



Writing Healing Stories

“This works even better than therapy,” says Kara, a bright-eyed middle-aged woman, her lined notebook lying on her lap. “I’ve talked about the stuff that happened to me over and over again with lots of therapists. I’ve done all kinds of therapy, but it wasn’t until I wrote it down and told the whole story many times that I feel healed.”

Comments like these make teaching memoir writing and using story writing in therapy a powerful and inspiring experience. I had been a licensed therapist for twenty- years when I found myself listening to an inner voice that urged me to write my own story. I found my way to the creative

writing program at Mills where I began writing about three generations of mothers who abandoned their daughters. This became my own journey to healing. Someday, I thought, I’ll combine therapy and my interest in healing with writing, but I didn’t know what form it would take.

A few years ago I discovered Dr. James Pennebaker’s research on writing and healing. Through dozens of experiments with different populations, Pennebaker and other researchers found that story writing was even more powerful for healing than journaling. The reason seems to have to do with the fact that a story has a structure; when the writer structures a story, he or she is making choice: how to tell it, what to present first. Then comes the development of the story: what happened, how lives evolved and changed, and the epiphanies and resolutions along the way. Pennebaker found that the kind of language used influenced the level of healing: the more integrated the language—“therefore, because, as I look back,” the greater level of healing.

Impressed by this research, I began to find out more, and met Dr. Pennebaker to discuss his findings. This meeting inspired me to complete my first book *Becoming Whole: Writing Your Healing Story*, a guide to using writing as healing for people who want to get their story out of their head and onto paper. More importantly, the research proved to me that people who didn’t define themselves as “writers” could engage in writing stories that have a unique voice and an arc that leads to resolution and healing. As we create a personal autobiographical story, we participate in a dual identity and consciousness: the “I” narrator creates a new stance in the story—a slightly distanced, observing self. According to Alice Miller, a Swiss psychoanalyst who writes about healing abuse, this distanced self becomes a witness for the lost or abused child that narrates the story. The narrator and the main character of the story, the memoir, work together to integrate the traumatic event, along with positive events in the narrator’s life.

Writing my own memoir *Don’t Call Me Mother: Breaking the Chain of Mother-Daughter Abandonment* was a freeing and healing experience for me, allowing me to witness myself and to create a story out of what had been pain and years of confusion. This book helped me to let the story live on the page rather than continue to hurt my heart. You can read more about my journey and both books on my website www.memoriesandmemoirs.com.

How to get started writing a healing memoir

- Read memoirs and personal stories for inspiration.
- Begin with small stories or vignettes that show a scene or describe an important person in your life.

- Write about turning points, the most important moments in your life
- Notice the critic voice—write down what it says, but don't let it stop you.
- Balance the critic voice with the “supportive guide” voice who encourages you and helps you to say what you have to say
- Some writers aren't able at first to write a connected narrative and story, and still need the non-structure of journaling.