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Words that Help: a Journey through Expressive Writing

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Words That Help:
A Journey through Expressive Writing

by
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An undergraduate honors thesis proposal submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Science
in
University Honors
and
Psychology

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Abstract

For the past three decades, researchers have studied the effects of “emotional writing” or “expressive writing” as a therapy tool, finding positive results for a myriad of chronic as well as intermittent psychological, emotional, and physical health issues. My interest in these findings, along with my academic interests in psychology and creative writing and my own experience with writing as therapy, led me to wonder if incorporating “expressive writing” techniques in a college setting would be beneficial. The few focused studies that have been done indeed show that it can be and my thesis aims to address a need for further research and experimentation with expressive writing in a university setting. My short story serves as an example of what the expressive writing process can produce when channeled and developed through a creative writing lens and my lesson plan as an example of the process’ broader, academic application. Combined, I believe they are the first steps toward helping other students find their clarity.

Introduction

“A writer is not so much someone who has something to say as he is someone who has found a process that will bring about new things he would not have thought of if he had not started to say them.” —William Stafford, *A Way of Writing*,

William Stafford was a poet, not a psychologist or a counselor, but in the opening line of his piece *A Way of Writing* he almost perfectly captures the fundamental spirit of what is known as “expressive writing” therapy. Expressive writing is commonly known as writing in which the author's primary purpose is to describe or communicate personal feelings, attitudes, and opinions (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). Therapists for example may give a patient a writing exercise that asks them to write freely about a traumatic or negative experience using extensive emotional description for 15 minutes a day, for three days. The therapist may then ask the patient to discuss or contemplate the emotions further to gain insight and/or closure, a less structured follow-up that reflects on the exercise may be scheduled, or the patient could have the freedom to complete the exercise without therapeutic intervention at all. The methods may be different, but the positive benefits are generally consistent (Brewin & Lennard, 1999; Henry, Schlegel, Talley, Molix, & Bettencourt, 2010; Low, Stanton, Bower, & Gyllenhammer, 2011; McGuire, Greenberg, & Gevirtz, 2005; Smyth & Pennebaker, 2008). This approach to therapy focuses more on the value of the process than on being a treatment with a standardized result. Because of this I feel it is a form of treatment that is drastically underutilized and rich with growth potential. It is a treatment that is inexpensive, extraordinarily customizable, and known to have positive psychological and/or physiological effects for nearly every demographic tested (Frattaroli, 2006; Pennebaker & Chung, 2007; Pennebaker & Evans, 2014; Petrie, 2004).

Being a psychology major and a writing minor, I always saw a therapeutic connection to creative writing. My interest in these subjects led me to research the possible positive effects of creative writing on a person's well-being. This search subsequently halted when I noticed a gap in the literature about this topic. Writing therapy in general is not new, but it is a form of treatment with little empirical study in a University setting and virtually none in regards to creative fiction or nonfiction. An article by English professor Mary Ann Cain (Cain, 2014) was one of the few sources I found that had a passion similar to mine about the importance of creative writing, stating:

I want writing to be an instrument of Soja's thirdspace, "the space where all places are, capable of being seen from every angle, each standing clear"; but also a secret and conjectured object, filled with illusions and allusions, a space that is common to all of us yet never able to be completely seen and understood, an "unimaginable universe" (56). I want writers to claim and create space for representing and re-visioning all of the complexities and contradictions of our being in relation to others. In this way, we move deeper into the truth of living. (239)

Cain, like I, looks at creative writing and sees the possibilities. Cain sees creative writing as an outlet for expression that stems further than just artistic expression. It can be a cathartic experience for people and I see no limits to the amount of cognitive exercise it can provide as well.

Discussion

The more practice a person has with writing, the more comfortable he/she will be with it regardless of the actual writing style (Lumley & Provenzano, 2003). Not only does expressive writing allow you to delve deeper into yourself and analyze an issue, but also frees and strengthens your working memory which in turn bolsters your analytical skills (Barclay & Skarlicki, 2009; Dalton & Glenwick, 2009; Lumley & Provenzano, 2003). Much like our teachers tell us when we begrudgingly moan, “But when am I ever going to *need* this?” the benefits of expressive writing spill over into other factions of life. By learning how to better articulate our feelings we become better partners in relationships (J. W. Pennebaker & Graybeal, 2001; Slatcher & Pennebaker, 2006), by exploring our emotions to find the root cause we become better problem solvers, and by understanding and taking to heart the meaning in all the information you gather, the better you are at understanding and appreciating yourself and your own agency (Giacomo, Abate, Pennebaker, & Rumbaugh, 2010; Lyubomirsky, Sousa, & Dickerhoof, 2006; J Wright & Chung, 2001).

With statistics showing a significant reduction in severity of symptoms for anxiety, depression, self-esteem, and quality of life, after patients were provided counseling (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014), the development of alternative options that could supplement or enhance this growth is ever the more necessary. Moreover, a thorough exploration of writing therapy is needed. The evidence that writing about stressful or traumatic experiences results in health and other benefits, including improved academic performance, lower levels of depression and pain, better perceived health, and better social functioning is clear and due to the efficient and adaptable nature of expressive writing, people already appear to be exploring it through Internet

resources (Lyubomirsky et al., 2006; Pennebaker & Evans, 2014; Wright & Chung, 2001; Wright, 2002).

Some researchers find writing therapy's major advantage is a collaborative program option that is "for patients and by them rather than being done to them. Too much medicine is diagnosis from the outside and having treatments done to the patient" (Wright & Chung, 2001). Expressive writing therapy has shown to be most effective with those who suffer from mild to moderate depression and is ideal for many who may not like the idea of drugs or more intensive therapies. Expressive writing approaches have a "normalizing" element meaning, for example, exploring your feelings via journaling and/or short story writing is something much more transferable as a hobby and a less stigmatizing form of treatment that can be entirely self-administered if need be (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014).

However, completely individualized and independently administered therapy is not necessarily the right option for everyone, but it *is* an option. As previously mentioned, expressive writing is a very flexible and cost effective plan, but completely eliminating the presence of a professional also eliminates their expertise. Therapists and counselors would be better suited to provide accurate and applicable information that is well-researched and supported in regards to treatment. Furthermore, leaving a more severe patient with no systematic follow-up can lead to less effective results (Chung & Pennebaker, 2008; Gortner, Rude, & Pennebaker, 2006).

By adding a creative element to expressive writing therapy, I am hoping to take what has been discovered and attempt to expand the depth of the therapeutic process and therefor expand the breadth of the results. By taking the completed pages from an expressive writing exercise, analyzing the emotions attached to the experience, and turning them into a work of fiction, people can find a different way of analyzing the trauma (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). Writing a

character that is intended to tell your story can breathe new life into a past experience. In addition to recognizing that creative writing has a therapeutic value, it is also important to explore the social benefits (Andersson & Conley, 2013; Campbell & Pennebaker, 2003; Pennebaker & Evans, 2014; Seih, Chung, & Pennebaker, 2011).

Writing a fictional story about struggle and trauma can provide a less invasive vehicle for those seeking therapy to convey their emotions in an indirect way. People then can gain a new perspective and a new outlet for sharing and letting go of their negative experiences because “the inherently organized nature of writing and talking about one’s thoughts about a traumatic life experience may provide a way for participants to accept their experiences and record them in an external fashion, thus allowing them to move beyond their troubles and ultimately resulting in favorable outcomes” (Lyubomirsky et al., 2006). In addition, working toward a goal like writing a short story is helpful regardless of whether or not the patient “completes” it. The process allows for more critical thinking practice, which is a practice that has no threshold. One does not have to produce a polished, print ready product in order for their story to be an achievement. The writing itself can serve as a physical representation of closure, which can be tremendously powerful (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). Though for those inclined toward creative writing, expressive writing can indeed be a fantastic jumping off point for new pieces intended for publishing.

Methodology

In order to explore the effectiveness of creative fiction in an expressive writing therapy program, I incorporated my writing minor in this project by creating my own piece of short fiction inspired by my exploration with expressive writing.

My fiction piece is more or less the product of the expressive writing process and I hope it will serve as an example of the sort of end product one might see by channeling this process through a creative writing lens. Professionals planning on using writing therapy are encouraged to gain experiential knowledge of the process as way to better understand the process they will be potentially guiding patients through (Wright & Chung, 2001). After consulting numerous studies and prompts, I chose to use the a four day series of writing prompts outlined in Chapter 3 of Pennebaker & Evan's book *Expressive Writing: Words that Heal* (2014) to describe and probe into the emotions of a traumatic life experience then use the free-write to inspire and develop a short fiction story.

I wrote for at least 20 minutes a day for four days then, after spending some time analyzing the writing I had produced, I followed up with the instructions and suggestions for "revising my story" in Chapter 4 (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014) to further explore my experience and work it into a coherent narrative. I used the prompts, writing for at least 15 minutes a day for three weeks, then, after a period of reflection, I used the completed exercises to create my short story. This initial process started in summer and I began workshopping my story in the fall in order to edit and format it to be read by others. I did not formally test or record data on any psychological or physiological effects I experienced because the purpose of my short story is not to demonstrate whether or not the therapy works nor to prove it produces a specific result or skill

level, but rather that the process inspired my writing and that a creative element can feasibly be applied to an expressive writing program.

Others may have adopted a similar writing method, but no formal training has ever been devised for this process (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014; Wright & Chung, 2001). Stafford continues in *A Way of Writing*, “I still must insist that I am often baffled about what “skill” has to do with the precious little area of confusion when I do not know what I am going to say and then I find out what I’m going to say (Stafford, 1990).” And that sort of clarity found from confusion is something anyone of any “skill” level can experience. Students in all fields of study could benefit from expressive writing, not just those with a natural affinity for creative writing (Frattaroli, Thomas, & Lyubomirsky, 2011; Lumley & Provenzano, 2003).

With that belief in mind, during my journey I decided to see if I could apply some of the exercises, particularly those from *Expressive Writing: Words that Heal* (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014), in a more general academic setting like that of the mentor sessions I conduct with freshmen students in the University Studies program at Portland State University. During Spring term, I decided to create a set of 10 prompts to be used by other mentors with their mentees as well as implement and try to gather feedback on three prompts during the term in my own sessions. So many of the exercises in Pennebaker’s book (2014) are extremely accessible and easy to complete for just about anyone, so I mainly focused on making the language of the prompts sound more broad rather than so “trauma” focused. I did this because like I noted earlier, benefits can be seen from writing about even minor day-to-day annoyances, which are subjects that college students, in my experience, are more apt to be bothered by and write about readily. I gave my mentees one 15-20 minute prompt during Weeks 3, 6, and 9 (Prompts #1-3 in Expressive Writing Prompts lesson plan pg. 38) as well as short anonymous surveys to gauge the

overall effectiveness of the activities. The survey I used was modified from the survey used in *Words that Heal* (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014):

Using the scale above, please answer the following:

1. How honest were you when describing your thoughts/feelings today? _____
2. To what degree do you currently feel sad or upset? _____
3. To what degree do you currently feel happy or content? _____
4. How helpful did you find this writing exercise today? _____

Does Jaede have permission to read your writing today? (circle one): YES NO

Since I decided too late to get IRB approval, I will not include any writing samples or specific information regarding the students involved in my mentor sessions. Also by the time this thesis is submitted, I will not be able to include information about Week 9's results. I made sure my mentees understood that I would be the only person seeing their writing, and that I would only do so if I had explicit permission to do so. They also were informed that they are not judged on the content of their writing and that they had the choice to change their minds about letting me read their pieces at any time.

Conclusion

A year after proposing my thesis and starting this expressive writing journey, I am immensely proud of the products I have produced. Though my piece *The Quiet Things That No One Ever Knows*, is still in a lot of ways “rough”, it has evolved tremendously into something near unrecognizable from the writings that inspired it. I feel as though I have gained a fresh perspective on a period of my life and feel a tremendous appreciation for what this experience has taught me. I feel as though I could go in a lot of directions with this piece and am excited to continue to work with it into the future. I will choose to let the piece speak for itself in regards to its content and hope that whomever reads it will get a glimpse at what this process has done for me creatively.

What most surprised me about this project was how quickly and confidently the purpose of it shifted for me once I found *Words that Heal* (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014) and once I became a Peer Mentor. The purpose for this project for me had always been to hopefully shed light on how amazing and useful expressive writing can be, but those two factors made me really want to take this project from talk to action. I did not want someone else to take the initiative, expand on my ideas, and then put them to practice. I wanted to do it. I was already feeling the positive effects and wanted to give my mentees a chance to see them. And, for the most part, my efforts were very well received. Most students let me read their samples each and appeared to really put effort into them. The anonymous surveys showed that each week, the majority of students found the exercises at least somewhat helpful and felt very few negative feelings afterwards.

Overall, I conclude that expressive writing can be very easily applied to an academic setting in a wide variety of ways— my story and mentor prompts serving as two examples of how. Instructors and students alike can use expressive writing in and out of the classroom. The

techniques are easily customizable and the results are nearly always positive to some degree. Students can become more apt to share and write freely, leading to better brain function, more self-confidence, and better overall college experience (Arigo & Smyth, 2012; Lumley & Provenzano, 2003; Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). I believe that, even in some small way, I was able to facilitate that for myself and some of my mentees and I believe my project could help others as well.

The Quiet Things That No One Ever Knows

This isn't how I thought it would go.

I never meant to get this involved. I never meant to make waves. I never meant to get attached, to care. I never meant to be important, to be the one picking up the pieces every day. I never meant to be the one talking a man off the ledge.

I just saw a young man with an interesting story. He was just supposed to be a guy I knew in passing, a charismatic man with piercing blue eyes who I'd met on my first night living in Portland.

"Rose?" I hear a shaky voice say on the other end of the line. I glance at the time on my computer. It's 3:17am.

"Yeah?" I reply, groggily trying to situate my phone on my ear.

"It's over Rose. We're done."

I know it's Chris, but I'm half asleep and trying to figure out what's going on. I have to be up for work in 2 hours, the horrible thought of ringing phones, two meetings, and finishing my story by deadline while exhausted entering my mind. In my sleepy confusion I think that he has called to break up with me. Then I remember we aren't dating. I sit up in my bed with a sinking feeling and when I hear his sniffing, I realize: Chris just called to inform me that his life as he knows it has just fallen apart.

When my editor told me that I was going to be doing a feature on “positivity in the underground Portland music scene” and needed profiles of local artists, I knew exactly who I wanted to talk to: Chris Madsen. Chris has a reputation for being a good guy. He’s sweet, witty, fun, talented, handsome, doesn’t drink or do drugs, doesn’t condemn those who do, and tries his best to remain drama free. He is the proverbial nice guy. He’s the kind of guy you want around.

Chris will jokingly talk shit to you when you hang out, but then whisper some of the nicest things you’ve ever heard from anyone ever in your ear as you hug goodbye. And he means it. All of it. He pays attention to his friends, he cares about their lives, he truly wishes everyone well. He’ll play a show and then be the rowdy kid stagediving and climbing on people’s heads and singing along to get people riled up for the other bands on the bill. Chris is the real deal. He’s a partner in crime. He’s a BFF. He’s a homie for life. He’s the definition of a good dude.

He was the perfect choice, the man for the job.

These were my perceptions and perceptions that were corroborated by the people in his life. Everyone had their own stories to prove this.

“I remember when I randomly called him up to see what he was doing and see if I could desperately rope him into helping me move,” Cassi says with a laugh. She’s a petite girl, a mutual friend of mine, maybe 5’ on a good day. “He picked up [the phone] and I said, ‘Hey, man! What are you up to?’ and he quickly replied, ‘Hanging out with you! What’s going on?’

It was funny and I was sure that once I mentioned that I needed help moving, he’d come up with something he needed to do or somewhere he needed to be. Especially ‘cause we didn’t

really know each other that well. Not even sure why I had his number come to think of it ‘cause I never really saw him except at his own shows,” she says with another laugh. “Anyway, he didn’t.

He just said, ‘I’m actually already driving so I’ll be there in like 20 minutes. That cool?’”

And he did just that. It was summer time and it was about 98 degrees out, but Chris still came over and helped Cassi. And he did it all for nothing in return. She offered to give him gas money, make him lunch, whatever. He’d have nothing of it.

“I didn’t have anything else to do,” he said. “We’re good.”

I got Chris’s number from Cassi and, just as easily as he had helped her out on that hot summer day, Chris agreed to let me interview him. He rode his motorcycle over to my place that very evening and we started chatting.

His eyes are still as stunning as they ever were.

Missing that clichéd twinkle though.

“I’m sorry if I seem a little distracted today,” he says looking down at his hands, rubbing them together as if trying to remove some sort of invisible residue. “Family stuff, my wife...a lot’s going on right now.”

He seems to be both asking for permission to leave and fishing for an excuse to stay at the same time. His answers to my questions hadn’t been what I was expecting so far anyway, so I decide to grant him permission to leave and we make plans to meet up again in a few days.

After he's gone, I get out my notebook and begin reviewing the recording of the interview. He spoke a lot of his family and wife. Felt like I was listening to a recorded therapy session rather than an interview. When asked about some of his proudest moments on stage, Chris mentions things like playing in Europe to thousands of people with his former band and doing intimate shows in tiny basements surrounded by friends and family all singing along together, but when he mentions a benefit he put on to help save a small theatre up in Washington, that's when his voice lights up. This performance was different. It wasn't with his band and it wasn't in front of tons of adoring fans. It was with his dad. His dad lived in Florida as, believe it or not, a John Belushi impersonator in the Blues Brothers act at Universal Studios and that night they performed a Blues Brothers routine together. "It was just the most fun ever," Chris says. I remember his face when he said that. He said it in such a way, with such a light in his eyes that seemed to make the blue brighten, just for a moment. That night mattered to him. His dad mattered. That's why when Chris found a woman that he loved, he asked his dad, "Should I go for it?"

Thinking of his wife, I remember seeing her once, before she was the Mrs., at a restaurant in Chinatown on my 21st birthday. Some friends and I were having dinner there before heading to a show that, in fact, Chris's band was playing. He was coming back from the bathroom, saw us all and decided to come say hi. I still didn't really know him, but my friends did. They told him it was my birthday and he excitedly said he'd get me on the guest list for the show as a birthday gift. We did the obligatory "Oh no, you don't have to do that... Oh, but I insist!" sort of schpeal for a minute then he excused himself so he could get back to his date. We all looked over and saw a pretty young woman sitting across the room looking slightly annoyed. We let him go

and then the murmurs began. “Who is she?” “I don’t know, I’ve never seen her before.” “Isn’t she so-and-so’s friend?” And so on...

When we finally made our way to the show, it only got worse. No one seemed to know who this chick was. This chick as everyone will later find out is Camilla. She grew up in Manzanita, likes pineapple, Sufjan Stevens, Ryan Gosling movies, Chuck Palahniuk books, really likes sharks, but likes horses even more (“You don’t understand. I wasn’t just ‘that’ girl who likes horses in school...I *was* a horse.” -Camilla Madsen), and was well on her way to stealing Chris’s heart. Tall, very slim and tan— she kind of carries herself like a chick who’s used to getting what she wants by doing very little to get it. I remember seeing her laugh and though she, oddly enough, sort of resembled a horse silently whinnying, I found it...fetching.

I was curious, but didn’t pay nearly as much attention to her as my friends did that night. I was sufficiently drunk by the time Chris’s band went on, but I’ll never forget how my friends made a big deal about pushing me to the front and laying my eyes on Chris with his bass slung around his neck and giant cake that read “Happy Birthday Rose!” It was a vegan mint chocolate cake from my favorite bakery. My friends had asked the guys to present it to me before their set.

Will, the singer, wished me a happy birthday and urged everyone to buy me a drink at the bar later, Jacob, the drummer, snuck in a quick hug, and Chris, the nicest guy ever, went into a quick speech saying how he remembered meeting me on my first night living in Portland.

“She was hanging outside of Ground Kontrol with Michelle because Michelle was going to see us play there, but Rose wasn’t old enough to get in. Michelle introduced us and I can’t remember what was said, but she was sassy from the start. She was awesome. I’m glad that a year later she is still here, that she stuck around and I’m sure she has many more memories to make with all of us. Now let’s circle pit around this cake and have a good time tonight!”

He grabbed me into a hug, gave me a quick kiss on the cheek, and whispered, “Happy birthday, babe” in my ear. Someone took the cake and stashed it out of harm’s way then they started up. That was my “Chris moment”. If it had come from anyone else on that level of acquaintance, I’d figure they were just blowing smoke up my ass. But with him, I didn’t.

I continued to see him around from time to time and it was always nice. I also continued to see Camilla. It took people a while to get into her. She was very dependent on Chris, she didn’t talk much at shows, didn’t really hang out with anyone when he was away on tour, and he was toned down when around her. He had it bad for sure and everyone around him just wanted to make sure she was worthwhile. She had dated a guy in a band before, even moved away from home at 17 to be with him in Cleveland, OH. That guy is a shitbag. I know this from personal experience. That guy is such a shitbag that I can’t even fathom anyone, regardless of how young or how naïve, actually being in a relationship with him. She had also broken up with another boyfriend once and moved to Paris for 3 months with her best friend Bridget when she was 19 on a whim. People judged Camilla based on that knowledge, myself included, but as things progressed, as Chris’s eyes grew brighter in her presence, people dug deeper, she became more comfortable and open, and people came to the conclusion that she was better than her past. She passed the test. She made the grade. She was cool.

In time, to everyone who knew them, they were meant for each other. She was the yin to his yang. They had the weirdest conversations that only they understood, did everything together, and after about a year of dating, after living together, getting matching tattoos, and adopting a pit bull puppy named Buckley, Chris decided to do something that he never even conceived of doing.

“It wasn’t as romantic as I’d planned, but marriage wasn’t something I’d ever given thought to before. I wasn’t sure I even believed in it. I just knew I loved her and I wanted her to be more than just my girlfriend. I wanted her to be my wife. I told my dad that I’d felt this way and he told me to follow my heart. That’s all I could do. Chris stops, smiling longingly and continues, “I just looked at her while we were sitting on the couch one day watching old episodes of Arrested Development and said, ‘Hey, babe?’ She popped an Oreo in her mouth and went, ‘Yeah?’ with her mouth full and without looking away from the TV and I just go, ‘I wanna marry you.’” She studied my face for a second slowly chewing her Oreo after I said that and once she’d swallowed, wiped her mouth and smiled the most beautiful smile I’d ever seen. She said, ‘I wanna marry you too.’ It was the best moment of my life at that point. I knew it was right. I felt it.”

On May 8, 2010, Chris and Camilla snuck away from all of their friends at the annual Punk Rock Bowling Tournament and Music Festival in Las Vegas, NV and got a marriage license. Only a few people knew what they were planning and those in the loop brought along nice dresses and button down shirts to adorn as they watched their friends exchange their secret vows. The day was fun and full of spirit. Chris’s band competed in the bowling tournament in the morning and played a set later in the day, his band members and friends watched other bands, got drunk at the casino’s happy hour, and took the trip as a welcome opportunity to have all their friends around enjoying themselves without the stress of their normal lives back in Portland. After singing and dancing along to Against Me! that night, the handful of friends reconvened with Chris and Camilla in the parking lot to pile into his band’s van and head to the wedding chapel. This wasn’t going to be so simple though. No, this wasn’t going to go well at all.

Jacob, Chris' drummer, was wasted and riled up after being accused of cheating by his girlfriend minutes before, decided that they weren't allowed to take the van to the chapel because Chris hadn't paid his "fair share" of its cost and it "wasn't his to take." Will, Chris' lead singer, tries to calm him, but to no avail. Jacob is convinced that Chris was the one who had been talking shit and upsetting his girlfriend earlier. People try to explain that Chris was gone all afternoon, making that impossible and saying, "Honestly bro, if you don't want your girl to think you're cheating on her, maybe you should stop acting so sketchy and, I don't know, stop cheating on her!" But none of it matters. "No, fuck that! I fucking hate that guy!" he says. He gets in Chris's face, threatens him, shoves him, all that macho bullshit. Friends try to break it up, others run after Camilla who stormed off crying, others to console Jacob's girlfriend who was also in tears— it was a mess.

Eventually Will seems to give the final word in awarding Chris the keys to the van. He doesn't go to the chapel though. He decides he's had enough of both of them. Jacob goes off cursing to find his girlfriend. Everyone else, the wedding party, is emotionally disheveled, drained and looking to regain their footing. Then their friend Margot breaks the silence, "Let's get you two bitches married. Fuck all of that," she tells Chris. "Tonight is about you two." The air lightens almost instantly. The tension dissipates. Everyone's back on track and they climb into the van in their nice get-ups with smiles returned.

The chapel was cheap, the ceremony speedy, but the love abundant. It showed in the choked up voices saying "I do," in the shaky hands slipping rings onto fingers, in the tears welling up in enamored eyes and being wiped away by tissues and shirt sleeves. What took place that night in that chapel was love. It was pure, it was palpable, it was real. It didn't matter to

Chris that they'd have to drive all the way back to Portland with his pissed off band mates. Or that they would kick him out of the band less than a month later. Or that it would result in him losing two of his best friends, two of his brothers. None of it mattered. He had Camilla, he had his wife, and he had a whole life of love ahead of him.

□□□□□

"Chris is basically *the* nicest guy ever," Camilla tells me. "That's the problem."

We're sitting at a table at Hungry Tiger Too. It was crowded when we arrived because it's Wednesday and every Wednesday they serve \$1 vegan corndogs and \$1 PBRs. That combo of cheap and tasty enough always brings hipsters out in droves. The waitress had moved a little table into the center of the room so we didn't have to wait anymore which was nice of her, but with the bright ass ceiling light directly above, it made us feel like we were center stage. Like everyone had eyes on us.

Before I can ask Camilla what she meant by that statement, the waitress came over to take our order. We order five corndogs (three for her and two for me), a basket of tots, and couple of cocktails (an Iggy Pop and a Tom Arnold, I believe; no recollection at all as to what they consisted of; hipster bullshit I'm sure).

The waitress walks off and Camilla continues, "It's like...it's like he's so sweet and nice that he's totally oblivious to what's going on sometimes."

She looks around the bustling room, searching for a better way to explain herself. Her hair is bright red now, even brighter in our spotlight, and most every inch of visible skin on her upper body is now covered in tattoos. She's visually a very different sight to behold than she was when I first saw her on my 21st birthday almost three years ago. She's still gorgeous, still has that

oddly appealing horselaugh, but she carries herself differently. Now instead of coming off entitled and snobby, she has this air about her like she's tried to grow up too fast, like she has something to prove. Maybe she just feels like she has something to prove to me. Maybe she feels like she has to prove that this wasn't her fault. Chris and I had talked a few more times since our first interview and so much of the conversations had gone down paths that all led to Camilla. Any time I asked about his new music, he'd tell me how she was the inspiration. When I asked how he made it with a new band and what it took to get signed to a label, he'd say she was the support to push forward.

It was always about her. He was always about her. And he was losing her.

"It's not like I didn't tell him anything. He knew when I was upset. I'm just unhappy you know? And I have been for awhile now. It's like, how long am I supposed to ignore that? Things aren't getting better and it's not fair to either of us."

She's right about things not getting better. Everyone in their lives could see it. Over the past six months or so, Chris and Camilla had fallen into a very distinct pattern: fight, fight harder, one of them gives up, then make up and act happy as ever. Most of these fights revolved around Camilla wanting to do something that Chris doesn't like. Ranging from petty issues like her wanting to go out for a drink with her girlfriends to more understandable gripes like her blowing nearly \$10,000 from a car accident settlement by quitting her job, going on shopping sprees, and getting quite literally more than a dozen tattoos in about a month and a half. I get

where his frustration is coming from the last one, but the other stuff was weird. Chris always said that he was fine with the fact that Camilla drank, but his actions didn't back it up.

Maybe he thought she would lose interest in those sorts of social get-togethers now that they were married, that she'd be content spending nearly every waking moment with him. He was. "She'd tell me to go hang out with my friends and do my own thing, but I didn't want to. I just wanted to stay home and hang out with my wife. I mean, is that really so weird?"

As it turns out, yes. Yes, it was. It really, really was. Anytime I saw them out and about, he tended to be the driving force behind them splitting early. And he wasn't very fun when they did stick around; he wasn't "Chris Chaos" the life of the party anymore. Instead some new guy that made people a little uneasy had replaced him.

"I'm pretty fucked up. She's not wearing her ring and I'm feeling more blindsided all the time. I swear I had no idea she was unhappy," Chris says. I'm in disbelief by this, but I don't push it. Though he's sitting on my couch, I'm not his therapist. It's not my place to make him make light of what's going on. I'm here to listen, but not like that.

At least not for now anyway.

"He was paranoid as fuck, Rose," Camilla tells me before taking a bite of her corndog. "I don't know why, but he was paranoid *all* the time."

I nod my head and sigh, "I know..."

And I did know. I didn't really pay too much attention to it until now or perhaps I willed myself not to, but I knew just like everyone else did. I could see Chris turning into this different person who was withdrawn and clinging to Camilla, his little bit of perfect, for dear life. Maybe he was doing it to avoid dealing with everything in his life that wasn't going right. Since getting kicked out of his band, the two of them did what they could to make ends meet. They lied on forms to get food stamps, Camilla worked various cocktail waitress jobs at douche bag night clubs downtown even though they both hated it (Chris hated the thought of her being pawed at by dudes in Ed Hardy shirts just as much as she hated the actuality of it), then Chris got a customer service job at Xbox and Cam a hostess job at the restaurant Montage. Chris hated his job, Cam loved hers. Maybe he was insecure at the idea of her being happy doing something without him. Regardless, no one liked this new Chris. He didn't feel right.

I remember going out for a "girl's night" of sorts with some friends a while back and one of them inviting Camilla to join us. Around 10pm she met up with us at this bar on Burnside, Rontoms. We were having fun and around 11pm she looks at her phone to see three missed calls and about ten texts from Chris wanting to know where she was. She texted him back saying, "Chill out! I've been gone a fucking hour!" When he wrote back demanding to know where she was, when she was coming back and if she was drinking, she didn't reply. She was extremely annoyed and hell, I definitely didn't blame her. He tried calling one of the girls we were with, but Camilla told her not to answer. Just as we were getting up to change venues, saw Chris walk in the door. He came up behind Cam, whipped her around and said with furrowed brows, "Why the hell aren't you answering your phone?!"

Pissed and tipsy she responded with wide eyes, "Oh...My...God. You did *not* really fucking come out here to find me. What the *fuck* are you doing here?!" They squabbled for a bit

before heading outside to squabble some more. The rest of us didn't know what to do, so we just stood there. I mean, it wasn't really our business right? Eventually Cam came back in, awkwardly hugged us all goodbye, and told us she was going home with Chris. It was only 11:47pm and we watched her leave, dumbfounded by the whole incident.

So yeah, I knew he was paranoid and possessive and rapidly becoming the guy you *don't* want around. He was a buzz kill, he was unapproachable, he wore a smile that didn't feel real, he was the kind of guy that you had to tiptoe around after noticing his oddly short new haircut that he'd gotten because he did crazy shit like hack off all his hair after fighting with his wife. I'll repeat, Chris was that guy you don't want around.

"So how was the show the other night?" Camilla asks me waving the waitress over for another drink. "I had three different people tell me they were nearly in tears."

She was referring to the show Chris's new band played at Black Water Music the night before last.

"Honestly," I sigh. "It was fucking rough."

□ □ □ □ □

I swear I can still feel the vibrations every time I think about it.

And I meant it when I said it was rough.

By this point, even though we'd only talked a couple of times about the situation specifically, I was one of only a handful of people who knew Chris and Camilla were on the rocks. Chris's dad was in town and he knew. He and Chris's sister came out to see him play. He was there to support his son the best he could and that was the important part. I could tell Chris was having a hard time every time someone asked where Camilla was and he would just say,

"She had to work."

He later rationalizes it to me as, "Well, at least I didn't have to lie."

He was still convinced they were going to work it out. "I'm not going to stop fighting for this, Rose," he says. "I love that girl. I don't care if the world knows how much I love her."

As the night progresses, bands play, we all hang out and catch up, then eventually head inside of the tiny room to watch Chris's band. I genuinely like their music. Chris is solely singing in this band and the new dynamic suits him more than playing bass in a pop punk band did. He seems to have found something good here.

They start up, everyone's getting into it, fans are getting a little rowdy as predicted, and his dad and sister are watching happily. A couple of songs in, I notice Chris's best friend Dominic recording the set and it's not until Chris starts introducing the next song that I realize why.

“Some of you came specifically for this song. Some of you didn’t.” As soon as the first couple of chords are struck, I know exactly what song is starting. “This is for my wife.” Steph and I just look at each other with an “Oh shit...” look as Chris starts singing.

“I’m sinking like a stone in the sea. I’m burning like a bridge for your body.”

I get chills and do the only thing I can think to do: sing along. He’s singing “Tautou”, the first song off Brand New’s album *Déjà Entendu*. It’s those same lines, *I’m sinking like a stone in the sea/I’m burning like a bridge for your body*, over and over for about a minute and half, with increasing intensity, and minimal music behind it. Chris’s eyes are shut tight and he’s clenching the mic even tighter. The air in the room grows thick and I can feel his emotion rising. Then, just

like on the album, then song ends and abruptly transitions into the next titled “Sic Transit Gloria...Glory Fades.” I instantly take cue from the punchier tempo, push my way to the front and start singing along to that too. As the chorus approaches, Chris raises a hand in the air, gets rid of the mic stand, and we all take it as an open invitation to get up close and personal. Others who know the song are pushing to the front to sing along now too. It seems all fun and games until I look at Chris’s eyes right before the last chorus. He’s hurting. He’s hurting and he needs this. The last chorus kicks in and with all I have in me, I sing, *“The fever! The focus! The reasons that I had to believe you weren’t too hard to sell! Die young and save yourself! The tickle! The taste of! It used to be the reason I breathed, but now it’s choking me up!”* I grab his face while others encircle him and jump on top of each other, *“Die young and save yourself!”*

The song ends, people clap, but the room is different. I’m shaking. Actually shaking and at the brink of tears. I feel like my knees are going to buckle. I look around at some of the other people in the room and can tell that they are trying to figure out what the hell they just witnessed.

The energy was undeniable. My friend Jared leans over and just says, “Dude...did I miss

something?" I don't know how to answer him and luckily the band starts playing another song so

I don't have to.

They finish their set and people start filing outside. Chris smiles, hugs me tight, and says

in my ear, "Thanks so much for coming out. It meant a lot."

"Of course, man," I say running my hand up and down his back like a person would to

comfort a friend.

"I'll get a hold of you tomorrow, ok? We should talk," he loosens his hold and looks at

me still holding my arms. "That cool?"

At this point our interview process is pretty much done so I'm not positive as to why he

needs to talk to me, but I just reply, "Yeah, whatever you need."

I give him a quick kiss on the cheek, he returns the gesture and says, "Thanks. Love you,

girl."

I smile, pat him on the shoulder and walk away.

My friend Melanie starts up the car to head home. She says to me, "There's something

big going on with that guy isn't there?"

I take a deep breath, fasten my seat belt and look out the window feeling drained,

"Yeah."

I tell Camilla some of these details, but not all. Just enough so she gets the idea.

“Fuck...” she trails off looking around the crowded restaurant. Her phone vibrates and the same reoccurring name flashes on the screen: Dev.

Dev is this dude who I know of as a friend of friends and works with Camilla at Montage. I know nothing about his personality, but his physical appeal is damn hard to deny. He’s tall, dark, handsome and ethnically ambiguous with dark brown hair that any woman would want to run her fingers through and a smile that could break vows. With insecurities running high on Chris’s end, the threat a man like that imposes is only that much more present.

As she keeps intermittently giggling and texting him, I play dumb to her blushing and say, “Sheesh...someone’s popular. Who are you talking to?”

She just finishes the text and stashes her phone in her purse, “Oh...just Dev from work.” She avoids eye contact and starts fidgeting with her unused fork. Watching her squirm like this gives me an inkling that I’m not getting the whole story.

But whatever, I wont pry.

“I’m actually heading over to Montage for some drinks after this if you wanna come with,” she says waving the waitress over to ask for our check.

I mull it over, but ultimately decline. And with that we pay our bill, head outside, hug, and go our separate ways.

Almost the second I walk in my front door, my phone rings. It’s Chris.

“Hey man, what’s going on?” I ask slipping off my shoes.

“Not much. Just thought I’d touch base with you. Is this a bad time?”

“Nah,” I respond, even though all I really want to do is put on my pajamas and wash my face. “I just got home. You’re good.”

“Oh yeah, you were out with Cam, huh?”

“Yeah…” How does he know that? I know I didn’t tell him.

“Yeah, she mentioned she’d be going out with you tonight and wanted me to check on the dogs,” he quickly interjects.

“Oh. Well, yeah we went out for corndogs and to follow up on a few things for the piece,” I reply feeling weird a bit about the line of conversation. His tone sounds a bit off.

“So is she on her way home?”

“No, she went to Montage.” I instantly regretted saying that. Shit.

“What did she go to Montage for?”

This is bad. I’m headed for a shit storm, I just know it.

“I don’t know. To hang out I assume.”

“I’m dying inside,” he utters suddenly, his voice shaky and distressed as if he’s been holding this back all night. “Is she with him right now? With Dev?”

“What? With Dev? I honestly don’t know,” I reply freaking out a little inside.

“I won’t sleep till I do. I want to fucking die. Did she go there to pick him up and go stay at his place again? My fucking life is ruined.”

He says all of this like a rapid fire of emotion and urgency. Then he starts crying. I’m blown away and still trying to process what he’s talking about. It’s like he knocked the wind out of me or something. And after taking a moment and a deep breath, I let go of any remaining objectivity I was hoping to maintain. I forget about my plan to just ride this all out and let him have it.

“Chris, you have to stop. I know this is the roughest thing ever for you, but I don’t know what she’s doing. I didn’t pry into her shit with him any further ‘cause honestly— I don’t want to know. You’re going to tear yourself apart obsessing over her comings and goings now. And I know nothing I say is going to change your mind, but that’s not gonna keep me from saying it and trying. I love you dude and hearing you like this is killing me. I feel like you’re one push away from doing something really crazy and it scares me.”

Wait, what the fuck? What the hell am I saying?

Did I just tell him I love him? Do I love him?

There’s a long pause, but I can hear him sniffing so I know he’s still on the line.

“I don’t mean to scare you. I don’t know what I’m doing... I’m sorry. I feel bad.”

“Don’t feel bad. I don’t want you to ever feel bad. This all sucks, and it’s going to continue to suck, but I promise you it will get better. And I promise I’ll be here for you as best as I can until it does.”

These words just keep coming out of my mouth. I don’t know why I all of a sudden decided that I want to take on that role, but it feels like the right thing to do. We certainly aren’t close by traditional standards. I may know a lot about him now, but he knows next to nothing about me. We rarely run into each other more than a couple of times a month, and we literally have never had a phone conversation until I started interviewing him, but there is some sort of connection between us. Something necessary. Something he has to be feeling too in order to be this vulnerable around me. I suppose he could just be a desperate man at the end of his rope that accidentally let a sliver of his despair slip into my view. He could just be manic.

But I don’t know that I believe that.

My gut says this is a brother in need. And my gut is nearly never wrong.

We sit there on the phone together for a few minutes. I’m not talking. I’m not sure what else to say, speechless listening to Chris’s continued crying. I feel just as helpless as he does right now.

He sniffles some more.

I hear him trying to wipe off his face and pull himself together.

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“For pulling you into my shit. It’s late. I should let you go,” he says still a little choked up.

“It’s ok. Really,” I say sitting down on my couch. “What’s your plan for tonight? I don’t like the idea of you being alone.”

“I’m staying at my friend Mason’s,” he replies. “I’ll be ok.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I’m good. Thanks, Rose.”

“No problem, call me if you need me.”

“I will. Thanks again,” then he pauses, “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

That night spawns a cycle. The next few days begin with a series of texts like, “I don’t think I’m gonna make it through this,” which eventually lead to frantic phone calls and me doing everything in my power to calm Chris down.

Do you have any idea how hard that is?

To have to constantly convince a man who’s spiraling out of control and consumed with heartbreak-driven determination to *not* go through with every bad idea his mind comes up with?

To have to somehow convince him *not* to go down to his wife’s work late at night and make a scene? To *not* beat up a dude whom he assumes is sleeping with his wife or at the very least

“waiting in the wings”? To *not* give up on his personal morals, start drinking his sorrow away, become so lost that he gets fired from his job, or just pick up and run away from everything and everyone?

In a nutshell, it’s fucking horrible.

And it’s only made worse by the fact that I care. I really care. If I didn’t care, I’d just be more annoyed than anything else about having to deal with it like so many others seem to be. And it’s this fact, this fact that so many of his friends appear to just be going through the motions telling him, “It’ll be ok, man,” and “Just don’t think about it, bro,”; telling him what they think he wants to hear rather than what he *needs* to hear in a selfish attempt to “stay out of it” because they “don’t want to get involved” that makes my growing role in Chris’s life all the more important. How did I become the one he turns to out of everyone? I’m worried, exhausted, and (thanks to my body’s natural tendency to throw all of my emotions into my stomach) so nauseous that I’m up to my tits in antacid and barely eating.

But every time he apologizes for being crazy and “bringing me into his shit,” I sincerely tell him not to be sorry. My mom taught me that friendship means being there for the other person when they need it most. You do it because, and only because, you mean it. And for some reason, I meant it.

So I continue the cycle. For thirteen more days it continues without variation. On the fourteenth day, things change.

The clock on my computer now reads 3:18am.

“Wait, what do you mean? What’s over? What happened?” I ask suddenly wide awake.

“I’m beyond disgusted,” Chris says through snuffles and staggered breaths. “She’s not even worth the assault charge I would’ve put on that guy. It’s completely over in every way.”

“Chris, I don’t understand...*what happened?*” I’m growing alarmingly nervous from his unstable tone and the words, “assault charges”.

“I came home to the two of them kissing, Rose,” he states bluntly. “I came home tonight after band practice, saw the door of our apartment open, walked in saw Cam and Dev fucking kissing. In my own fucking home, Rose.”

“Shit.” That’s all I can muster.

I’m still in disbelief and waiting for this to be a misunderstanding or, better yet, just a super vivid dream.

He continues, “Yeah, when I walked in they quickly separated and she started freaking out and instantly saying shit like, ‘You weren’t supposed to see that!’ and ‘I swear this has never happened before!’ And I mean, Rose come on, I’m not fucking stupid. I grabbed my brass knuckles out of my bag and told him to get the fuck out of my house. I said, ‘That’s some low shit kissing *my* wife in *my* own house,’ and he said, ‘Ok, man. I can respect that,’ and left.”

I let him keep talking, it’s physically the only thing I can do.

“By this point, Cam is crying and trying to explain herself or whatever. And I just told her to get out too. She kept grabbing me and trying to tell me to listen to her and that she ‘never meant to hurt me’, but it’s all bullshit. You don’t fuck your husband in the morning, then fuck another dude that night...”

I have to cut him off there, “Whoa, wait *what?*”

“Yeah, Rose,” he says plainly; sniffing now subsided, tears temporarily at bay. “We made love this morning. We both slept at home for the first time since all this shit started, her in the bedroom and me on the couch. When we were getting ready in the morning, we started talking and things were looking up. One thing led to another and yeah, we had sex. So tell me Rose, what kind of person does all of that and still doesn’t mean to hurt me?”

“I...I don’t know what to say,” I stammer, truly at a loss for an answer.

“Neither do I, Rose. Neither do I.”

“So...what happened? How did things end?”

“I just told her that I was through with her. She’s trash to me and I can’t believe I wasted any of my time on her. She wouldn’t leave so I went outside. She followed me crying and yelling and when I got to the car, I saw that piece of shit Dev standing around the corner. I was so pissed off that I tried calling Tony, Matt, Josh, anyone to back me up because I wanted to kick that dude’s ass. But no one answered. Cam kept trying to get my phone and keys away from me, grabbing me and scratching me and then Dev came over and got in my face. I asked why he was even still there and Cam said she was his ride. I told him he could fucking walk home and that she could go with him. Cam tried to get the keys from me again and when I shoved her off, Dev, who as you know has about 4 inches and 50lbs on me, put me into a headlock. When he finally let go, I threw the keys at Cam and told her to just go.”

“Fuck...Well, where are you now?”

“I called Dominic after they left and he called me a cab. I’m up at his place in Vancouver. I grabbed some shit and the dogs and just came up here. I told him what happened, but he has school tomorrow morning so he went back to bed after I got here. You’re the only one who’s gotten the full story.” He pauses, “You’re the only one who answered the phone and listened.”

And I did just that. I listened. I listened until my alarm went off letting me know it was time to get ready for work. I listened on my lunch break and I listened when I got home. I listened the next day and listened the next week when our friends’ band played a show, Camilla showed up drunk, and Chris overheard her say, “I love him and I know I always will.” I listened to his eyes that night, welling up like rain flooded ponds, threw an arm around him when our friends sang a song called “Convinced I’m Wrong” and sang with him loud, “*What good am I to anyone like this? It’s been a hard couple months, I’ll admit! But after tonight! I’m not so convinced! That I’m wrong! That I’m wrong!*” I listened to his face as he started to allow himself to believe those words.

Chris is not the same guy regaling me with stories of touring around the world that I was originally going to write about. He’s not the perfect superhero of all things awesome like I once thought, but he had a goodness in his heart that my heart couldn’t desert.

I thought I would always be listening.

Expressive Writing Prompts

Each of the following prompts has been selected from Expressive Writing: Words that Heal by James W. Pennebaker, Ph.D. and John F. Evans, Ed.D. and adapted to a mentor lab environment. They each have their own set of specific instructions and are meant to be customizable to fit various lesson plans. I recommend stressing in all situations the importance of creating a safe, non-judgmental environment for students to write undisturbed and without stopping. Even the smallest distractions or threat of pressure can make the activity more difficult to commit to. You may also choose to follow-up with an informal discussion or sharing session, but some students may be hesitant to share so encouraging them to doing so on a voluntary basis is recommended. Happy writing!

PROMPT #1:

Think of a possible concern or worry you have going into the term. Is it something new or perhaps something already active in your life? Take the next 15 minutes to write about it in more detail. Describe your situation. How did it start? How do you feel about it now? As you write about this stressor, think about how it ties to other aspects of your life. Is it carrying over into other situations? Are there other people connected to or affected by it? Is this something you've dealt with in the past? How do you see it impacting your future (short or long term)?

PROMPT #2:

Today I would like for you to take the next 15 minutes to write a letter to someone in your life to thank him/her for something he/she gave you, taught you, or has inspired in you. We rarely make it anywhere in life without a boost from someone and at times it can be hard to remember and acknowledge that. Take a moment to imagine how the recipient may feel when they read your letter. Address the recipient personally. Think about your relationship with them and the context of the occasion. As you construct your letter, describe the gift, the skill, or the inspiration you received from knowing them. In your letter, you may tell them:

- What their gift meant to you when you received it.
- How you felt about it then and now.
- How you have used this gift or the skill or the inspiration you received from them.
- How your life has been enriched by what you have received from them and by their presence in your life.

PROMPT #3:

Looking into the future, take the next 15 minutes to write a descriptive paragraph about yourself. To guide your writing, consider: What do you look like at your personal best six months from now? What is the image that comes to mind? Describe your face and how it reflects your state of mind. Describe your prevailing mood. How is that reflected in your self-talk? Describe your diet. Your sleep. Your regular or new habits. How do you spend your time? Describe your interactions with others. Your relationships. Your work. Write as much detail as you need. Write about your future self in the first person, present tense. Start with the words “I am.”

PROMPT #4:

Imagine if someone you care about like your close friend, your child, or your partner is going through the same stressful situation you wrote about in other expressive writing exercises. In a compassionate letter and respectful way, write a letter with advice based on your experience. You might do any or all of these:

- Write about what you wish you had known but learned later, and what you imagine they might learn from the event.
- Write about ways you are now growing and ways they may also grow.
- Write about any benefits from the situation.
- Write about what they might learn about him/herself from going through this difficulty.

PROMPT #5:

Think about an upsetting or confusing event that has happened to you recently. (Maybe a fight with a family member or friend, or perhaps an unexpected conflict at work). Ideally this event should be something you have thought about a few times in the last couple of days. Have an event in mind? Good. Now, for the next 15 minutes, without thinking or censoring your thoughts write about what happened. Pretend you are talking to a stranger you will never see again and be as honest as possible. Don't worry about imposing any sort of structure to the piece or analyzing it. Just spit it out on paper.

PROMPT #6:

For the next 15 minutes, write a short story about yourself on one of the topics below. Write without abandon and feel free to get as creative as you like.

- What keeps you up at night

- What makes you get up in the morning
- Your frustrated dreams
- Your dreams attained

PROMPT #7:

On returning home from work, you learn that your house of 15 years has burned to the ground. All of your possessions— clothes, jewelry, pictures, and reminders of the past— are destroyed. The police arrest you on charges of arson, even though you aren't guilty. You are eventually freed and have moved in with your cousin while you think about what to do.

For the next 15 minutes, imagine this event happened to you. Really let go, take pen to paper, and try to feel the emotions and consider the thoughts you would currently have. Create scenes in your mind and make them as vivid as possible. Finally, put yourself in the present and consider what it would be like for you now dealing with this trauma. Explore your very deepest emotions and thoughts about this event. How might it be related to other events in your life? How must this trauma have affected you when it happened? How does it affect you now?

PROMPT #8:

After reading the poem below to yourself twice, use the next 15 minutes to try your hand at writing a poem about being mindful of your day. Use the poem's theme, rhythm, or repetitions as scaffolding for your own poem, or create your own theme, rhythm, or repetitions. If you like, feel free to start with the line: "I got out of bed..."

*I got out of bed,
Sheets silky, white cat purring,
It might have been otherwise.
I delighted
in a hot cup of tea.
It might have been otherwise.
I played with my children on
my bed. Laughter, tickling, joy.
All morning, I read, wrote and ran,
Some of my favorite things.
At noon I reveled in a hot shower, then
Went to a friend's house.
It might have been otherwise.
We ate dinner. Moroccan and delicious,
Drank wine, shared stories, laughed, ate more, drank more.
Friendship. It might have been otherwise.
I slept in bed.*

*Hydrangeas outside my window.
My children's artwork on the walls and planned another day.
Just like this one.
But one day, I know it will be otherwise.*

"Otherwise," by a participant.

PROMPT #9:

One tried and true method of writing is called stream of consciousness writing: simply place your thoughts and feelings on paper as they occur. The only rule is that you write continuously for the entire 15 minutes. Don't try to censor yourself. Just write what you are thinking about, what you are feeling, hearing, smelling, or noticing. It is important that your writing simply follows your stream of thought. Don't worry about spelling, grammar, or sentence structure. Remember that this writing is just for you alone. Just begin writing and don't stop until time is up.

PROMPT #10:

Think of an event, conflict, or other issue that you have been dealing with lately. This should not be a massive trauma— rather, choose something that you would label as a mere annoyance. For the next 15 minutes, write about this issue using the third-person voice. Replace "I" with the appropriate pronoun for yourself and write about the actions and emotions of the "main character" (you) as though you were observing everything as an outsider. Be as honest and detailed as possible.

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