



CapeWomenOnline - Where Cape Women Shine

Your local venue for the women of Cape Cod to share their ideas, experiences and resources while inspiring each other in their life's journey

Inspire . Encourage . Network . Share

Literary Women



Summer 2013

The Healing Power of Writing

by Nicola Burnell

In 1997 I launched *The Healing Power of Writing*. This class changed not just my students' lives, but mine too. WRITING HEALS. As a teacher, I've witnessed the undeniable healing capacity of simply pouring one's thoughts onto the page to produce poetry, memoir and fiction.

Research has shown that writing is a powerful tool to help people with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder process repressed memories and uncover triggers that can lead to dangerous flashbacks. Writing gives our stories a safe place to exist, outside of us.

Writing my story saved my life. *Seriously, I wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for the opportunity to get my story out of my head. Paul*

Writing can help our brain access information that remains buried beneath a lifetime of anxiety and pain. It lifts the lid on the box we hide in the deepest corners of the mind.

Writing sheds light on our darkest experiences and emotions, bathing them in an energy that allows room for recognition of and relief from past pain. Rick's story is a perfect example of the importance of writing to heal:

My soul was full of scar tissue. *Childhood brought way more than my fair share of trauma. Polio took away the use of my legs. My mother kidnapped me, took me away from everyone I knew and loved, and moved me to another country.*

As the years passed, I became a poster boy for survival, overcoming obstacles and building a happy and positive life. Good education, wonderful wife and stable marriage of over forty years, two grown and successful children, a fulfilling career - the whole nine yards of the American Dream.

But inside, the wounds to my soul continued to fester. Talking helped; love helped; helping others helped. All of these things helped, but couldn't cure what ailed me. For years, those close to me urged me to write my story. I never found the time; I always found a thousand excuses not to write.

Finally, in busy retirement, I forced myself to carve out time to write every week. What a blessing it has been. I've kicked myself countless times for not having started writing years ago. Exploring and cleaning out the deep recesses of my experiences, no matter how painful, have finally brought true healing.

As I write, I can feel the scar tissue softening, shrinking, disappearing. Every word I write moves my soul from the scarred and shrunken thing that it was for so many years, to the healthy, vibrant and life-giving thing that it is becoming.

Writing has healed my soul in ways that nothing else has been able to do.

Writing also helps to process grief. It provides a space for the meanderings of the soul as it searches for a way to let go and find a new path forward. When Katharine's son died suddenly, although not unexpectedly, she turned to writing for solace:

Whenever I can express sorrow through writing I become calm and accepting. *There is pain in life, I know, but it can be overpowered by beauty and happiness.*

Writing can break through the veils of long-held grief and finally offer peace of mind. After Helen's father died, in the First World War, no one talked about him. A discovery of letters he'd regularly sent home to his wife introduced Helen to the loving father she'd yearned to know her whole life. Weaving her story around excerpts from his letters helped to heal her heartache:

I decided to put the hurt on paper.

Like a wound, I know it's there.

But now it's safe.

I can go there when I want to.

I can feel the pain afresh.

Like an old faithful friend.

Then I can close the box until next time.

I decide.

'Bongo Bob' often brings his guitar and other instruments to class – we never know what we're going to get from him! He uses writing to make sense of his life, past and present, and he's not afraid to risk it all:

"This is therapy." *Our Teacher with the Luminous Aura quietly announced at my first class.*

"Write about anything you want. We'll critique it, but remember, one overly critical comment can make someone put down their pen and never pick it up again. Be gentle with each other."



Tree House Refuge: The Perfect Place To Write

"Therapy?" I thought. Therapy? I thought this was writing class. I don't know how to write, but I know how to just be honest.

So I was.

I wrote about what was real for me and I listened carefully to what others had to say and what they wrote.

It was only the second class when I first cried.

I always told my daughter, "It's OK to cry when you're hurt or you're sad, but NOT to try and get your way."

Well, I WAS sad. Many people I had loved had passed away in the prior few years and it physically HURT to listen to the story that one of my

classmates was reading about his time in Vietnam. I teared up and tried to hide it, but the Luminous One doesn't miss much and when she asked me what was going on I lost it.

Once you cry with a group of people, the rest is easy.

Just write it down.

I'm not so raw anymore and I'm much more careful with my criticisms; not just with my fellow artists, but with everyone. And I don't cry much in class anymore either. We're too busy laughing.

Sometimes, writing can feel like you're pulling your intestines out of your nose. It can be hard to stick with it and write to the end of your thoughts, but as Nancy learned, the payoff is worth the effort:

Writing takes a thin silver needle and burns the tip with a match. Writing picks at the scab that never quite heals, finds a splinter from handling an old family frame, and with a small amount of pressure, writing squeezes out puss and blood onto a clean sheet of paper. Healing begins.

Writing can lead to clarity. One of the most effective tools for reaching an understanding of where we are in life is what Julia Cameron calls the Morning Pages: three pages of uninterrupted, unedited stream-of-consciousness writing that when completed, is set aside and let go.

These pages not only help to work through trauma and past pain; they also reveal possibilities that can change your life, as Johanne discovered first hand:

I have learned the power of the written word. The process of morning pages and writing exercises put me on a trajectory of manifesting things I only dreamed of; owning my own home, being a published writer and now creating housing for adults with autism.

Writing about my own vision was a place to start. Writing made it credible. It planted the seed in my thoughts which then translated into action and ultimately into creating a new reality.

I wrote in detail about the home I would live in; how many rooms, what they looked like, who would live there, right down to the animals! I had no conventional means to buy a home at the time but I kept writing about that vision. With the help of Habitat for Humanity I moved into my own home in 2002.

I continued writing. I wrote about autism with a heartfelt intention to help people understand what it feels like to live with such a challenging diagnosis. There were times when just writing the words on paper brought unexpected tears to my eyes; emotions brought to the surface that I didn't even know were there, until I wrote them down. That in itself was healing. Healing also came from the emotional response from the people who read my articles - I'd reached them on a feeling level. Today, I'm working with other parents of adult children with autism toward a joint vision called Cape Cod Village, Inc. We plan to provide community housing for kids like ours. I write about this vision daily.

My journey continues with greater vision and inspiration, starting with the power of the written word.

Perhaps one of the most powerful ways to heal through writing is with humor. Yvonne began her upcoming novel in one of my classes; she is the queen of facing down her fear and pain with fabulous, funny stories.

A diagnosis of relapsing remitting multiple sclerosis is devastating and overwhelming. Fortunately for me, soon after receiving the news, several things happened in my life that caused me to actually laugh; an inappropriate comment by my little brother, a medical misunderstanding, a surprised and sympathetic cop who pulled me over for speeding on my way to my first infusion.

I realized that when I was laughing, I wasn't crying. That is not to say that I don't have breakdowns once in a while, but when I can channel my frustrations into humor, I feel like I am fighting back.

I didn't want to forget the things that I was finding amusing and soon I started writing them down. MS can provide A LOT of material. The stories multiplied. I joined the Cape Cod Writer's Center and then signed up for Nicola's class "Stop Talking About a Book - Just Write It."

I learned so much, and for the first time, realized the natural high that comes from helping others to laugh too. When Nicola and my classmates would start giggling as I read my work the feel-good emotions overtook the debilitating ones.

MS continued to give me even more material and the desire to help others struggling with a chronic illness lead me to start a weekly blog that I like to say "uses a giggle stick to beat up on MS."

Finding humor in the struggle, writing about it and then sharing it with others is the only thing that keeps me sane in the insanity that is living with MS.

Life is short and the bad times will be plenty. But laughing is a healthy release. And I don't know about you, but I look much prettier when I am laughing than when I am crying!

My currently untitled book is scheduled to be released this fall. But in the meantime, please check out my website [Finding Humor in a Multiple Sclerosis Life](#) or visit my blog for a laugh or two!

I have been writing and teaching about writing for over 17 years. My work is a gift that connects me to people who inspire me daily. If you don't write, I encourage you to put pen to paper - or fingers to keyboard. You may be surprised at what comes out of you, and how good your writing can make you feel.

To read about my own experience of writing check out my article [From Rustic Writer's Cabin to Tree House Refuge: Tales from a Writer's Retreat](#)

Nicola Burnell is Publisher and Editor of this magazine. For information about her ongoing writing classes and coaching programs [click HERE](#).

Testimonials from Nicola's Students

Summer Writing Classes with Nicola Burnell



The Healing Power of Writing

The power of the thoughts occupying our mind cannot be understated. We are what we think and believe.

Every Life is a Story Waiting to be Told

We all have stories that define who we are and what we have accomplished in our lives. Whether you want to share your story with family or friends, or work towards publication, this class is for you!

Stop Talking About Writing a Book ~ Just Write It!

This six week class is for anyone dreaming of writing the book that has been rattling around in their head for years.

[Click here](#) for details and Registration Form