

# THE STORY YOU NEED TO TELL

WRITING TO HEAL FROM  
TRAUMA, ILLNESS, OR LOSS

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WRITING PROMPTS

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SANDRA MARINELLA, ma, med

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# WRITING GUIDELINES

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## Personal Writing Guidelines

At the end of each chapter, you will find writing prompts. These are suggestions or ideas that can guide your writing. Choose the ones that sound like a good fit for you. If you are new to personal writing, begin by committing to *five minutes of writing at a time*.

Additional ideas will be shared in coming chapters, but if you are ready to write, here are some guidelines to help you get started:

- Begin by finding a comfortable spot to write. If you want, bring your water bottle, coffee, or tea.
- Choose a journal, notebook, or computer.
- Forget about rules – grammar, punctuation, and spelling. Just plan to write.
- Choose a prompt, put your pen to paper (or your fingers on your keyboard), and write for at least five minutes. If you write more, congratulate yourself! If a prompt fails to connect with you, try the next one.
- Write as often and as much as you dare. Give it your best.
- Then reread and reflect on what you have written. You may be surprised at the stories or thoughts you hold within.
- Work to develop a personal writing practice that works *for you*. Every writer is unique, and by finding how you write best, you will grow your words and your voice.

*All the best as you begin this amazing life journey!*

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PART ONE

**WRITING:  
NOT DROWNING**

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## CHAPTER ONE

# Waving *Not Drowning*

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### Writing Prompts and Suggestions

Using these prompts, we will start to learn how to unleash our inner stories.



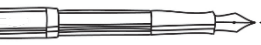
#### *Writing Prompt: A Recent Surprise*

For a minute or two make a list of some surprises, good and bad, that you have had. Then put a star by a recent and difficult surprise. Explore this event. What happened? How did you face it, or how will you face it? If it is too painful to explore at this point, let it go for now.



#### *Writing Prompt: Waving, Not Drowning*

Have you ever chosen to make the best of a bad situation? Describe this experience. What happened? Did you turn to others for help? Were you able to find a positive way of looking at it all? How did it work out?



#### *Writing Prompt: The Tragic Gap*

Start by creating “tragic gap statements.” Do this by writing one or more statements that follow this form: “I want to... but I can’t because...”

Here are some examples:

*I want to move, but I can’t because I don’t make enough money.*

*I want to be an actor, but I can’t because I suffer from anxiety when I try to perform.*

*I want to undertake a new challenge, but I can't because I believe I am too old.*

Now either choose a statement you have written or create a new one. This tragic gap statement needs to connect to a dilemma you are facing. After you write this statement, answer these questions as best you can: What is your dream? What obstacles are making it hard to accomplish your dream? How can you face this challenge? If you are not ready to explore this dilemma, come back to it later.

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## CHAPTER TWO

# Facing Trauma

## *When There Are No Words*

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### Writing Prompts and Suggestions

After a trauma it takes a while to find your voice, to break your silence. But you will. If you feel ready to write, pick up your pen, your tablet, or your laptop computer. If you need them, use the Personal Writing Guidelines listed at the opening to help you find your words. If you are not ready to write, accept and engage your silence. You will know when you are ready. Trust your inner voice.



#### *Writing Prompt: Practicing Silence*

If trauma has left you without words, try to embrace and practice silence for several hours. (Even if you are not faced with a difficult experience, this is a valuable exercise.) Often the world is cluttered with noise and social media messages. Often we need silence to realign our story. Find a comfortable place to explore silence. Turn off your cell phone and shut down all social media. Perhaps you want to meditate or pray. Perhaps you want to be closer to nature and the beauty of the earth. Maybe you want to hike. Whatever you choose to do, for one or several hours, practice silence. When you finish, take up your pen and see if you are inspired to write about the experience. How was it? What did you learn? You may want to repeat this exercise whenever you feel you need the calm and quiet to center you.



#### *Writing Prompt: Embracing a Comforting Space*

Whether or not you have faced a traumatic experience, it is comforting to find a space in the world that can comfort us. Pick out such a place – a garden, a mountain trail, a bedroom, the loft in your barn where you love to hide. Imagine or visit this place. Now write about it. What is the history of this place? Can you describe this space in detail? How does



it look? Feel? Smell? Sound? How does this place make you feel when you are there? Can you go there when you need to? Can you reflect there? Can you write there? What do you love most about this space?



*Writing Prompt: Finding Your Voice*

Do you recall a time when you were so shocked you had no words? When was this? Can you describe what happened? When did it happen? How did you regain your voice? What did this experience teach you? Is it still hard to think or write about this experience?

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## CHAPTER THREE

# Writing

## *Finding Our Words*

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### Writing Prompts and Suggestions

While we are working together, you may be in search of the story you need to tell. Remember, there are significant physical and psychological rewards for doing this work. Follow your instincts about when and how much to write. But please – *write*. If you need them, use the Personal Writing Guidelines given on page 4.



#### *Writing Prompt: The Unexpected Moment*

Choose a moment that caught you off guard. Perhaps you had an unwanted visitor, received a bad grade, or were dropped from a team or rejected for a job. Or perhaps you received an unwanted diagnosis or marriage proposal. What happened? What was difficult? Do you recall your emotions during this time? How did you manage it? What helped or could have helped? Did anything good result from this unexpected experience? Explore.



#### *Writing Prompt: Changes*

Make a list of the changes you have had to make (a job, a school, a home, a relationship). Describe one of these changes. What did you think? What did you feel while undergoing this transition? What was hard about this change? What was positive in this experience?



#### *Writing Prompt: Challenges*

What difficult challenge have you faced? Describe what happened. Explore your emotions as you faced this challenge. Have you been on a military assignment overseas

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and had to face a battle? Does a familial death haunt you or others in your family? Were you or someone you love in an accident? Have you faced injuries or trauma? How might you break your silence and explore this challenge? Later reflect on this story. How can it be reframed to fit your life?

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PART TWO

**WRITING DOWN  
THE SELF**

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## CHAPTER FOUR

# A Room of Your Own

## *A Journal*

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### Writing Prompts and Suggestions

If you have old journals or diaries, or even an autobiography or memoir you have written, you may want to dig them out for these writing explorations. If you don't have them, you may want to pull out old photo albums or flip through photos stored on your computer or cell phone. If all you have is memories, they work quite well, too. Make a list of time periods in your life – youth, high school, your first job, perhaps a fulfilling job, maybe a time when you accomplished something, when you married or became a parent or a grandparent.

You can begin this exploration by just choosing a photo, or you can use a memory that is captured in your mind. Remember, the Personal Writing Guidelines can be found on page 4.



#### *Writing Prompt: Capture a Moment*

Choose an intriguing photo (or substitute a memory) that captures you or someone you know well. When did this moment happen? What happened right before this event? What feeling does this memory evoke? Write the story of this experience. What do you learn about you or another individual from this photo/memory?



#### *Writing Prompt: Digging Deeper*

From time to time it helps to reflect on your life and learn from it. If you have your old writing, poems, diaries, or journals, you may want to invest time in exploring your words from different periods of your life. You could do this by reading your journals or old writings or searching through your old photos. Think about these questions as you explore:

- What time periods were especially fulfilling?
- What time periods were especially challenging?
- How would you describe yourself as a character when you look back on these experiences? What were you like? What can you learn from yourself?



### ***Writing Prompt: Your Past -- Who Were You?***

After spending time with your old writing, photos, or memories, choose a time period from your past. It could be five years ago, ten years ago, or longer. Write about who you were at this age. What was important to you? What can you learn from this past you? (If you want, repeat this exercise, using other periods of your life or other memories.)



### ***Writing Prompt: Your Present -- Who Are You Now?***

How would you describe yourself in one page or less? Or how would a good friend describe you to someone she wants you to meet? What do you enjoy doing? What do you believe is important? What do you like about you? Is there a story you like to tell about yourself? What does this story say about you?



### ***Writing Prompt: Your Future -- Who Are You Becoming?***

Experiment with your future. Imagine a day five years from now. What you would like to see? What would you hope to be doing? What do you believe will be important to you at this time? Try to visualize and to describe a positive day in your future.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

# Writing Down the Self

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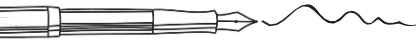
## Writing Prompts and Suggestions

These ideas will help you explore the writer in you.



### *Writing Prompt: The Book or Movie Journey*

Think back on all the books you've read and all the films you've watched. What books or movies have you loved? What ones have changed you? Is there a book or movie that had a profound impact on you? Describe your experience with one or more of these books or films. What did you learn? What did you value? If you have a passion for either books or films, you may want to consider keeping a reading journal or a movies journal where you explore your reading and viewing experiences.



### *Writing Prompt: Just Do It!*

What would help you *get your words out*? How could you experience writing in a way you would enjoy? Do you have a unique way of writing, your own pattern and practice? If not, explore these two important elements by thinking and writing about the questions that would help:

- Where do you share your private writings? In a journal? On a computer? Are you comfortable with this format? If not, what might work better?
- Do you need privacy for your writing? If so, what security measures could or should you take to protect your writing?
- Do you have a place where you like to write? If not, could you create or find such a space?
- Have you "fired" or found peace with your inner critic? Do you feel free to do the writing you need to do?
- Do editing, spelling, and grammar slow you down? Can you keep your internal

editor quiet when you write?

- When do you write? Do you want a schedule or a more regular practice for your writing? Is it possible to establish a better plan for your writing?
- Are there rituals you would like to establish with your writing?
- What frustrates you about writing? What do you love about writing?
- If you struggle with writing, are you a storyteller? Can you share and maybe tape your stories?



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## CHAPTER SIX

# Stages of Writing and Healing

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### Writing Prompts and Suggestions

If you need the Personal Writing Guidelines, review them on page 4. If you have begun to establish your writing practice, get comfortable, select a prompt from the list below, and begin writing. Give it your best.



#### *Writing Prompt: A Positive Change*

Choose a person who has changed you in a positive way. You can also choose an experience that has changed your life. Describe this person or experience. Tell the story. Discuss how and why your attitude changed.



#### *Writing Prompt: Finding an Ending*

Is there an experience inside your head that won't seem to go away? What is it? Why does it haunt you? Does this story need an ending? Explore your story.



#### *Writing Prompt: A Letter*

If you are struggling, write a letter to a loved one. Decide what you need to tell her or him. Then simply put your pen to paper, and let your message and your stories come. Write for as long as you need to. Come back to this if you need to. When you reread this letter at a later time, decide if you should send it, destroy it, lock it away, or publish it.

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PART THREE

**FINDING MEANING  
THROUGH STORY**

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

# The Magical Mystery Tour

## *How Our Brains Create Story*

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### Writing Prompts and Suggestions

These writing suggestions will allow you to open up and begin to explore some of your difficult yet life-defining stories.



#### *Writing Prompt: A Near Crash*

What near crash have you faced? What unexpected event or diagnosis or loss has disrupted your beautiful afternoon? Were you able to hold on to your flight stick? How did this experience work out? Explore.



#### *Writing Prompt: Starting to Dig for Life-Defining Stories*

Do any stories come to mind as important life experiences? Explore one of these stories. Did it help define you? Why or why not?



#### *Writing Prompt: What Have I Learned Recently?*

Choose something you have learned recently. What did you learn? How did you learn it? What surprised you about learning it? Explain.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

# Stories

## *Our Lives Hang on Narrative Threads*

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### Writing Prompts and Suggestions

These prompts will help you to connect with stories, characters, and human characteristics that influence your life.



#### *Writing Prompt: Character Search*

Choose a character you connected with from learning or reading – as a child, as a teen, or as an adult. How did you discover this character? What did you have in common with this character? What did you admire about her? What experiences of this individual allowed you to feel a connection to him? Explain.



#### *Writing Prompt: Story Search*

Make a list of the stories you remember from your childhood. Write a quick summary of a story you loved. Then explore it. Why did you connect with this nursery rhyme, fable, folktale, book, or movie? What intrigued you about it? What did you learn from it?



#### *Writing Prompt: The Hero Search*

Describe a person or character you believe is heroic. This person can be someone you know or wish you knew. This character can be real or fictional. Describe the individual's heroic story. What qualities make him or her heroic in your eyes?

What qualities make someone heroic? What qualities do you have that you hope will contribute to your own hero story? Explore this.

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## CHAPTER NINE

# Finding Our Life-Defining Stories

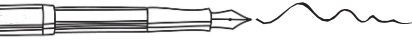
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### Writing Prompts and Suggestions

Let's begin by exploring various pathways to writing about our lives. Get comfortable, and plan to spend at least twenty minutes engaged in any one of these activities. Choose the activity that fits you. If any single pathway leads to a wave of writing, ride the experience and let the stories unfold. If you hit a roadblock and the words dry up, move to a different prompt. Your goal is to find and begin the process of telling some significant life stories or to explore your personal life-defining experiences.

Okay. Get comfortable. Sift through your experiences. Dig deep. What stories have made you the person you are? What moments should be fully woven into the narrative that is you? What stories will define who you are and who you can become?



#### *Writing Prompt:* Finding Our Life Chapters

When I reviewed my journals, my life unfolded in chapters that could easily be summarized. With or without a journal, you can begin the process of finding your defining stories by making a simple list of the main chapters of your life. Here is the beginning of my list:

- Childhood in Indiana
- Living in England
- Southport High School and friendships
- Purdue – new ideas, new friends
- Discovering community service – tutoring, teaching

The chapters do not have to be chronological. They can be listed thematically, as feelings, values, or even a mix of these. After you make a list, you may want to *briefly* summarize each period. As you do this, look for the events that were significant turning points in your life. What moments changed you?

In *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self*, scholar Dan P. McAdams suggests identifying chapters but focusing on *specific events in detail*. He suggests

that you tap into:

- peak experiences
- low points
- turning points
- significant memories



### *Writing Prompt: Stepping-Stones*

Stepping-stones is one of the best-known activities for helping you to find your stories. It was developed by the late Ira Progoff, a psychotherapist who devised the Intensive Journal Method. While helping others search for an understanding of their experiences, Progoff suggested they “spontaneously reflect” on the course of their life and list the significant moments. “The Stepping-stones,” he explained, “are the significant points of movement along the road of an individual’s life.” These markers can help you see the big picture of who you are. They allow you to reconnect with events that define you.

The process is easy. You make a list of seven or eight life experiences — or more, but no more than twelve. Place them in chronological order and read them aloud. Then explore each event in writing. Do any themes or threads keep reappearing to teach you something about yourself? You may need time to digest your markers. If so, come back to the list later and find one or more of the experiences that you need to explore in depth. Write about this event or time period in as much specific detail as you can: What happened? What do you remember? Who is a part of this story? What did you experience? What did you learn? Pour it all out to see what you can find.



### *Writing Prompt: Memories of Mentors*

Another way of finding our defining stories is by rummaging through memories of significant people in our lives. Who are the teachers, friends, relatives, or mentors who changed you? Make a list, and see what memories surface for you.

I wrote down James Fulcher, my high school humanities teacher. Out of curiosity I went back and thumbed through the journal I kept in his classroom. While his lectures dominate my notes, what I remember most are the open-ended questions that he raised and asked us to write about: *Why do we create? What is happiness? Does being ethical lead to being happy? Why do we fight wars when they devastate lives and cultures?*

Explore the significant individuals who have mattered in your life. What did you learn from each of them? How did they change or influence you?



## Writing Prompt: Finding Who-You-Are Stories

The goal here is to tap into your stories. While you don't need to do all these activities, you do need to find the ones that will help you shine a light on who you are. Defining experiences can grant you a renewed understanding of yourself. They can help reframe who you are and help you grow.

Create your own ways of finding these stories. Recently, when my first grandchild was born, my sons and their wives were digging through the family albums. They wanted to know, *Who does the baby look like?* Before long we were crowded around the kitchen bar telling old and treasured family stories.

- *Photo search.* The photos in albums, on phones, and in the cloud can resurrect dozens of meaningful experiences. Dig through them. Write about the stories that surface.
- *Map search.* Do you want your story-tapping brain to take over? In working with students who claim to be stuck or unable to remember their past, I often ask them to draw a map of their childhood neighborhood or to map out a place they love and visit often. These maps rarely disappoint, for they transport you back into your experiences.
- *Create your own search with songs, games, blogs, trips...* Do you center your life on music and song? You may want to dig through the songs that have held special meaning for you. Many moments in our lives can be dated and recalled by the music we heard at a concert or hummed for days in our head. What games have you played? When? Do you play games endlessly on your phone or Xbox? Do you have memories of playing Monopoly with your cousins or marbles with a childhood friend? Maps, trip itineraries, Facebook pages, old CDs or albums, artworks, cell phone or family photos, journals or a blog you keep – all are a treasure trove of memories.

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## CHAPTER TEN

# Making Sense of Self with Stories

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### Writing Prompts and Suggestions

Again, you will be exploring various pathways to writing about your life. Plan to spend twenty minutes or more engaged in any one of these activities. Choose the activity that fits you best. If any single prompt leads to a wave of writing, ride the experience and let the stories unfold. If you hit a roadblock and the words dry up, move to a different prompt. Your goal is to find and begin the process of telling some significant life stories.

Okay. Get comfortable. Sift through your experiences. Dig deep. What stories have made you the person you are? What moments should be fully woven into the narrative that is you? What stories do you need to tell?



#### *Writing Prompt: Finding Our Best Stories*

With help from the late Michael White, Liam was able to re-align his understanding of who he was. Make a list of positive moments in your life. Have there been times when you helped someone else? Have you done something helpful for a friend or neighbor? Have you ever volunteered? Have you learned something new? Have you developed new skills? Earned a degree? Have you learned a new language? Written a story or poem or a book? Have you overcome a fear? Write about moments that show you in your best light. If you want, you can talk to someone who cares about you and ask him or her to help you find your best possible stories. Then write your stories.

Another option: you can turn this assignment around and make a list of something helpful you want to do or something new you want to learn. Then write about the process of trying to achieve this goal or this new learning.

When you complete this writing, leave it for at least a day. When you return to it, read and see if you can find themes that show the best you. What are they?





### *Writing Prompt: Sharing Shattered Stories and Untold Stories*

The hardest pieces to collect in our minds are the broken ones. When a personal story shatters, we have to pick up the pieces, as Grace did. Is there a story you have not told? Is there an experience that you need to explore? You may simply want to jot down some notes about what happened. You may feel more comfortable making some drawings or writing a poem. If you are comfortable with writing, explore the details of what happened and the feelings you experienced. Try to write out the complete story. Come back to it later and review it. Is the story over, or do you need to explore it further? You may choose to continue your exploration in writing, you may want to talk it through with a close and trusted friend, or you may want to see a counselor to make sure you have worked through the experience.



### *Writing Prompt: "This I Believe" Essays*

Originally "This I Believe" was a popular radio series hosted by Edward R. Murrow in the 1950s. Today "This I Believe" has evolved into an international organization, engaging people from all over the world and all walks of life in writing and sharing essays describing their values and beliefs. National Public Radio has archived more than 125,000 of these essays, and you can hear them on public radio, on webcasts, and at [thisibelieve.org](http://thisibelieve.org).

By writing one of these essays, you have a chance to express and clarify ideas that matter to you. You can choose to begin writing for ten minutes on any one of the questions listed here. If one idea takes off, develop it into a full-fledged essay that you might want to send to an op-ed page of a newspaper or submit to a blog or appropriate magazine. You can also develop your own questions or ideas for this writing. What topic is important to you? Mental illness? Gun control? Climate change?

Write about what matters to you. Work to express your honest feelings and thoughts. Support your thinking as clearly as you can.

Here are some starter questions to work with:

- What is most important to you?
- What do you believe?
- What have you learned?
- What do you value?
- Is creativity important to you? Are you driven to create? Discuss.
- How important is family? How is the nuclear family changing in our culture?

- What makes you happy? Is happiness different from fulfillment?
- What change would you like to see in your community or culture?
- Is there a social issue that concerns you? Why? What needs to happen?

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PART FOUR

**REWRITING OUR  
SHATTERED STORIES**

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

# Writing to Heal

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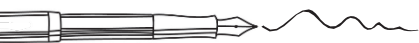
### Writing Prompts and Suggestions

If you have a broken story that continues to bother you (an accident, a divorce, an illness, an experience with abuse, a painful loss), this activity may be the place for you to start.



#### *Writing Prompt: The Pennebaker Writing Process*

- *Begin by choosing an emotional issue, a difficult experience, or a trauma “that has profoundly affected your life.” It may be difficult to think or talk about. While it may be from any period in your life, you might be experiencing it right now.*
- *Find a comfortable and private place to write where you will not be disturbed. If you are concerned about others seeing what you write, keep your writing in a safe place, or destroy it when you are done.*
- *Tell your story without holding back. Include both your thoughts and your feelings from the past, and then present them in as much detail as possible.*
- *Write continuously for twenty or more minutes without paying any attention to spelling, punctuation, or grammar. Just write.*
- *Do this for four consecutive days. During this time you can continue writing about the same experience and expand on it, or you may choose different topics.*
- *If you write about the same topic on all four days, work to explore how this event has affected your life. Did this event change you? How? Has it changed your work situation, your family, your relationships, or your beliefs?*
- *Try to write a complete story or experience. Length does not matter.*
- *Review your work after each session to see if you have shared your deepest thoughts and feelings. Monitor your feelings. Has the writing made you sad or happy? Was the experience valuable or meaningful?*



### *Writing Prompt: Reflection*

Pennebaker suggests that you take a break before coming back to review the writing you did over those four days. When you return to your work, you will want to read it carefully and think about it. Were you able to express your genuine thoughts and feelings? Do you have a greater understanding of what happened? Did you find value and meaning in the writing? What have you learned? What insights have you gained?

Ideally, the writing will lead to new insights, and it is possible that you will not only learn from your writing, but you will gain a sense of relief from the experience.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

# Breaking the Silence

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### Writing Prompts and Suggestions

Centered on the process of freewriting, these prompts encourage you to let go and allow your words to come.



#### *Writing Prompt: Choose a Word*

Often a word pulls thoughts and memories from us. Find a comfortable spot. Use your journal, notepad, or computer and begin to write. Don't think about it — just put words, whatever comes, on paper. Here are some possible starter words: *Fear. Anger. Pain. Loss. Hope. Resilience. Love. Peace. Friendship. Connection.*

If you start with one word and find another, go with it. Set a timer, and write for at least ten minutes. If you want to go longer, do. If you get stuck, write, "I am stuck. I am stuck...." until your brain kicks in with another thought.

Review your work later to discover what is inside you. Then make a list of the words you want to explore. And if you are ready, begin again.



#### *Writing Prompt: Find a Poem*

You may want to write in response to a poem. Poems hold powerful insights, and often they open us up to places we need to go. Find a poem. Read it. Choose a line or a few lines you love, and begin to write.

I often begin with two lines from Ellen Bass's poem, "The Thing Is," and use these lines as a prompt:

to love life, to love it even  
when you have no stomach for it



*Writing Prompt: Create a Collage*

Create a collage using pictures from personal cards, photos, clip-pings from magazines, and words. Create it randomly, or choose a theme.

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# Getting Unstuck

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### Writing Prompts and Suggestions

Based on the work of Kross, this writing activity asks you to pull back and observe a difficult experience that is stuck on replay in your mind. You will work on seeing the event from a distance.



#### *Writing Prompt: Step Back and Ask Why*

Begin by closing your eyes. Now go back in time to the event. In your mind's eye, consciously move back or out of this scene. From a distance, watch the event as an observer who is simply trying to see what happened and why. You are observing yourself but as a character and from a distance. Take your time to play out this story.

Now write this incident as an objective observer, including all the details and emotions that you see unfolding. View the emotions, but remain distant and logical. *What happened? When did this happen? How did this character (you) feel? Why did this character (you) feel this way? Why did this happen?*

Later review your story. Try to make sense of what happened. Work to establish an understanding of *why it happened*. Remember, when we can logically understand a rumination, we can prevent it from running loose in our minds.



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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

# Embracing Other Perspectives

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### Writing Prompts and Suggestions

Let's work to understand how others view your world.



**Writing Prompt:** Write from a Different Viewpoint

Choose a difficult story from your life. But before you begin to write, explore it. Pull outside yourself. Be the person on the other side of this experience – perhaps your ex-husband, your child, or your boss. See the event from his or her side. Work to be understanding. Tell the story with insights into this character's feelings. See the details that would be captured in this character's mind. Write it, and then ask yourself: *How did I see this differently? What have I learned? What insights are important here?*



**Writing Prompt:** Unsent Letters

Write a letter to someone who has upset you (lied to you, hurt you, left you, betrayed you). In this letter help the other person understand your feelings. Then write a return letter from this person to you. Write from her viewpoint, trying to understand her side. Work to understand the event. Then try to leave it behind you.



**Writing Prompt:** Writing as a Fictional Character

Sometimes we are not ready to write from the viewpoint of an assailant or abuser. When this happens we can benefit from turning to a fictional character. You might create a mentor, a teacher, a wise guide, someone who steps in to rescue you. Write your messy-difficult story, but allow this character, real or fictional, to tell your narrative and to guide you through it. Afterward, explore what you have learned from this character's experience.

How has your understanding of the story changed? What insights have you gained?

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# Story Editing

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### Writing Prompts and Suggestions

Let's explore how to edit a challenging personal story.



#### *Writing Prompt: Story Editing*

Choose a personal story or event. It may be one that troubles you or an experience you simply want to understand more fully. Perhaps you consciously want to face it or change your interpretation of this experience. Try working with these steps to edit this story:

- Begin by freely writing out the story.
- Then rethink it. Review your story by making notes that help you identify different ways of viewing it. (If you received a bad grade, are you going to see yourself as dumb or are you going to make constructive changes to help you improve? If you are in a bad relationship, can you move past blaming and faulting yourself to finding ways to cope and make changes?)
- List all the possible ways of reworking or editing this story. How can you make it a better story? Can you work to learn something new related to it? Can you volunteer to help others who have the same problem? Can you do or create something such as an artwork or poem or song to help you move forward?
- How can you choose to reframe or edit this story? Are there positive ways of working with this story? Place stars next to the specific ways you have listed that make good sense. This is critical, for it is here that you are making conscious choices in how you want to change.
- Rewrite your list working only with your starred items. They will be the center of your new interpretation.
- Now visualize how this will work. Give this process time, and give yourself space and quiet. You can even leave this exercise and return to it later if you sense that would help.
- Now rewrite your edited story. You should write your final draft in the way that

fits you uniquely. You can write this in your journal — or not. It can pour out of you as a freewriting exercise, as a poem, as a novel, as a script, as a memoir, and so on. Look for the positive as you write.

- Later you may come back to your story to reflect on it. In this review, ask yourself: Why did this happen, or why is it happening now? Have I edited this experience in the best way for me to move forward?
- If you feel successful at this challenging task, acknowledge it. And then work to accept and live your new story.

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

# Rewriting and Transforming

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### Writing Prompts and Suggestions

These writing activities allow us to work toward our changes, our unique story transformation.



**Writing Prompt:** Exploring Hope and Possibility

Choose to create a collage or a poem that explores your hopes and possibilities.



**Writing Prompt:** Inching Forward with a List

When you have faced a crisis or a trauma, one technique that can help you inch forward is making a list of what you can do or need to do. Ask yourself how you can manage this event. Who can you talk to? What can you do to face this experience? Begin by jotting down any actions that might help. When you finish your list, prioritize these activities. Mark the important items with As and the semi-important items with Bs. The not-so-important actions can be labeled with Cs. Move ahead by working on your list of A activities. Cross each item off as you complete it. This will allow you to measure your progress and to find your path forward. Re-view and rewrite this list as needed.



**Writing Prompt:** Finding Possibilities

Write a description of a current difficulty or challenge you face (a teenager in trouble, an illness in your family, the loss of a friend, or simply an out-of-control schedule). This is different from listing because you will begin by freewriting and work toward the creation of a doable plan. Start by sharing your concerns and feelings about what has happened. Then brainstorm and explore all the possible ways you could handle this

challenge. Think outside the box. After you have explored all the things you need to do, work to add activities that will allow you to feel centered and balanced. Do you need time to visit with friends? Do you need to reconnect with an activity that you love and left behind in the craziness of your schedule? Do you want to paint? Take a trip? Hike? Practice yoga? Then go back and highlight or underline what seems doable and *important* for you to pursue. Now sketch out a plan – your “possibilities.” Remember, you need time to balance yourself but not to binge on comfort foods or TV. Then create and try your new plan. Review it as needed.

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PART FIVE

**WRITING TO HEAL**

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

# Writing to Heal from Hardships and Trauma

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### Writing Prompts and Suggestions

If you remain troubled by a past experience or trauma, consider doing these exercises. The prompts are intended to be used either alone or in tandem with counseling. Choose the prompts that will help you tell your story, as well as the prompts that will best support your growth.

*Important note:* If you remain deeply troubled by your experience, seek out counseling and professional help.



#### *Writing Prompt: Structured Writing on a Story You Need to Tell*

If you have not written about a difficult experience or trauma, you may want to approach it first by doing a structured writing adapted from the work of Kathleen Adams. By answering simple questions you can explore your experience and decide if you are ready to move forward with an in-depth exploration. Begin by completing each sentence starter, and follow it with a short paragraph of a few sentences. It should take about ten to twenty minutes.

- The story I would like to explore is...
- What comes to mind is...
- What bothers me about this experience is...
- What I would like to understand is...
- I am hopeful that...
- Perhaps it would help if...
- What I have learned is...

Later come back and review this writing. At this time ask yourself: What have I learned? Is this a story I need to explore in more depth? Decide on your next step.





### *Writing Prompt: Song Lyrics*

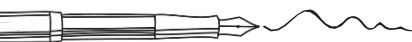
Our music and songs make it easy to explore hard events. Make a list of the songs you love. Then create a playlist or a mixed tape (these have evolved). When you play this music, choose the lines that connect to you. Then you may choose to write briefly about the lyrics you love, write a poem about a theme you found here, or create a collage that explores a few lines you love from these songs. You may want to share your music with a friend.



### *Writing Prompt: Springboards to Your Story*

Here is a list of simple prompts that might help you tap into a story you need to tell. Try one or more of these ideas. Begin by freewriting, and see how one unfolds. If the writing takes off, continue with this prompt. If it stalls, choose another.

- I knew I was faced with a challenge when...
- I knew it was over when...
- The secret I harbor is...
- The scars I hide are...
- I am faced with the unknown because...
- I believe I have turned it around by...
- My hopes are...
- My dreams are...



### *Writing Prompt: Questions about the "Story You Need to Tell"*

If you continue to search for the story you need to tell, try to answer these questions with as much depth and honesty as you can. These stories *do not* have to be based on difficult experiences. Finding joyful and positive moments may well provide you your best story yet.

- What story do you want to tell? Why?
- What is unique about your story?
- What is painful about your story?
- What is joyful about this story?

- What is universal about your story?
- What have you learned from this story?

Remember, if your writing ever seems too painful, stop. If you are afraid someone will see what you have written, shred or burn it. The healing it has given you will remain a part of you.

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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

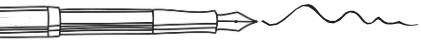
# Writing to Heal from Illness and Injury

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### Writing Prompts and Suggestions

These prompts focus on how writing can support us during an illness or while we are recovering from an injury.



#### *Writing Prompt: Dialogues*

When you are faced with an illness, disease, or injury, you need to reach an understanding of what has happened. You can begin by having a conversation with your body. A dialogue is a script that bounces back and forth between you and another person, pet, thing – or, in this case, your body. By talking you allow your inner voice or wisdom to help you understand your illness, disease, or injury. Don't judge or criticize what you write. View this as a search that might reveal some important insights.

It might start like this:

Self: Body, why are you so exhausted? Body: You saw the test results.

Self: I did, and I didn't like them. I am afraid of my disease. Body: I think we need to make some changes.

Self: What are you thinking? Maybe diet?

Play out your conversation with yourself to find answers that will help you get a handle on your situation.



#### *Writing Prompt: Exploring Your Truths*

Choose one of these prompts, and freewrite for five minutes. If the topic takes off, stay with it until you reach a point of completion. If the writing seems stuck, choose another

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prompt. Revise it if needed:

- I have never talked about this...
- The hardest lie I ever told was...
- The way it really was...
- It is dangerous to...
- This story is hidden in a box in the back of my mind. It begins...



### *Writing Prompt: Words That Heal*

Choose a word associated with healing: *hope, resilience, courage, endurance, patience, fortitude, tenacity, heroism, optimism, confidence, or strength.* (Choose a word not on the list if you think it fits.) Write a brief character description of one person you know who mirrors this word in the way she lives. Now choose a word that you want to embrace more fully in your life. Start with a statement like this:

- I want to be more hopeful...
- I want to be more patient...
- I want to be more...

Then write a brief character sketch looking into your future. Create a portrait of you as someone who is hopeful or patient or



### *Writing Prompt: Downside-Upside*

Make a list of all the difficult aspects of facing an illness, injury, or any difficult situation. Write first about what brings you down, what you hate, what isn't fair – the downside. Then scribble it out or draw *x*'s through it or rip it up. Now write about what you have learned, what you value, what you can build on from this experience. Draw a frame or stars around your upside. Write how you can live your upside more fully. Then go out and live it.

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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

# Writing to Heal from Loss

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### Writing Prompts and Suggestions

Here are some prompts to help us face the pain of loss through our writing.



#### *Writing Prompt: A Tribute or Eulogy*

Write a poem or short speech that honors the person you have lost. As you write, work to capture the images, details, and one-of-a-kind actions that made this person special to you. If you can, read this at a memorial service, a celebration of life service, or a simple gathering of friends.



#### *Writing Prompt: A Needed Conversation*

Write a talk you need to have with someone you have lost. Before you begin to write, think about these questions: Is there a conversation you still need to have with this person? Is there a conversation you would like to have? Are there questions you wish you had asked? Are there topics you think would be important to explore together? Here is an example from a young woman who recently lost her mom to Parkinson's disease:

You: Mom, I never had a chance to tell you how much I liked the blue dress.

Mom: Blue dress?

You: The one you made me last April. You were so sick and I was...

Mom: Oh, that dress. I knew you liked it. Do you wear it?

You: Yeah, but I was a bit of jerk. I didn't want you to spend your energy on me.

Mom: I know. But I wanted to do something nice for you.



#### *Writing Prompt: A Special Community*

When we face a loss, we need the support of others. Choose a special group or community you are a part of — a book club, a church group, a work group, a golf team, a fishing club, a band, a choir, a yoga group, a group of close friends, a service organization, or a writing group. Then explore these questions: Why am I a part of this group? Why is this community important to me? What have we shared that has been important? What can I do to make this community more meaningful for other members as well as for me? How have the members of this group provided support for me? Have I been there for those who needed me? Am I there for these individuals at times of loss?

If you need more support, what groups should you consider joining?



### *Writing Prompt: Accepting a Loss*

Tell the story of a loss you have experienced — the loss of a pet, a classmate, a friend, or a family member — and how you came to terms with it. Before you write, get comfortable. If it will help, post photos of the one you have lost around your writing space. Then answer these questions: What happened? What precipitated this loss? What is hard about this loss? Who has helped you cope with the loss? What activities have helped you navigate your loss? What have you learned from the one you have lost?



### *Writing Prompt: Gratitude Quotes*

At times of loss it is critical to find ways to support your well-being. Finding and writing about positive quotes, especially ones that express our gratitude, will help. You might want to find or create your own gratitude quote. Then reflect on it and write about it. What does it mean, and why is it important to you?

Here is a quote by Albert Schweitzer. If this quote resonates within you, write about it: “At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.” What does it mean? Who has lighted the flame within you? Why? How can you show your appreciation?

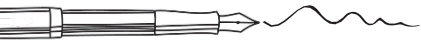


### *Writing Prompt: Gratitude Journals or Letters*

When you are grateful, positive emotions surface. After a loss, expressing your gratitude can help reground you by allowing positive feelings to resurface. Here are ideas for your

writing:

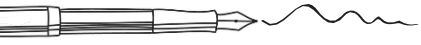
- You might choose to write a letter of appreciation to the person you have lost. If you want, you could share it with others.
- You might choose to write “gratitude memories” or “gratitude poems” that allow you to reconnect with a few of the wonderful moments shared with the one you have lost.
- You may want to initiate a gratitude journal in which you can regularly express your thanks for the people and experiences you value.



*Writing Prompt: Create a Bucket List of Wisdom*

This is where any past writings might prove helpful. You can re-read your old notes, journals, stories, poems, and essays and rediscover your personal stories. Or simply begin anew. It is never too late to begin this search. Collect or write what you have learned. The goal will be to capture your wisdom. If you choose, this could begin as a collection of your favorite life stories.

Keep it. All of it. When you feel the time is right, share it with loved ones — or bequeath it to them.



*Writing Prompt: Create a Bucket List of Your Favorite Stories*

This is similar to the last writing prompt, but it could be a shared family activity that helps in a time of loss — or at a time of family celebration. Pull together family stories and photos. Place them in a scrapbook, in a video, in a PowerPoint presentation, or in your own creative format. This bucket list of stories (or simply treasured family photos) can be shared at a family memorial, a celebration of life, or an appropriate family event: a graduation, a birthday, a wedding, or a retirement. Keep it, update it, and share it with loved ones at the right times.

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PART SIX

**WRITING TO TRANSFORM**

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## CHAPTER TWENTY

# Resilience

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### Writing Prompts and Suggestions

This prompt encourages you to rewrite a story you need or choose to tell. Search for your new interpretation of the event.



#### *Writing Prompt: Rewriting Your Resilient Story*

Choose a current event in your life that has its share of challenges: An election? A move? A boss? A new baby? Maybe it is a setback — or maybe not. Plan to write a blog, a letter, a script, a poem, or a story about it. Before you begin writing, think about these questions: What is happening? Why do you want to write about this? Is there a problem that needs to be solved? If so, what are some actions you could take? Can you create a different way of looking at this event? How can you help yourself move forward? Do you need to create a different ending to this story? If so, how should it end?

- *Write a blog* to an audience who follows you. Share this experience and how you managed it. Share with your blog audience what you learned. What is the important take-away from this experience?
- *Write a letter* to a future “you” explaining how you managed a challenge. What did you do or can you do to turn this event into a positive experience, one that taught you something or helped you to grow, learn, and move forward?
- *Write a script*, as Chris did. In this script, share a memory (or memories) of a challenge you have faced or are facing. Work to see your story in a new way. Find the positive angle. Try to see it and write it in a way you can reinterpret and live with. Chris did this as he wrote his script on Jenny, fantasizing on how it “should” have ended.
- *Create a poem* by finding images that help you piece together, in new and positive ways, any challenge you have faced or are facing. Work toward creating a portrait of your resilience.
- *Write your best story* by sharing a challenging experience and finding a positive framework to understand it, re-frame it, or end it. Know you can.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

# The Burst of Creativity

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### Writing Prompts and Suggestions

These prompts will encourage you to tap into your creativity.



#### *Writing Prompt: Experiences, Limitations, Rejections, and Losses*

Creativity often surfaces from the pain of our experiences, limitations, rejections, and losses. Think back to your past. Then write for at least ten minutes on one of these topics:

- *An experience.* What experience opened you up and helped you discover or rediscover an ability you might not have explored or known you had? What new ability came from this experience? Dancing? Gardening? Running? Painting? Golfing? Writing? Cooking? Metal-working? Rock-climbing? Explore this.
- *A limitation.* When did you learn you had a limitation? How did you learn this? How did you feel? What came from this experience?
- *A rejection.* When have you experienced rejection? How did you feel? How did you handle this experience? What did you learn? Did it change you? How?
- *Losses.* Have you experienced a loss (a divorce, a death, a move, a retirement) that opened you up to a new aspect of your creativity? How did this happen? What did you learn from this experience?



#### *Writing Prompt: Lists*

Brainstorm a list of action verbs or phrases of possibility. Work to find the actions that you hope to take in coming weeks — perhaps plant a garden or write a poem. When you list all the action verbs or phrases you can find, re-create your list. But this time, make it

a specific I-will-do-it list. What project do you need to undertake? What will you do to make this happen? Make your list detailed and clear. Post it on your bathroom mirror, tablet, smartphone, smartwatch, or computer. Begin acting on it. Now.



### *Writing Prompt: Create a Collage*

Create drawings or graphics – or find pictures, photos, words – and create a collage that embodies a theme that you treasure in your life. Creativity? Resilience? Nature? Love? Hope?



### *Writing Prompt: Reflecting on Your Metaphor*

Often as we work to understand and rewrite our story, it is helpful to find a metaphor or a symbol to represent us. Begin by making a list of twenty metaphors that connect to you. Could you be a balloon, a dancer, a storyteller, a coach, an acrobat, a teacher, a bird, a tree, a lotus flower, a bear, the sun? After making this list, choose one metaphor that fits you. It needs to be something that will allow you to open up and explore yourself in new ways. Reflect on your choice, and then answer these questions:

- What is your metaphor?
- Why did you choose it?
- How does it fit your story?