

SESSION 3: WHAT YOU RESIST, PERSISTS

Part 1: Writing Lesson:

FRONT DOOR, BACK DOOR...

START WHERE YOU ARE.

“I’m always highly irritated by people who imply that writing fiction is an escape from reality. It is a plunge into reality and it’s very shocking to the system.”

– Flannery O’Connor, Mystery and Manners

In the last session I talked about the importance of making an agreement with myself to accept my writing, no matter how bad it was, in order to get started. I had realised that if I was editing my work too soon, I would cut off the flow of ideas, so I promised myself to ask the Editor to wait, and to give my Creator full rein until it had spent its first wave of ideas (at least).

Having understood this dynamic, I launched into a number of years when Writer’s Block was, for me, a thing of the past. And then I found myself going in circles again. At this stage I had been teaching Creative Writing for quite a few years so I was understandably Not Impressed! “You know what causes Writer’s Block!” I lectured myself. “What *is* the problem?!” Because there I was again, starting stories and having them trail off leaving me feeling frustrated and stupid.

One day I found myself reading a book of short stories by Jewish writer Serge Liberman. It seemed to me that every story presented the same type of character (new migrants to Australia) in the same type of situation (recovering from their experiences during the Holocaust and having trouble adapting to life in the new land).

Reading these stories, I was suddenly struck by the realisation that Mr



Liberman was *healing himself* through writing. He was revisiting a source of trauma over and over again, and allowing himself to gently unravel the knot created inside him by those experiences.

When I realised this, I looked at my own writing and recognised that there were certain themes that *I* was revisiting over and over. Even though I was writing fictional stories, I could see my own life story peeking through.

I came to understand that my writer's block this time was due to my unspoken criticism of myself for *having had* those experiences! Not only that, but I was effectively telling myself that I 'should have' lived a faultless life. I was blocked because I was forbidding myself to reveal the sensitive issues in my life.

Once I saw this, I took a deep breath and allowed myself to dive right in, to face and tell those stories. My writing flowed again, and so did my sense of self-worth.

ACCEPTANCE REALLY IS THE KEY

This is the precious gem I learned: **Whether you are blocked because you are criticising *HOW* you are expressing your ideas, or whether you are blocked because you are criticising yourself for *WHAT* you are writing about, the solution in both cases is an Attitude of Acceptance. This attitude is like a healing balm.**

So, if you find yourself writing on ‘dangerous themes’, allow yourself to go there. One of the titles I considered for this book was ‘Love and Heal Your Life through Writing’. The root of the word ‘**heal**’ is ‘**whole**’, and we only heal ourselves when we accept our whole selves, warts and all. Doing so, by the way, is a **holy** practice...

Like the pearl that is formed by being irritated when an intruder breaches its shell, and the diamond that is formed through pressure over millions of years, your most challenging experiences are a source of great richness for you personally, and for you as a writer, so allow yourself to write about what has been difficult in your life. Wisdom arises from a combination of experiences and reflection. Most of the truly wise were not born that way; they developed their wisdom through hard experiences. Allow the wisdom that you have gleaned from those experiences to float to consciousness. Sometimes we only discover how much we have learnt when we write about it.



WRITING EXERCISE:

You might already have stories that are bursting to come out of you in which you will write about or just touch on experiences that have been challenging in your life.

Sometimes these stories turn up on our front doorsteps demanding to be written, and sometimes (most often, in my experience), they sneak in via the back door.

“It’s a story about a genius and a fisherman,” I’ll say of my latest writing.

“Neither of those in my life.” Nope. No fishermen or geniuses to be seen... but somehow, as the story unfolds, I’ll find myself and my themes turning up... In fact, ‘The Genius and The Fisherman’ was the very story that triggered the realisation I mentioned at the beginning of this session.¹

If you don’t have either a back-door or a front-door story to work on, try one of these topics:

- **I wish I’d never seen...**

- **Home**

- **‘Anything’**

As often as you can, choose any topic at all and write in response to it. Just pluck a word or phrase out of thin air, borrow someone else’s title or first line, and see where it takes you. Practise trusting yourself (both in choosing a topic and in responding to it). As you develop that ‘self-trust muscle’, you will increasingly trust yourself in other areas of life too.

¹ You can read ‘The Genius and The Fisherman’ on my website ***

- **Virtual Themes**

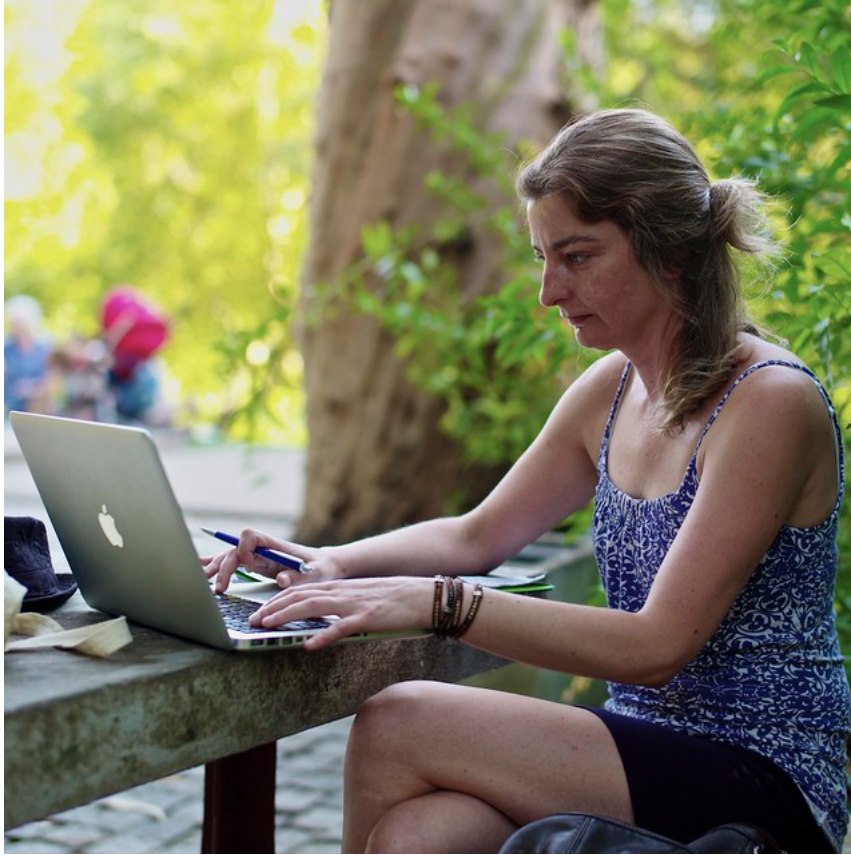
Some years ago, when I was studying NLP, I was introduced to the idea that each person's life reflects a 'virtual theme' or a 'virtual question' – that there is a kind of subtext to our lives, something we are trying to understand or achieve as we go through our lives. Perhaps your life-theme is one of abuse or abandonment, perhaps it's financial struggle, disagreements, loss of partner, illness, confusion, rejection, failure... It could also be playfulness or soul mates or spiritual breakthrough or being a teacher. Maybe your virtual theme is attracting or just missing amazing opportunities.

This is a particularly interesting exercise if you have been writing for some time as you will already have a body of material. When you go back over all of your previous writings, note the themes. What do you keep being drawn to write about? Which characters keep turning up in your stories? If you've been getting stuck, have a look at your themes because anything that is persisting is probably there because you've been resisting...

- **Painful memories**

Psychologist and public speaker, Jordan Peterson, advises people who are troubled by past memories to write about them, to fully articulate those memories in order to free themselves and put that baggage down. When a memory has not been resolved, it continues to draw upon the body's emotional energy. He recommends dividing one's life into six epochs and then analysing the emotionally significant events of those epochs in order to learn from them and be better prepared for a similar challenge in the future. It is his view that we only remember the past in order

to better prepare for the future. Once we have evaluated past difficulties in this way, our brain will leave them alone.



SESSION 3: WHAT YOU RESIST, PERSISTS

Part 2: Life Story Work:

TRACKING LIFE STORY THEMES AND FINDING THE BLESSINGS IN DARK EXPERIENCES

“There are so many different things you can use writing for. One of those is pure invention. For me, that’s my highest reach of it. But you can also use it to write your way through personal problems, which is what Eat, Pray, Love was for me.”

– Elizabeth Gilbert

MY STORY

Throughout my difficult years in relationship, I increasingly heard a small inner voice saying, “Leave”.

It’s not easy to trust that sort of voice when one has all sorts of other inner voices saying, *“But you’re not doing a very good job of being a parent. How will you cope if you leave? And how can you take your children away from their father – even if he isn’t very interested in them?”*

Besides, I did love him, and the sex was great. When we made love, I felt very loved. So maybe I should just hang in there. Maybe this would all work itself out. Maybe he would change...

I remember at one stage reading a book called *Too Bad to Stay, Too Good to Leave* by Mira Kirshenbaum, the very title of which seemed to hit the nail on the head. There was a questionnaire in the book that was designed to assist one in sorting out the inner turmoil, but at the end of the questionnaire I was as confused as ever. I couldn't seem to face the likely answer: leave! And I couldn't bear the default: stay!

That little voice nagged at me to leave the relationship FOR YEARS! It was probably a daily mantra. When I finally decided to leave the second time, in the interim I had done so much personal growth work *that no separation was required at all*. As I explained in the last session, my partner just 'magically changed' and we began to communicate more effectively than we had for a very long time.

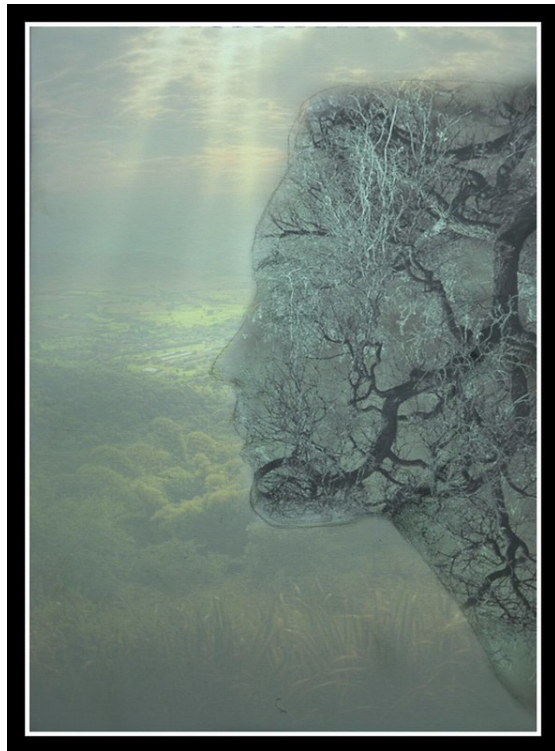
Even though I found that I didn't need to physically leave the relationship at that time, I realised that the little voice nagging me to leave had been serving me all along. It was the voice of my inner knowing that I was not valuing myself. It was the voice of my self-worth crying out for greater acknowledgement. "Leave" was my inner language for "Don't take this shit anymore! Value yourself! Change what you're thinking! Change how you're relating! Listen to your feelings! You deserve better."

I have a hugely greater trust of my intuition now than ever before. However, for a long time I believed (virtual theme) that I could not trust myself or my judgement. When I was a child, my mother was discovering the spiritual wisdom of the East. She was moving away from her Jewish roots and exploring yoga and meditation and channelling and all sorts of other spiritual practices and phenomena.

And she would regularly closet herself away in her room to meditate, posting a sign on the door that read: “Please respect my appointment with God.”

I think that sign haunted me for years. I remember standing outside the door and thinking, “Mum’s in there with God.” So, if God was in there with her, perhaps that meant He wasn’t out here with me. Perhaps it meant that she had a direct line to God. Perhaps it meant that if I wanted an answer from God, I should ask Mum.

And that’s what I started to do. Instead of turning within and developing my own connection to God/inner wisdom/my soul/spirit/higher self (or whatever you want to call it), I began to turn to my mother for answers since she was on God’s right hand. If my mother was travelling on a plane, I knew that plane wouldn’t crash. I had a crazy sort of faith in her relationship with God.



My mother had a wonderful library of wisdom that I regularly browsed. Why didn’t I just use what I was reading to develop my own understanding? I probably did, to some extent, but I was also caught up in this idea that her insights were somehow more trustworthy than mine; as a result of this, I developed a lack of self-trust that dogged me for years.

It’s amusing that, while I didn’t trust my judgement in my personal life, I was designing Creative Writing workshops that were all about trusting oneself. I only I recognised this irony years later; the day I did, I laughed out loud.

Trust issues have been a virtual theme throughout my life. My first birthing experience – a long non-progressing labour that resulted in intervention – was fraught with distress, both for me and for my son. When I looked back on that experience a couple of years later, I realised that I could have birthed him naturally and easily by myself if I had only trusted myself more. I remember waddling from the natural birthing centre into the hospital with a deep, heavy ache that later I understood. If I'd only trusted my body and myself, I could have birthed him there and then in the car park, and passed on the epidural experience.

But I didn't trust myself. Since then, I've been increasingly taking the risks and increasingly gaining the rewards of self-trust.

For example, my second birthing experience: Having been through that first birthing trauma, when I discovered that I was having twins, I was, understandably, somewhat nervous (read: terrified). And this was not just about the actual birthing process (though that was scary enough – I mean, you can't give birth to one twin and then brush your hands off and say, "That's enough for today! Everybody home!" You've got to keep going and produce Number Two); it was also about the parenting job after they emerged. After all, I wasn't currently winning any prizes for great mothering in that department. My very challenging toddler was ruling the roost. So, as the dreaded day approached, I was doing a fair bit of thinking, praying, hoping, affirming etc. on the topic of a nice, easy birth.

Just before my twins were due, I woke up at 4 am one morning with this poem in my mind:

The pain begins

And she throws herself away...

Now she is carried,

light as a bubble

By the raging torrent.

Sharp edges erased,

she knows no resistance.

She is the river.

The persona melts.

Sound takes over:

she groans,

she bellows,

swept away, driven along, tossed hither

and thither...

No desire to push or strain;

she fills her mind with images

of opening,

flowers opening,

buds unfolding effortlessly.

Her babies fall out,

Soft as butter.

I'd had a secret desire for these babies to be born at home, having been told that my looming hospital birth would be attended by a GP, a midwife, a twins specialist and two paediatricians – one for each twin – and a fear-driven induction if they were even three minutes late. Since I'd taken great care of myself throughout the pregnancy, and had reconnected with my first-birth-midwife and healed much of that latent trauma, I decided that I would have no such thing.

A dear friend who was passionately pro-home birth had given me lots of information about the safety of home birthing and the dangers of intervention. She'd also supported me emotionally throughout my pregnancy, and her confidence in my body's ability to do what it needed to do had somehow communicated itself to me.

This was all about trust yet again.

So, a few nights before my twins were due, my partner and I implemented some age-old birthing wisdom (intercourse in a particular position). The following morning labour pains began and, after a 45-minute labour, our beautiful daughters were with us, before we had time to get anywhere near a hospital.

This is one of my most cherished experiences, both because of the joy in welcoming them at home rather than in a clinical environment, and because their birth was a celebration of my new-found trust in my body's innate wisdom. It was nothing like 'soft as butter', more like 'excruciating and exhilarating', but easy by comparison with the 32-hour ordeal I'd experienced with my son.

I believe that the inner voice that guides a story is the same inner voice that guides our lives. It's an intuitive knowing that is entirely trust-worthy. In the context

of writing, this intuitive part of us sees the big picture; it knows where the story is going before we do. In the context of our personal lives, our intuitive self knows what we need to do to grow.

The real message of the voice telling me to “leave” was: “Value yourself more.”

I had had low self-esteem and hence no boundaries. The difficult years with my partner served me by providing more and more hurtful experiences till I was frustrated enough to listen to my heart/soul/feelings, and take responsibility for my own happiness. When I did, everything transformed.

HIDDEN BENEFITS

In the previous session I suggested that you tell your story, either through journaling or by speaking it to someone you trust. Now here’s the important part: When you have recorded the situation fully, ask yourself: *If there were a benefit to me in this situation as it is/was, what might it be?* Just assume, stupid as it may sound, that there *is/was* a benefit, that this experience *is/was exactly* what you need/needed. Given that, why? How did it/is it serving you?

Eg. If you’ve had health issues, how has illness served you? What has illness taught you?

Eg. If you’ve had work issues, how have retrenchments or frustration or being unappreciated served you? What have they taught you?

Eg. If you’ve had relationship issues, how have rejection or conflict or abuse etc. served you? What have they taught you?

Eg. If you've had money issues, how have lack of money or poor decisions or circumstances outside of you served you? What have they taught you?

Meet your greatest teachers! These experiences and these people are 'it'. Just as my frustratingly distant partner and my explosive son have been two of my greatest teachers, the people you clash with or who most disturb you are very likely to be your greatest teachers. Experiences, circumstances and conditions that appear to be entirely co-incidental can be included among your teachers.

THE YIN-YANG WHOLE

In 2003 I heard about an author and teacher called Dr John Demartini. Friends gave me his book, *The Breakthrough Experience – A Revolutionary New Approach to Personal Transformation*,² for my birthday in 2004. I read the book and was deeply impressed by Dr Demartini's wisdom and wealth of knowledge. In 2005 I attended his signature program.

The Breakthrough Experience book and program invite the reader to look beyond appearances and conventional thinking and to discover the gifts within every single life experience; to recognise that there is an order behind our apparently chaotic experiences and that the purpose of life is to find that order. Dr Demartini busts the myth that we are here to be happy; we are actually here to grow into our fullest potential, and that will entail both happy and unhappy experiences along the way.

We humans tend to glamourise the beautiful, the peaceful, support and comfort; but a white-washed life lacks depth. It's not wise to seek an only-happy life

² Hay House, 2000 (?)

or to overlook the gifts that lie within adversity. Artists use shadow to create beautiful pictures. A blank white canvas would interest no-one at all, even though we might use lovely words like ‘unadulterated’, ‘innocent’, ‘pure’ and ‘perfect’ to describe it. Artistic appeal is generated when we are presented with a variety of different colours, shades and shapes; when shadows give a picture depth. The dark colours accentuate the light. It’s not interesting to have only light/white; it’s the contrasts that make life rich and interesting, not the sameness.

Consider nature. Again, it’s the diversity that makes animals and plants resilient. Homogeneity is neither sustainable nor interesting; a mono crop is more susceptible to pests, and pure-breds are more susceptible to disease and genetic weakness than mongrels. This is how it is for humans too. Darkness and difficulties enrich us and strengthen and energise us, making us resilient and interesting.

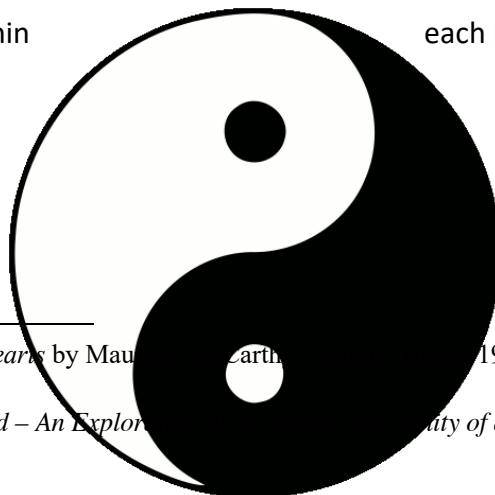
Here’s an example from literature. The narrator, a ‘blocked’ artist is out for a walk when...

“I came across this wonderful wreckers’ yard this morning. I was walking back from a two-hour hike I’d taken along the northern end of Ballingo’s national park. I was only about a kilometre out of town. There were all these clapped-out old bombs around a plain little wooden house. Someone was living there – there was washing on the line. An even row of flapping nappies against the black-green of the hedge. I stood there filled with wonder. Just to the right of the nappies were eight flattened cars piled on top of each other! Stunning. Each was rusty but a different colour. They seemed so absolutely indifferent and finished. At the same time so full of what they had been. Behind the house, in the distance, were eight tall pencil pines.”

“A perfect composition. The dark vertical shapes in the background, directly above the flat horizontal slabs of colour that were the cars, and to one side the white flapping shapes of the nappies – like so many flags of surrender. And in the foreground was a little girl of about four. Black tangled hair and red rubber boots. She was jumping around in the puddles singing to herself, completely oblivious to everything. I sat down across the road from her and pulled out my sketch pad. My mind was going berserk. Oh this world! I kept thinking. This bloody world! The beauty of it. What can I do with it? This terrible unfathomable world of squashed cars and little girls in red rubber boots! I rushed home, my heart racing and light.”³

You’ve probably heard the expression, ‘every cloud has a silver lining’. Our folk wisdom knows that difficulties strengthen and enrich us, and that there is usually a hidden gift or blessing even in quite adverse-appearing circumstances. Alan Watts, in *Two Hands of God*, explores the underlying unity behind explicit opposites, including ‘the discovery of light in the very depth of darkness’.⁴ Caroline Myss, another wonderful writer and teacher, says that ‘every wind comes from God’. (‘God’ being the essence/source of Love and Intelligence, not a mythical punishing figure.)

The yin-yang symbol shows us that within each dark experience there is a point of light, and within each light experience there is a point of darkness. That point of darkness within an experience that appears to be all-



³ Pp 263 – 264 *Chain of Hearts* by Maurine Bonham, Earth Angel Press, 1999. My bold.

⁴ P. 210, *Two Hands of God – An Exploration of the Unity of all Things* by Alan Watts; Century Paperbacks, 1963.

good is something that Dr Demartini calls ‘a drawback’. As you probe your memories, allow yourself to also recognise the other side of the balance scale: that our happy experiences harbour darkness.

Even our most precious love affairs have drawbacks. Hollywood has conditioned us to confuse infatuation with love but it’s not wise to wear rose-coloured glasses. When we are ‘blind with love’, we are actually infatuated; true love is seeing – and loving/appreciating – the whole person, not just the qualities we admire... (I think that my life journey has been almost exclusively dedicated to this realisation – or so my writing reveals!)

In *The Breakthrough Experience*, Dr Demartini guides readers through a set of questions designed to assist us in balancing our perspective, our positive and negative ‘charges’, so that we become grateful for *all* the experiences in our lives.⁵ The following exercise will allow you to make similar discoveries.

⁵ The Breakthrough Experience™ is also available as an experiential program. www.drdemartini.com

YOUR STORY

WRITING EXERCISE: Sweet and Sour

Go back to your life story and make a list of your apparently glowing experiences.

Now pause for a moment. Pick one or two of them and ask yourself, what were the little warnings you overlooked? How were things that at first appeared to be just positive, in the end also a hindrance?

Then make a list of your dark experiences. What are the gifts, the blessings in those events? How have your difficult experiences been serving you? How have you grown as a result of those experiences?

Leonard Cohen wrote a beautiful lyric: *“There is a crack in everything; that’s how the light gets in”*. Free writing is all about trust, so go now and write. Look into your cracks. Find the light. And trust...

“We did not come to remain whole.

We came to lose our leaves like the trees,

The trees that are broken

And start again, drawing up from the great roots.”

– Robert Bly