Writing Prompts

for Surviving &

Healing

Healing emotional wounds is a complex process, and there is no one-size-fits-all remedy. However, since the 1980s, studies have repeatedly shown that writing about the trauma can help. James W. Pennebaker, PhD, one of the leading authorities on the effects and practices of writing for healing writes the following:

The evidence is mounting that the act of writing about traumatic experience for as little as fifteen or twenty minutes a day for three or four days can produce measurable changes in physical and mental health. Emotional writing can also affect people’s sleeping habits, work efficiency, and how they connect to others. Indeed, when we put our traumatic experiences into words, we tend to become less concerned with the emotional events that have been weighing us down.\*

**1. A Letter to Your Past Self**. Do you continue to be weighed down by events in the past? Writing about those events honestly and from your heart can help you make meaning of what happened, as well as better understand others’ points of view.

**A suggestion for writing:**  Write a letter to your past self—the self that went through the loss or trauma—from your today self. What would you say to comfort yourself? What advice would you give? Offer your past self the acceptance and love that s/he needs.

**2. Writing or not writing**. Is there something you’d like to write but that you’ve been afraid to touch because it involves emotional pain? Try starting. If you’re not ready, write about what you’re afraid will happen if you write about that subject.

**3. Stillness.** What is stillness?  According to Pico Iyer, travel writer and author of The Art of Stillness: Adventures in Going Nowhere (2014), it’s not so much about meditation, but “sanity and balance…a chance to put things in perspective.”

**A suggestion for writing:**   For this week, consider how quiet and stillness have been part of your healing process.  What practices have helped you learn to embrace quiet and turn your attention to what is, instead of what was or could be?

**4. Mulligans.** October 17th is National Mulligan Day. In golf terms, mulligans are penalty-free do-overs. In the world outside of golf, mulligans aren’t always possible. Describe a time in life you wish you could have had a do-over.

**5. From Poem to Writing.** Read one of the poems by Ojibwe poet Denise Lajimodiere, then write in response to the following prompts:

-How does this poem move me?

-What feelings does it summon up?

-In what ways can I relate to the person’s plight?

-How does the poem’s structure and subject matter provide a natural entry to a worthwhile writing activity?

**6. Survivance (Survival + Resistance)**. American Indian Scholar Malea Powell writes this about early American Indian author Sarah Winnemucca:

“[She] is an important figure in the history of rhetoric in the United States, and in the history of resistance to the manifest manners of empire. Brought about by the contingencies of imperial conquest on the continent of North America Winnemucca’s rhetorical negotiations and performances open up questions of ethnicity and gender that Native people are still answering, questions that have deep import in our survivance” (88-89).

In what ways has your own survival included acts of resistance? What larger forces, of colonization or other oppressive movements, have been a part of the trauma you have experienced?

References

1. From: <http://www.writingthroughlife.com/a-weeks-worth-of-journaling-prompts-healing-the-past#sthash.JhCosJpR.dpuf> \**Writing to Heal: A Guided Journal for Recovering from Trauma & Emotional Upheaval*, James W. Pennebaker, Ph.D., 2004, Raincoast Books

2. From Louise DeSalvo’s *Writing As a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms our Lives*

3. From <http://writingthroughcancer.com/category/writing-prompts-for-cancer-survivors/>

4. From the RRVWP blog: http://rrvwp.blogspot.com/

5. from Geri Giebel Chavis’s *Poetry and Story Therapy: The Healing Power of Creative Expression*

6. From Ernest Stromberg’s *American Indian Rhetorics of Survivance: Word Medicine, Word Magic*

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