

The Use of Journal Writing As a Recovery Tool

by Charles Gillispie

"In this poor body, composed of one hundred bones and nine openings, is something called spirit, a flimsy curtain swept this way and that by the slightest breeze. It is spirit, such as it is, which led me to write..." — Basho

Basho was a traveling poet and student of Zen meditation. He is most famous for a travel journal he wrote in 1689; *Narrow Road to the Interior*, which describes a trip he took to Northern Japan:

"In which year it was I do not recall, but I, too, began to be lured by the wind like a fragmentary cloud and have since been unable to resist wanderlust, roaming out to the seashores."

Basho's book is full of brief paragraphs, often followed by very short poems, which describe the people and places he encountered, as well as his own moods and perceptions:

"Autumn—even birds and clouds look old."

With a little guidance and encouragement, we can all benefit from journal writing. Like Basho, we can celebrate and record our journey into the "interior"—the landscape of our struggles, hopes, insights and experiences.

Therapeutic Journal Writing

James Pennebaker, a professor of psychology at the University of Texas, reports that writing, in-and-of-itself, is not necessarily therapeutic. In fact, many of his clients who suffer from anger and depression report feeling worse after writing in journals. The process of writing about feelings, without any direction or structure, seems to exacerbate suffering instead of providing relief.

Dr. Pennebaker notes however, clients do report relief from journal writing under specific conditions. For example, clients who record events and thoughts as well as emotional experiences report greater relief after writing. Combining these three elements of daily life into a cohesive narrative is an essential component of therapeutic journal writing.

Additionally, Dr. Pennebaker notes that clients who write for at least twenty minutes a day for three days in a row report greater emotional comfort after writing in their journal. People in recovery can utilize these findings to receive more benefit from their writing.

The Use of Sentence-Stems and Repetition

Dr. Nicholas Mazza, founding member of the National Association of Poetry Therapy (www.poetrytherapy.org), believes that structure is an essential component of therapeutic journal writing. Structure can help us explore uncomfortable feelings while providing a positive direction. Dr. Mazza favors the use of sentence-stems and repetition to create meaningful poems or paragraphs.

The following journal entry is copied, with permission, from the journal of a young woman in treatment for substance abuse. It represents the use of sentence-stems and repetition. It was written after the young

woman agreed to end a romantic relationship, over the phone, that had been extremely abusive and destructive:

I used to trash my emotional wreckage onto those who neither deserved nor understood

But now I peel off the layers and stand naked in the responsibility of my grief

I used to stab the dagger into my heart and demand any willing boy to pull it out

But now I'm stitching up the wound and reflecting on the scar tissue

I used to play on words to be a puppet for applause

Now I am down on my knees in amends for my guilt

I used to die in the apocalypse with every mistake

But now I live in the moment with every experience

I used to crave the bittersweet lingering of the past

But now I'm driven by the desire to savor the curiosity of tomorrow

I used to see God in the pleasures I was granted

But now I see God in the ironic challenges I face

There was a time when I let go of the past for him

And now, finally, I let go of all of this for me."

The author reports that she used the sentence-stem and repetition with great reluctance in her journal. She thought the structure would mute her voice and her range of emotions. However, she discovered that the structure helped her stay clear of the habitual thoughts and feelings toward her boyfriend and opened a new avenue of hope and strength. In fact, she reports being surprised by the power that comes out in the entry. She sees a quality of self-esteem she would like to experience more.

Considerations for Practice

Journal writing, as a recovery tool, provides a number of advantages. First of all, the journal is immediately available to us, whenever we need it. As we practice therapeutic journal writing, we can develop much needed skills in mood management and regulation. Hopefully, as we become proficient in the use of specific structures, we will discover important information about our barriers to recovery. This material, when uncovered, can deepen and enrich the counseling experience for both clients and counselors.

Perhaps most importantly, the therapeutic journal can become our record of progress in recovery. In the tradition of Basho's travel journal, the therapeutic journal becomes a mirror reflecting our spiritual struggle, our spiritual accomplishment, as well as our spiritual need.

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