

Chapter 1

Reflections of Writing Narratives

ABSTRACT

Writing becomes a catalyst for healing. When people transfer thoughts and feelings to paper or a computer, stressful emotional events in the mind and physical tension in the body often improve. While writing cannot take the place of a medical expert's evaluation, it can help the healing process. This narrative focuses on how students in a classroom, patients in a clinic, and anyone coping with uncertain times can use the writing process to share ideas, track symptoms, vent frustrations, compose prayers, or reflect on life.

I JUST WANT YOU TO KNOW WHO I AM

How can writing help people heal? This question served as motivation for research and led to discoveries in my roles as a high school English teacher, Stephen Minister at my church, and health coach. While writing cannot take the place of an evaluation by a trained medical expert, it can help the healing process. When a patient writes about symptoms in a journal to share with a medical professional, a high school student writes about the day's events in a journal to deal with emotions, or an adult writes a prayer in a journal to cope with uncertainty, the process of writing serves as a valuable resource. Regardless of the circumstances which motivated the writer to pick up a notebook and pen or type at a computer, writing releases thoughts and emotions from the mind to the page. When people transfer ideas to paper, stressful emotional thoughts in the mind and physical tension in the body often improve. Writing therefore becomes a catalyst for healing.

This chapter uses narrative inquiry to share stories and apply artistic methods, such as writing in journals, to the practice of healing. The theory of narrative inquiry invites writers to own their writing voices by using the first person pronoun "I" to make stories accessible. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain, "questions of form for a narrative inquirer are with us from the outset of an inquiry. Even as we tell our own research stories prior to entering into the midst of the field stories, there is a tentative sense of plot. As we engage with research participants and live and tell stories with them, the plotlines under composition are restoried, that is, they are relived and retold. All of these tellings and livings prefigure the narrative forms of our research texts" (p. 165). Narrative inquiry, as a qualitative interpretive form of research, focuses on stories and the finding of narrative threads, or themes, in the stories. Narrative

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inquiries may include objective data, such as a tally of the number of times events occurred; however, a narrative inquiry also includes subjective data, such as the stories of participants. Consequently, the researcher in the field of narrative inquiry may choose to participate as a participant observer instead of only observing other people. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) discuss, “narrative inquiry has the compelling, sometimes confounding, quality of merging overall life experiences with specific research experience, realms of experience often separated in inquiry” (p. 115). If the researcher chooses the role of a participant observer, attention must be paid to the dual roles. Heifetz (1994) describes the dual roles by using the extended metaphor, “consider the experience of dancing on a dance floor in contrast with standing on a balcony and watching other people dance” (pp. 252-253). Narrative inquirers alternate between the balcony perspective of observation and the dance floor perspective of interacting with participants.

My research into writing as healing focused on studying the stories of others during my doctoral dissertation, and included my own story about the death of my mom. I didn’t want to interview others about the narratives which shaped their lives without also including my own transformative narrative. My research consequently transformed into having a larger purpose. DeSalvo (1999) explains, “the writing process, no matter how much time we devote to it, contains a tremendous potential for healing” (p. 73). My experiences of how I used writing as healing meant as much to me as the stories of the people I interviewed. The research for this chapter exists as observational research and reflections of previous research projects. It serves as a qualitative interpretive analysis as well as an introduction to writing as healing for anyone looking to explore the concept in their lives.

This narrative connects writing methods to the practice of education and medicine with the goal of helping people heal. This section’s title, *I Just Want You to Know Who I Am*, is a line from the song *Iris* by the Goo Goo Dolls. It describes how patients feel when seeking help: They want someone to know their stories. When seeking medical treatment, a patient wants to feel like his or her story is being heard and the medical provider sees a person, not just a name on a chart. Rankin (2015b) advises that despite demands from a sometimes frustrating medical system, those practicing medicine need to take the time to look their patients in the eyes and not stand with a hand on the door to the exam room because, “just as healers must stand up and reclaim the lineage of their professions, patients must reclaim their own power, standing up with their autonomy, their intuition, their willingness to question and participate in changing the system from within, and their vote. It all starts with change at the level of the healer-patient relationship” (p. 238). Whether a patient talks to a health coach, receives prayers from a Stephen Minister, or writes in a journal, the important thing is that the patient feels the story is heard. Encouraging the students in my classroom to practice journal writing provided a foundation for me to apply similar methods to the medical field.

PANDEMIC NARRATIVES

Who am I now in this pandemic? I suspect others ask this question of themselves as everyone searches to reinvent themselves and their lives. Every day, the news about the virus seemed worse. Wasn’t the year 2020 supposed to represent optimism, clarity, and new vision? Wasn’t 2021 supposed to be different? What is happening in the world? I knew I needed to return to writing, because writing always provides the clarity I need to survive difficult situations. Writing helps me make sense of the uncertainty and chaos. It captures my experiences so that years from now I will look back at what I survived during this time in my life.

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