



DRAWING STRENGTH FROM WORDS

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PART ONE: WRITING TO HEAL

We use words every day. We speak, we write, we use language to form our thoughts and understand our emotions. The power of language allows us to communicate, to create, and to learn. Language also has the power to harm, silence, and oppress. I suggest we use the power of language for something positive: self-healing.

Writing doesn't just let me be myself, it lets me know myself. Some days writing acts as my companion, others as my translator. When I write, I can ask myself questions and give myself answers. When I put my thoughts down on paper, they gain a texture. I can weave them into a fabric, something I can touch. Writing gives flesh to abstraction. It is my mind made visible, my soul made pen and ink.

Wayne Muller writes, "Our own wounds can be vehicles for exploring our essential nature, revealing the deepest textures of our heart and soul, if only we will sit with them, open ourselves to the pain...without holding back, without blame."¹ This is how I see journaling. Let your notebook be a sacred space for healing through processing, release, and discovery.

Writing teaches me to be gentle with myself, to let myself be. I often have stories that feel fully formed inside my head, but when I sit down to work on them, I can't translate my thoughts to paper. I have learned that some stories need time to incubate before they can be brought into existence. I just let myself write about something else, anything else, to give these stories the room they need. They will be ready one day, and I will be here to write them.

PART TWO: STARTING AND MAINTAINING A PRACTICE

"Writing to heal requires no innate talent, though we become more skilled as we write, especially when we pay careful attention to the process of our writing. Every published writer was once a beginner. Even seasoned writers, facing a new project, must start anew, begin again."²

¹ Wayne Muller, *Legacy of the Heart: The Spiritual Advantages of a Painful Childhood* (New York: Touchstone, 1993), 36.

² Louise DeSalvo, *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 15.

Above all else, journaling is about the process rather than the product. While you may end up with a beautiful piece of prose or a fantastic poem, what you write in your journal can be messy and doesn't have to make sense. All that matters is that you enjoy yourself and not stress about what ends up on the paper.

If you're having trouble coming up with something to write about just ask yourself, *what is true for me right now?* Natalie Goldberg suggests, "Whatever's in front of you is a good beginning. Then move out onto all streets. You can go anyplace. Tell me everything you know. Don't worry if what you know you can't prove or haven't studied... Own anything you want in your writing and then let it go."³

The best part of writing is that I am not only the one speaking, but also the one listening. Truth is being present with myself and noticing. My truth can evolve; it can change from day to day or minute to minute.

Allow journaling to be a space where you're truly gentle with yourself. You don't need to feel silly if you used "there" instead of "they're," or if your thoughts don't flow, or if after ten minutes of writing you didn't get where you wanted to. Let yourself have fun and let yourself express your sadness. This practice is yours. Trust your instincts; trust yourself.

Every time I place pen to paper or put my fingers to the keyboard, I get a little bit closer to knowing myself, to knowing my process. Everything I've written I've had to write to be able to get here.

PART THREE: READING TO HEAL

"People may assume that writing is a creative act while reading is passive, but this is only if we're reading for information. For the seeker, reading symbolic prose is a transformative enterprise that requires engagement."⁴

Reading may not, at first, seem like a self-care practice. Many feel like reading is more of an obligation than a comfort. As someone who reads very slowly, I sympathize. Books that others finish in a day may take me half a week to wade through. But, like writing, reading is something that you can practice. Once you know how to read, the activity can open you up to infinite possibilities for learning and nourishment.

When I read, I hold whole worlds within my imagination. I find myself in the characters I encounter, find my home in the places, find my loved ones, my trials, my joys. I discover my difficulties paralleled in another's—I feel like I am not alone in my struggles.

Reading, like journaling, is a practice in empathy. Stepping into another's world, even if that world is fictional, can expose you to new ways of thinking, and provide you with problem-solving skills and inspiration.

³ Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within* (Boulder: Shambhala Press, 1986), 36.

⁴ Irina Achildiyev, forward to "Writing from the Well," *Inkwell*, vol. 6 (Kent: All Access, 2011).

There is no shame in imitation. When I find a writer I love, their words become a part of my own, and I draw motivation and courage from them.

How you read can be based entirely on what works best for you. Do you prefer reading early in the mornings or late in the evenings? Do you need to be comfortable or a little out of your element to stay alert? A great technique to stay engaged with the book you're reading is to read aloud. This lets you taste the words and hear the music in them. Reading, then, becomes a whole body experience that engages multiple senses.

I like to write all over my books because it lets me feel like I am having a dialogue with the author.⁵ When something confuses me, I'll write question marks next to the passage. When a thought, question, or association comes up, I'll write it in the margins. If you don't feel comfortable writing in your book, or if it's borrowed, keep a scrap of paper folded in the pages on which to jot down what you're feeling, thinking, or wondering about.

PART FOUR: DREAMING TO HEAL

Ever since I learned to read, I began devouring any book I could get my hands on: the more fantastic and bizarre the story, the better. I grew up on Daniel Pinkwater, David Almond, and Patricia A. McKillip, and because of this, my dreaming mind has always been provided with wonderful material with which to create stories.

In my dreams I am told stories. Stories about my needs, my wants, my secrets. These stories reveal new pieces of myself, pieces I can heal or nurture.

Many writers and artists use dream imagery as inspiration for their work. I find dream journaling to also be a meditative act. When I write down my dreams, I'm able to start my day off with the satisfaction of having gotten something down on paper. Dream journaling helps me to process charged or frightening dreams so that intense feelings I have upon waking don't linger with me throughout the day.

PART FIVE: DRAWING STRENGTH FROM WORDS

*"Art is to console those who are broken by life."*⁶

A writer's skills do not arise out of inherent talent, but are strengthened through discovery. We must learn resilience over perfection and curiosity over effortlessness. The best gift we can hope for is the drive to keep honoring our processes.

⁵ For more information on annotation, see Natasha Russi's article in *Inkwell*, vol. 10, "Changing the Text: Annotation as Interaction."

⁶ Julia Glum, "Vincent Van Gogh Quotes: Sayings, Paintings by The 'Starry Night' Artist On His 162nd Birthday," *International Business Times*, last modified March 30, 2015.

Allow yourself to get excited about writing. Just because you love writing poetry doesn't mean you'll love writing short stories, and just because you love writing short stories doesn't mean you'll love writing poetry. That's okay. You can love what you love, and your loves may change. One day you might find yourself bringing that joy you get from short stories into a poem.

As a student, I often feel like I am writing for someone else. Journaling lets me write for myself. My journal is a sacred space to use however I like without anyone grading or critiquing me. When faced with the task of writing to hand in, the blank page can seem daunting. With journaling, allow it to feel liberating. Sit on a park bench and write the dialogue you think the birds are having, write a grocery list without any consideration of budget, write a heartfelt letter to someone you miss. Find excitement in pulling your thoughts down onto that open space; find wonder in the messes you can make.

The more I write, the more I love it. My words wrap around me. They are my ribcage protecting my heart, but giving it ample room to beat and to break when it needs to. Writing offers me a space for healing, a space where I can see myself anew. ◇