



BEYOND CATHARSIS: WRITING TO CONNECT

BAKI WRIGHT

I. WRITING FOR CATHARSIS

I initially turned to writing for emotional release when I was in middle school. Adolescence is often difficult; for those of us who have experienced extreme emotional states, it can be even more excruciating.

“Why are you so crazy?” a friend once said, after I had confided in her. “I’m going to put you in a box until you’re not crazy anymore.”

“How would that help?” I asked.

“You would be so crazy that you wouldn’t be able to get out. But you would want to get out, so the only way you could get out of the box would be to make yourself not crazy anymore.”

My friend’s insensitivity is an example of the ways that I was shamed for the emotions that I was experiencing. I was struggling with what may be called mental illness, yet I was made to feel that it was my fault. I craved validation and acceptance, yet I feared rejection and condemnation if I revealed anything too personal.

In writing, I found that I could become emotionally intimate with myself. While my journaling was connected to the literal details of my life, my creative writing provided a level of abstraction that helped me to begin to interpret my experiences. I also used my writing to seek support and understanding from my friends. I hoped that readers would be able to connect with my stories, but I wasn’t yet able to offer any insights. My mind was still “puzzling its way out of its own shadows.”¹

II. WRITING FOR SUPPORT

In Seattle’s performance poetry community, I was accepted and understood. I was sixteen when I started attending writing circles hosted by Youth Speaks Seattle. Many of the writers in this group were dedicated performance poets in their teens and twenties. At my first writing circle, I recognized

1. Debra Gwartney, “When the Action is Hot,” *Poets and Writers*, January/February 2013, 23-26.

a few names and faces from open mics and poetry slams. I hesitated to share my writing, but what other people read was so vulnerable that I was moved to read as well.

I attended writing circles religiously. Every Wednesday, I came early to the Langston Hughes Cultural Arts Center to greet people as they came in. This was better than church. When the facilitator gave the prompt, we congregated over our notebooks in silent prayer to the written word. When we shared our work, it was as if all that divinity flowed through each writer in turn. My favorite poets were now my peers and my mentors. The secret of our talent was that we came together to inspire each other.

Simply to have my voice heard and to know that my words were valued was therapeutic. It helped me gain confidence in myself. I wasn't just writing for catharsis anymore. I had begun to refine my writing to a level where it was more accessible to other people. I came to think of myself as a writer. This gave me a sense of self-worth.

In writing circles, I learned to create work from freewriting, which was foundational to the development of my writing process. The Youth Speaks community also taught me how to revise. Other writers gave me critical feedback on my work and shared their revision techniques. Performing poetry at open mics was also an important source of feedback. Over time, I became more committed to Youth Speaks as an organization. I participated in business meetings. I sat in on workshops as a facilitator-in-training. I was one of the poets representing Youth Speaks to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation when Youth Speaks was being considered for a grant. It was a joy to be of service, to further the cause of making poetry accessible to a younger audience.

Then the unthinkable happened: I stopped writing performance poetry. I stopped because I was feeling better and no longer craved catharsis through writing. My creativity shifted to other mediums: music, photography, sculpture. Because I stopped writing poetry, I fell out of the organization.

About a year after I stopped attending meetings, I saw the local director at the mall and she offered me a ride. In the car together, I apologized for leaving. I was ashamed for not writing and for not contributing to Youth Speaks. I felt like I had betrayed the organization and let her down personally. She seemed disappointed, but she was also understanding. Youth is a time to grow and explore, to find your voice—wherever that path leads you.

III. WRITING TO CONNECT

When my creative journey took me beyond performance poetry, still I wished that I could have clung to my identity as a Youth Speaks representative, because that identity had brought me belonging and self-esteem. As Natalie Goldberg says in her classic book, *Writing Down the Bones*: “Writers get confused. We think writing gives us an excuse for being alive. . . . Often we use writing as a way to receive notice, attention, love. ‘See what I wrote. I must be a good person.’ We are good people before we ever write a word.”

While it can be affirming to share work with a community of writers, today I am supported outside of writing. I am blessed to have a therapist and a support group. I also share emotionally with my family, my friends, and my romantic partner.

My time in writing circles and open mics was crucial for getting my writing beyond catharsis. Writing for emotional release provided the wellspring of inspiration that fueled my initial development as a writer. When I saw that other people were able to connect with my work, it encouraged me to hone my abilities. Now that I am well-established in my journey of emotional healing, I am able to offer insight into what I have experienced instead of overwhelming the reader with pathos.

As I wrote with a community of performance poets, I realized the power of writing to build connections. In *Writing to Change the World*, Mary Pipher says that “a writer’s job is to tell stories that connect readers to all the people on earth, to show these people as the complicated human beings they really are, with histories, families, emotions, and legitimate needs.” Writing can provide you a window into another person’s life, their thoughts, the people they care about. I believe that this is the ultimate stage of a writer’s craft—to not simply express yourself, but to connect. This is an audacious task that can only be undertaken in time, with perseverance and love.

MORE ON WRITING GROUPS

If you are considering joining a writing group, I would encourage you to look around to find a group that is appropriate. If you are still gaining confidence or you enjoy coming together to freewrite and share new work, you may feel at home in a writing circle. If you feel that you have a solid draft of a piece and you are looking for critical feedback, you may prefer a critique group. If you want to listen to poetry and share your work without receiving critical feedback, an open mic may be a good fit. Different writing groups will also have different levels of intimacy. Some writers will want to share very deeply, and some will prefer to interact as professionals.

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