

On Writing Therapy

Words can kill: this we know only too well. But words can, in small measure, also sometimes heal.

Amos Oz

Writing is a form of therapy; sometimes I wonder how all those who do not write, compose or paint can manage to escape the madness, the melancholia, the panic fear which is inherent in the human condition.

Graham Greene

I went to my first writer's workshop last summer. It was in Italy. Maybe I would not have gone had it been elsewhere. However, a writer who I have admired and respected for years was teaching a class on the essay and the memoir. While I can scarcely claim to be a "writer," recently I have been trying to write personal essays and I knew that I would learn a great deal from her class.

My hope was amply confirmed, as she was every bit as instructive in person as she is on the written page. Initially I was worried that my lack of writing background would prove to be embarrassing. I found, to the contrary that I could hold my own with her, as well as the other students in the class, many of whom had also been writing professionally for years.

The workshop was held in Assisi, a much-visited hill town in southern Umbria. I treasured every moment. I loved being in Italy--the warmth, the crazy, wonderful people, the food, the endless days and nights of utter pleasure. My

room looked out over fields of sunflowers and the steep, winding streets of Assisi. As I was sitting at my desk, the town below and all of Umbria lay before me.

There were ten of us in the class that met every day but one for two consecutive weeks. Each of us presented something we had written before coming to the workshop. We were not asked to do any new writing, although I know many of the students wrote a great deal while they were there.

I asked the class to read an essay that I had written about my lifelong devotion to the *New Yorker* magazine. The other members of the class, all of whom were women, presented memoirs that were deeply charged tales of personal conflict, marital strife, difficult mother-daughter relationships, sibling rivalry, unruly children, or a shattered love affair. I was struck by the sameness of their accounts, by the sadness that ran through them all. I kept thinking there surely must be more to writing memoirs than page after page of emotional turmoil. Yet, other than my own essay, no one wrote about anything other than a failed relationship.

I thought a lot about why the students were so preoccupied with their cheerless experiences. Their accounts reminded me of James Pennebaker's recent book, *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions*, which reviews recent research on the therapeutic effects of writing about emotional experiences.¹ Reading about the psychological and physiological studies in Pennebaker's book had been an eye-opening experience for me, as it was my first exposure to writing therapy. In recalling Pennebaker's research, I began to view the student's memoirs as largely therapeutic, that, like the subjects in his studies, they were

¹ Pennebaker, J. (1997). *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions*. New York: The Guilford Press.

also trying to alleviate their emotional distress by writing about their misfortunes. Since Pennebaker's book seemed so closely associated with student's memoirs, I decided to summarize it for them during one of our last classes.

My review must have struck a responsive chord as it elicited a lively discussion during and after class. The students recognized that individuals can obtain some degree of relief by *talking* about their distress in a therapeutic setting, but they were not aware that simply *writing* about it could also be therapeutic. In his book, Pennebaker marshals an impressive array evidence to show that writing about emotional experiences has the same positive effects on physical and mental health as discussing them with a trained therapist.

In an early study, for example, he employed two groups of individuals. Those in one group were asked to write about extremely important emotional issues, while those in the other group wrote about neutral topics. The individuals in both groups wrote for 15 to 30 minutes each day for 3 to 5 days. They usually wrote in the laboratory and were never given any feedback about their written material.

Pennebaker says: "The degree to which writing or talking about basic thoughts and feelings can produce such profound physical and psychological changes is nothing short of amazing." He reports that it leads to fewer illnesses and physician visits, improvements in immune function and decreasing stress as measured by autonomic function. Students show an improvement in their grade point average. Employees report a decline in work absenteeism and an increased likelihood of reemployment following job loss. And the majority of research participants indicate they experience less stress, negative affect and symptoms of depression.

In another study Pennebaker reports that the spouses of individuals who committed suicide reported having fewer health problems when they spoke to others about this traumatic event than those who did not. Indeed spouses who did not talk about their partner's death experienced higher levels of anxiety, depression and insomnia.

According to Pennebaker, suppressing the expression of upsetting events is harmful and over a period of time becomes a serious health risk. In contrast, facing them squarely by talking and writing about them has the opposite effect. How does writing accomplish this? In trying to answer this question Pennebaker reflects on his own experiences:

In writing about upsetting events, for example, I often came to a new understanding of the emotional events themselves. Problems that had seemed overwhelming became more circumscribed and manageable after I saw them on paper. In some way, writing about my haunting experiences helped to resolve them. Once the issues were resolved, I no longer thought about them.

Pennebaker suggests that writing therapy is not unlike the Zeigarnick effect, a phenomenon observed in the study of memory. This effect refers to the fact that *interrupted* tasks tend to be more accurately recalled than completed ones. For example, individuals prevented from completing a story will be more likely to recall it accurately and for a longer period of time than they would, if they had finished it. In like fashion, writing about a troubling experience enables the author to give some closure to it, perhaps to resolve it and thereby put it aside, instead of ruminating about it day after day.

Writing provides an occasion to work through events in a more logical fashion. It externalizes a traumatic experience, gets it out into the world, so to speak, so that it can be viewed in a different light. Pennebaker also suggests that self-disclosure, the act of telling others about significant personal experiences, accounts for a substantial portion of the therapeutic effects of writing. In this sense writing is not unlike psychotherapy. In that situation you speak to a trained professional about significant personal events, whereas when you write about them, you may be expressing the same things privately. Pennebaker also points out that writing about emotional experiences mimics, to a certain extent, the circumstances under which confession occurs in religious settings

Is writing about upsetting events as effective as talking about them with a therapist? While not directly addressed by Pennebaker, Donnelly and Murray (1991) have recently examined this question.² They report that when there are at least four sessions, the changes produced by writing are indistinguishable from those produced by traditional therapy.

Recently I have also begun to wonder if writing e-mails to another person about emotional experiences might also have therapeutic effects. The written word of e-mail is not unlike other forms of writing and the interactive nature of this type of exchange has much in common with a psychotherapeutic exchange. I recall an e-mail my wife sent me a few years ago, when we were living and working in different cities. While we spoke daily on the telephone, we also communicated a good deal by e-mail. One night during a stressful time for her, she e-mailed me: "It's 1 am. X says I shouldn't write you in the wee hours of the morning, that depression is at its height then and nothing seems possible. But I am doing it

² Donnelly, D.A. & Murray, E.J. (1991). Cognitive and emotional changes in written essays and therapy interviews. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 10, 334-350.

anyway. *Somehow I find it cathartic. I always feel better after putting my thoughts down.*" [Italics mine]

Communicating online like this has all the marking of writing therapy. Individuals find it consoling to e-mail someone about their emotional distress. Sometimes it might even be a person who they haven't met. I wonder if the effects Pennebaker reports in *Opening Up* would also be true for exchanging e-mail messages with another person on the Internet? Would a group of individuals who are e-mailing about stressful matters be more likely to show the kinds of benefits he describes than a group e-mailing about neutral matters?

At the present time there is no evidence on this question. But it leads me to wonder if part of the attraction of online communication stems from the way it gives individuals an opportunity to write about emotional experiences that are normally suppressed. Indeed, perhaps e-mailing is another way to initiate and maintain the process of healing produced by writing or speaking to someone about those experiences.

Under certain conditions anonymous online disclosures might even be more effective than those expressed in a therapeutic situation. In a recent discussion of online communication, Gwinell (1998) notes that:

People generally compose e-mail, however, in relationship to the written word, alone with their computer. The sense of the person to whom the e-mail will later be sent is not immediate, the way the presence of a living person is. Being alone with one's thoughts also

opens the way for thoughts to arise that would be very difficult to express to another human being present in the room.³

It all sounds so simple. We all write. Some of us write in our journals or we write letters and now e-mails. We all are doing battle with one thing or another. The research on writing therapy tells us that to win our battles we need only spend a little time each day writing about them.

Can it be this simple? Were that it was so. There is much to be skeptical about in the many studies of writing therapy. We know, for example, that not every study reports a positive outcome. In those that do, we know that not all individuals have benefited from the writing experience. Nor do we know how long the positive effects last or if another group of individuals who did not write about their emotional experiences would show comparable changes during the same period of time. Above all, we do not know the mechanism responsible for the observed results. Pennebaker has proposed several--disinhibition, self-disclosure, and insight. But these alternatives are not clearly distinguished from one another and there are few if any reported tests designed to choose between them.

In *Opening Up* Pennebaker reports an interesting finding. Across four days of writing, individuals who wrote *less* benefited more than did those who wrote the most about their distress. This indicates that something other than simply writing about emotional experiences is responsible for the positive effects of writing therapy. In analyzing the content of the writing samples, Pennebaker found that those whose physical and mental health improved the most tended to use more *causal analysis* [italics mine]. This finding is supported by a recent

³ Gwinell, E. (1998). *Online Seduction: Falling in Love with Strangers on the Internet*. New York: Kodansha International.

study demonstrating that expressive writing is likely to have the greatest benefits when it has a narrative structure.⁴ Individuals who wrote tales that consisted largely of fragmented memories did not benefit as much as those who had organized them into a coherent narrative.

This line of research is consistent with all that I learned at the summer writing workshop. There we were taught that simply writing without a narrative structure, without an "organizing principle," is not literature. It appears that it is also not an effective form of writing therapy. For both to work there has to be a larger theme, a "revelation," as our teacher put it. At the workshop, we were taught that a narrative of personal feelings does not constitute literature. The author of a personal memoir has an obligation to come to a larger understanding of their experience, rather than simply recounting it, one incident after another, no matter how moving or eloquent.

I am not sure any of the memoirs presented at the workshop reached this kind of self-understanding. While writing them may have been temporarily therapeutic, most of us who were readers found them wanting in terms of psychological or literary wisdom. Many journeys were recounted, but few if any became tales of self-discovery.

I believe we are deluding ourselves by thinking we can put our emotional problems behind us simply by writing about them. Long ago we learned to be skeptical of the claims of the "insight" theory of psychotherapy. Awareness is not sufficient to cure. Similarly, the evidence on writing therapy suggests considerable caution about accepting its various claims of success.

⁴ Smyth, J., True, N., & Souto, J. (2001). Effects of writing about traumatic experiences: The necessity for narrative structuring. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 20, 161-172.

Long before I ever heard of "writing therapy" I wrote in my journal. I know that I am much more likely to write when things are not going well. But I also know that no matter how much I write or how much truth there is in what I write, I do not thereby put the problems behind me. I may feel a little better after I compose the passages. But only for the moment. Eventually the problems disappear. However, I realize full well that this occurs for reasons that have very little if anything to do with the fact that I may have written about them.