Chapter 8

Narratives of Writing as Healing

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ABSTRACT

Writing as an art form helps people heal physically, emotionally, and spiritually. This chapter uses the theory of narrative inquiry to present a first-person case study of the author’s writing life dovetailed with research illustrating how writing helps people heal. Writing methods will help educators, patients, people experiencing struggles, and anyone who wants to transfer thoughts to the page. Writing helps people cope with adversity, reframe situations to show a more optimistic attitude, and feel safe because the written page will not judge its author. Journal prompts serve as resources for the reader to begin or continue a writing practice.

INTRODUCTION

How can writing help people heal? This question served as the motivation for research and also 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 events in the mind and physical tension in the body often improve. Writing can therefore become a catalyst for healing.

Narrative Inquiry

This chapter uses first person and the method of 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 and 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 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 can choose to participate as a participant observer instead of only observing other people. 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 began with studying the stories of others during my doctoral dissertation, but expanded when the death of my mom caused me to unexpectedly find myself in the same position as the research subjects I interviewed. My research transformed from just another topic to study to having a larger purpose. My own experiences of how I used writing as healing mean as much to me as the stories of others. 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.

PROLOGUE: BACKGROUND OF WRITING AS HEALING

My stress level felt worse. Reflection reminded me that life became busy, leaving me with little time to write. I feel happiest when I can immerse myself in the research and writing process, where I discover new ideas and share them with others. I knew what I needed to do: Return to writing. Writing helped me through difficult situations by bringing clarity to my life. As a National Board Certified Health Coach, I advocate a holistic approach to healing. Writing helps me manage my stress most of the time, but it does not exist as the only option or a magic cure. A couple times in my life, losses such as the death of my mom caused my stress to transform into anxiety; I needed therapy and medication, and no shame exists in either option or in asking for help. So, if you find yourself reading this publication, I hope you understand the disclaimer that none of my words can become a good alternative for a conversation with your doctor if you experience anxiety or any other health issue. When everyday stress does not cross the line into anxiety, however, writing can help.

Research exists to support the theory of writing helping people heal, beginning with the work of psychologist James Pennebaker. Pennebaker and Smyth (2016) discuss Pennebaker’s original study, which led to the discovery, “people who wrote about their deepest thoughts and feelings surrounding traumatic experiences evidenced enhanced immune function compared with those who wrote about superficial topics” (p. 21). They continue with the observation that improved health continued after the writing experience and elaborate, “people who wrote about their deepest thoughts and feelings related to stressful or traumatic experiences had reliable improvements in health in the two to three months after writing” (p. 25). Additional studies on wellness and writing followed. Evans (2010) summarizes