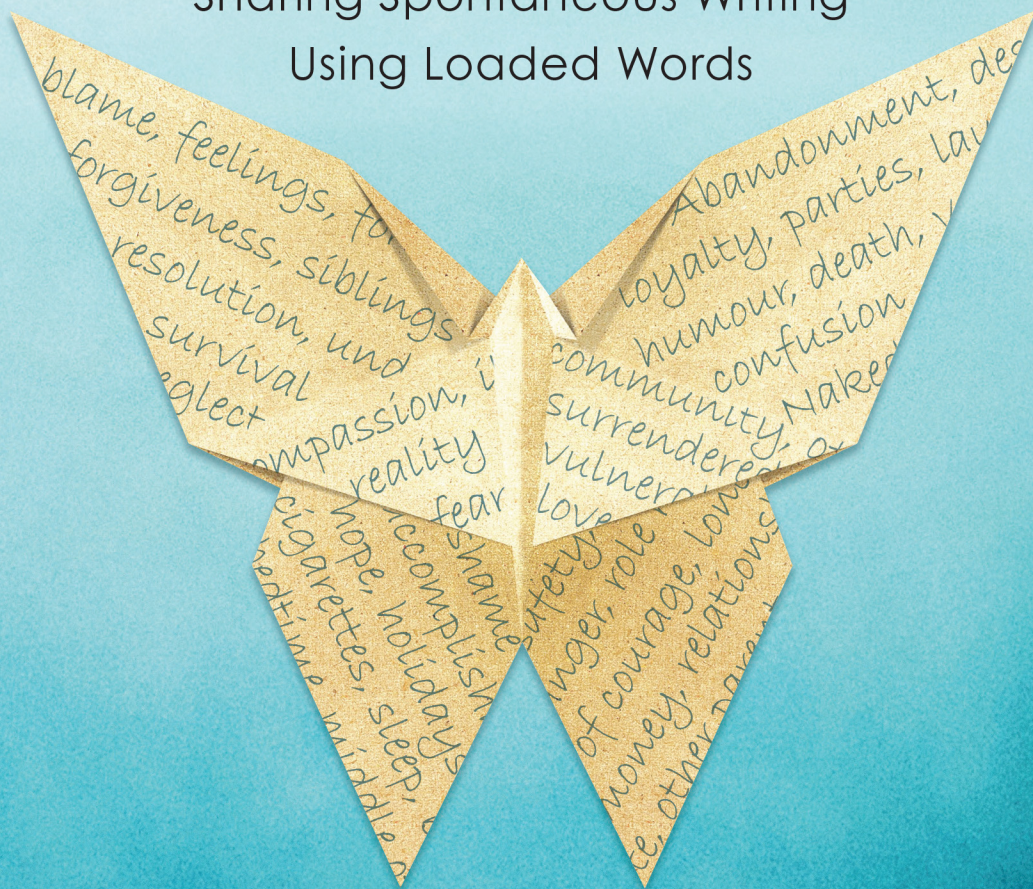


TRANSFORMING MEMORIES

Sharing Spontaneous Writing
Using Loaded Words



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Chapter 5

Your Turn

To be a person is to have a story to tell.

—Isak Dinesen

After the three of us had written our original writings, the snapshots from our childhoods with our alcoholic parents, we constructed a letter to invite other women we knew to participate with us in writing and sharing. Inspired by our original letter, we have crafted a new version just for you, hoping you accept our invitation to begin your own writing and your own transforming process of discovery and healing.

We hope you will say yes—yes to being willing to try writing, yes to possibly starting today. Today, you ask? Yes, today, now. You can begin to write today . . . it's not too late.

Dear Readers—

This is our “official” letter to invite you to try writing some reflections about being the child of an alcoholic [or about anything that might sit heavily on your soul] . . .

While many discussions with good friends are intensely personal, they rarely involve the actual telling of incidents, the actual description of events or pictures that we all carry vividly in our memories.

Try writing about a memory (or several central memories) of your childhood experiences . . . memories of incidents that forever haunt you . . . and then share them with others.

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If you choose to share your writing, you will also have the privilege to see others' "personal pictures." You will learn a lot about yourself and about others. And you will possibly find the process of putting your memories down on paper to be difficult but also helpful, cathartic. Fear not! Research is saying that writing about trauma is good for your health.

What you write doesn't have to be very long . . . it just needs to communicate images you remember when you close your eyes or stare off into space and think about what you went through as a child (or still go through as a child) of an alcoholic parent [or as a result of your own unique challenging circumstances in childhood]. Change names and places and write under a pseudonym if you are concerned about confidentiality.

You don't even need to worry about writing with perfect grammar and spelling. What matters is that you find your voice and capture images and emotions, your own "relivings." The computer can check for spelling!

If you are now thinking, "Tempting idea, but I think it would be too painful for me," let us counter with, "Pain can be productive if you work with it . . . this might help." If you are saying, "Tempting idea, but I don't have the time," let us counter with, "There's always time for things if you feel they are important." If an inner judge is suggesting, "Sounds like a tempting idea, but I can't write," let us counter with, "Don't let concern about writing ability keep you from doing something you want to do." And, last but not least, if you are feeling drawn to this but don't know

where to begin, we have listed a variety of writing prompts or exercises to get your expressive juices flowing.

Please say yes.

Your Story Matters

We know stories will only be written/told when someone is ready. Maybe you don't feel ready, but we suggest trying a bit of writing anyway. No one is asking you to write something that would win a Pulitzer Prize, and you can always tear up what you write. You really have nothing to lose and everything to gain. Writing has an ability to open internal doors and retrieve seemingly forgotten memories. In other words, writing may show you are "readier" than you think! You will never know unless you try . . .

You may find it helpful to establish some rituals around writing . . . Somerset Maugham always wore a special hat when he wrote. You might want to establish a special place to write and a predictable time of day or night. You might want background music or complete silence. You might want to read a passage from a book of meditations or you might want to empty your mind and just jump right in. And how about having a hot cup of coffee or tea, a special pen, a favorite notebook, a comfortable chair, perhaps a candle to create a contemplative atmosphere, a timer to tell you when ten minutes have passed. When you have finished writing, you might want to identify a safe place to put your words until you are ready to share with others.

In case you don't know where or how to begin, here are twenty-five writing prompts or exercises you can use to begin. We have culled them from our own experiences and from writers we admire.

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We could have come up with even more, but we think that once you begin, you will be able to come up with your own catalysts.

Quite possibly, the simplest way to begin would be to use some or all of the words in chapter 4 to evoke and capture your own memories or emotions. As a variation on this theme, you may want to make your own list of loaded words and jump right in.

These exercises are in no particular order—you can start at the beginning or read down to find something that appeals to you . . . or you can just close your eyes and put your finger on the page, randomly, trusting that that's the exercise for you at this moment.

Just start. Try writing for ten minutes at first, but feel free to write longer if the words are flowing. Remember—no rules . . . just begin.

Writing Prompts

1. If you were writing a book about your childhood, give your book a title . . . and then try writing the opening paragraph.
2. Write letters to your family members, dead or alive, and tell them who you are at this point in your life. (And remember, there is no expectation you have to send these letters.)
3. Consider that you have the opportunity to interview the people in #2. What questions would you want to ask? As you imagine what they might say, remember that an interviewer can keep asking “Why?” to enable you to get to deeper answers.
4. If you were being interviewed, what would you want to be asked? What would you *not* want to be asked . . . and why?

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5. Describe where you lived as a child—and maybe try this in a bulleted list: your bedroom, your house/apartment, your neighborhood. What do you see? Can you smell anything? Are there sounds that you recall? Who was there?
6. What five words do you hope or wish people would use to describe you. Why have you picked these words?
7. Get a dictionary and just open to a page at random and put your finger down on a word . . . and then write for ten to twenty minutes. Here's an example of what happened when someone touched the word “carry”:

I have carried children before they were born and carried them again

as babies, crooning them to sleep,

as toddlers, whispering away the pain of scraped knees,

as teenagers, giggling hysterically, trying to piggyback them across the room.

*I have carried small puppies new to our family,
and then carried them again to their graves.*

*I have carried cut-up food to my mother,
hoping food could nourish her intoxicated soul.*

*I have carried disappointment and resentments for years
unaware of the magnitude of the burden.*

8. As you think of various dramatic or humorous moments from your life, to whom would you give the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor/Actress . . . and why?

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9. Complete this sentence: “The first time I _____”
(. . . and you can do this exercise over and over).
10. If you were going to be on a magazine cover, which magazine would you pick and what would the caption be? Can you write the whole article?
11. Remember something that happened during your childhood that troubled you . . . and try writing about that experience from another family member’s point of view.
12. Make a list of little-known facts about you. Which of these do you love?
13. What were the gifts of your childhood?
14. Make a list of moods such as mad, glad, sad, bored, tired, anxious, etc. Take one of these moods and write about a time when you felt this way.
15. Find a picture from your childhood and write about what you see, what you remember (. . . and you can do this exercise over and over).
16. Make a “gratitude” list. From this list, is there anyone you want to write to?
17. What do you long for? What’s keeping you from attaining this?
18. Think about a turning point in your life and describe it in one sentence. Stay with this reflection and go deeper . . . Who was there? Was anything said? Why did this happen? Was it by chance or by intention? What else can you say about this? How were you feeling before this turning point . . . and after? How do you feel now? Have you left anything out? Is there anything else about this turning point you can add? Are there

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any connections about this turning point to other aspects of your life? (And you can keep asking yourself questions . . . it's often surprising what lies deeper in our memories as we peel back the layers.)

19. Try interviewing your body. For example, “Eyes . . . what have you seen that frightened or delighted you?”; “Ears—were things ever too loud for you?”; “Feet—were you ever too cold?”; “Heart—did you ever beat very, very fast?” . . .
20. Write a haiku—a Japanese form of poetry made up of three lines, the first and third with five syllables and the middle line with seven syllables. Here's an example:

*The cupboard opens
Hiding forbidden bottles
Hopes are crushed again.*

21. If you only had ten minutes to write your life story, what would you include? Try it.
22. Complete this sentence: “I once thought _____ but now I know _____” (. . . and you can do this exercise over and over).
23. Imagine a movie is being made of your life. What music would you want in the soundtrack and why?
24. Go to the library, to the memoir section, and examine what people have written for their opening lines. What would you write as the opening line of your memoir?
25. Did your family have its own rituals—fish on Fridays, special cakes for birthdays, lists of chores? Pick one of these rituals and examine where it came from and how it felt.

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If writing feels like a struggle and nothing is coming, change your scene—go for a walk, take a bus ride, look for things that are light or dark, observe people. This is sometimes called a practice of “losing your mind and coming to your senses” and is often effective in eliminating writing stagnation. Another option if you are feeling stuck is to try drawing a picture instead of writing. Last but not least, you can always use the statement “this is why I am feeling stuck” as your writing prompt!

Sharing

When you’ve done some writing, you may be ready to think about sharing your reflections with another person or with a group.

Over the years, two of the three of us found solace in joining Al-Anon where, by gathering anonymously in groups around a suggested set of principles, people can safely speak and share their stories. However, as explained in the first chapter, sharing written work is another matter and is not the same as simply talking. Writing is more profound and has more beneficial effects on your health.

We hope you will find at least one other person you trust to share your writing and to speak your words out loud. We encourage you to listen with your heart to what is offered in return. Even if you only find one other person, the beneficial effects can be profound and you will know you are not alone.

We have already suggested identifying a trusted friend, a wise colleague, people with whom you share experiences and values. If no one immediately comes to mind, you can watch for community talks or book groups that might relate to challenging childhood experiences—showing up and being in the audience might help you identify others who might be interested in sharing

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experiences. Try to find writing groups, perhaps through writing organizations in your community, or consider starting your own. You might even learn about and feel brave enough to attend a weekend gathering dedicated to exploring past experiences.

We were blessed with being a small group and engaged in a process that covered writing and sharing over a considerable period of time. However, one of the people who only attended our first gathering felt that even that brief weekend had been profoundly valuable. She wrote:

On Sunday morning, before we all went our separate ways, I looked around the room and saw myself—myself in the past and in the future. I saw myself struggling with wanting recognition from my alcoholic parent . . . I saw myself crying because I felt I had failed and hadn't been able to save him from himself and make everything better . . . I saw myself calm in knowing there was nothing I could have done to change the way things were . . . I saw myself older, wise and still beautiful . . . I saw myself laughing . . . I saw forgiveness of others for their being human.

I understood there was a reason we were all here together. It was like bringing together the various pieces of a whole person, the whole person I someday wanted to be, that I was becoming. And then I knew, I really knew, I was going to be all right!

When I came home, I had changed. It was subtle but I could feel it. I had discovered a certain part of me that was stronger than it had ever been and these women helped make that possible.

Worth a Try

Writing is cheap, available (even in the middle of the night), portable, doesn't need to take much time, can be private or shared, and has the power to heal trauma and improve your health! Even

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Even though our journey together, with all of its writing and sharing, spanned three decades, the benefits started right away and were sustained. We are not necessarily suggesting you begin a thirty-year process . . . but we are inviting you to at least write for ten minutes and then share what you've written with someone else. And then we hope you will try it again . . .



*It is our inward journey that leads us through
time—forward or back, seldom in a straight
line, most often spiraling . . . As we discover,
we remember; remembering, we discover.*

—Eudora Welty