

## **SESSION 4: SUPPORT**

### **Part 1: Writing Lesson:**

#### ***YOUR WRITING SUPPORT GROUP***

*“Someone who loves us can often see our soul potential more clearly than we can ourselves. When this happens, it has a catalytic effect, it invites and encourages the dormant, undeveloped part of us to come forth and find expression.”*

*– John Welwood*

When I was sixteen years old, I placed an ad. in the local paper looking for other writers who might like to join me in establishing a writer’s group. Another 16-year-old girl answered, as did a few older men; I can’t remember who else. The others soon dropped away, but that girl hung around and we became friends.

This experience was wonderful. It was a statement that I was taking my love of writing seriously, and, being something of a loner, it found me a friend with shared interests. Helen Patrice and I have stayed in touch over the thirty years since I placed that ad., albeit with large gaps as we periodically drowned in our respective lives... Helen is a wonderful writer who has now published several poetry collections and is working on a memoir about her inspiring life. My life is all the richer for knowing her.

In 1987 I was a team leader on a personal development, accelerated learning program for teenagers called 'Discovery!' It was led by American and Hawaiian trainers and was a mind-blowing experience for all concerned. As I sat listening to Head Trainer, Dr Stephanie Burns, tell her stories about boldly taking on experiences for which she was barely prepared, I realised that I dearly wanted to teach Creative Writing but was waiting till I was... er, perfect. In that moment I had one of those grand BFOs<sup>1</sup> that we are all privy to at times, and realised that holding back was absurd. You achieve mastery by *doing* the thing. As a result of this inspiration, I applied to Orwil Street Community House in Frankston to teach Creative Writing, and was accepted. Thank you, Stef! You inspired me to follow one of my dreams.

From Orwil Street Community House I presented my writing course in



numerous community houses and TAFE colleges, culminating in a seven-year stint at Monash University in the Short Courses department from 1999 until 2006, when I decided to leave in order to focus my efforts on marketing my

newly self-published book, *The Mastery Club*. In 2008 I recommenced teaching my programs and then began one-on-one coaching as well.

I'm grateful to all the people who have attended my Writing Mastery<sup>2</sup> course throughout the years and have enabled me to share my love of writing, to develop my ability to encourage others, and to fine tune and clarify my thoughts about the

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<sup>1</sup> Blinding Flash of the Obvious.

<sup>2</sup> First called 'Creative Writing' – how creative! Then 'The Creative Writer', then 'Writing Mastery'.

writing process. Since the course was designed for a group context, some of the exercises in this book will be more satisfying if shared with others, so you might like to gather a few friends and work through them together.

If that isn't possible for you, you'll still get loads of value out of just working through the 'one person exercises', but if you're thinking about bringing together a group of co-writers, here are a few points for you to consider.

It's valuable to hear others' writing for several reasons. For one, you get to find out that everyone is as nervous, unsure, brilliant, and 'learning' as you. You'll also learn lots about different writing styles and approaches, and you'll be amazed by the variety of responses that are possible to the exact same topic.

There can, however, be some drawbacks to sharing your writing, such as if you have a tendency to compare yourself with others. Becoming too focused on other people's opinions and responses to your writing is a sure way to strangle your inner Creator, so you might prefer to only work with people you know and trust. On the other hand, strangers often bring 'fresh blood', new perspectives, and unbiased feedback.

Here's a quick word on copyright in case you're worried about someone stealing your ideas. When an idea is just that – a concept that you're thinking about and discussing with others – it's anyone's. As soon as you write it down and assign your name to it, it's yours and legally copyright. You don't need to go through any official process to make that idea yours, although you might choose to use the international copyright symbol © alongside your name to more strongly alert people to the fact that you are aware of your ownership of this written material/intellectual

property. (Some writers post their material to themselves as an official way of declaring ownership of material, but it's not actually a legal requirement.)

## **The Golden “Reading Your Writing to Others” Rules are as follows:**

### **LISTENERS:**

LISTEN ACTIVELY. I.e. make this a learning experience, rather than listening passively.

Notice what works and what doesn't. Does the story hold your attention? Can you

visualise the scenes

that are being

described? How do

you feel as you

listen to the story?

Note down the most

impactful phrases



you hear in each piece of writing. Doing so trains you to notice distinctions about

masterful writing; in time they will also provide valuable feedback for the writer.

### **READERS:**

1. JUST READ IT. Present your writing in its purity: ‘This is it.’ Don't indulge in justification (‘this isn't very good because I'm feeling tired'), adding (i.e. preambles like: ‘what I'm trying to do here is...’) or taking away (‘it's not very good – I don't think you're going to like it...’). Let your writing speak for itself.

2. NOTICE YOUR INTERNAL DIALOGUE - What is the editor saying to you – ‘that’s a stupid idea’, ‘did I do it right?’, ‘theirs will be better’... We must not only be the accepting Creator of our ideas as they come in, *but also as they go out* - i.e. as we read and share them. Apparently it takes 1000 hours of art practice to be considered an expert, so don’t criticise yourself while you’re just beginning.

3. LEARN FROM OTHERS BUT COMPARE YOURSELF AGAINST YOUR OWN BEST WORK, not against another’s work. Each person’s writing style is an expression of their unique essence. Remember Carmel Bird’s comments about new writers trying to be David Malouf or Agatha Christie? Instead of coveting someone else’s style, appreciate your own, and allow your strengths to unfold as you continue to work. This is the ‘most’ Golden Rule.

4. IT’S MUTUAL. Remind yourself that, just as you are interested in, and non-judgemental about, others’ work, they feel that way about your work. Your respect for others builds safety and trust within your group and increases everyone’s confidence.

However, having said all of that, if you are so focused on your own nervousness and your fears about others’ opinions that you’re not able to gain value from sharing your writing with others, feel free to exaggerate how terrible your writing is, how inadequate you feel, how much better everyone else is, etc. etc., to get that anxiety out of your system! Give the anxious part of you a STRONG voice and it won’t undermine you. This is another version of Self-Acceptance - it’s about you accepting

and expressing your feelings! (Mothers often instinctively pluck this tool from their Parenting Kit: “Yes, Lucy, you really are utterly hopeless at maths. I’m surprised you even dare turn up at school each day. Everybody else I’ve ever met in my whole life is outstandingly good at geometry. There’s obviously something deeply wrong with you –” etc. If the parent already has a playful relationship with the child, this sort of tactic can be very effective in breaking stuckness.)

When I was about seventeen years old, I did some school-initiated work experience at Playbox Theatre Company. It was a wonderful experience, all the more so because the Company was working with an emerging playwright by the name of Julianne O’Brien. Julianne was only a few years older than me and was hugely inspiring to me. I learned heaps watching her rewrite scenes in response to feedback from the Director and actors. I was impressed by her humility in receiving their feedback, and by her flexibility in reapproaching her material.

Julianne gave me a birthday gift of a large exercise book and a set of colourful pens. On the first page of the book, she wrote in purple:

*“Dear Liliane,*

*Never stop writing – just start new pages!!*

*Your Pen Pal, Julianne. xxx”*

I have always treasured this gift. I think that my favourite present has always been fresh paper and a good pen, since it is simultaneously the promise of much writing joy. (Although nowadays I’m so attached to the greater speeds I can achieve while typing, that my laptop has become my most treasured possession.)

Julianne also gave me a copy of the following poem that she wrote to encourage herself to deal with the feedback she received from others in response to her writing.

**MONSTERS by Julianne O'Brien**

I bite the heads off all my monsters

They come at me and I bite their bloody heads off.

They haven't got a chance in hell

Swipe, swipe, swipe, head off, swipe off

I get so out of breath and giggly with the whole bloody rush of it.

WHO SO EVER

WHO SO EVER

WHO SO EVER BLOODY comes up to me

looking like a monster of ANY SORT

should know

I'm out of patience now -

I'm into the good stuff.

**EXERCISE: Conquering Fears Poem**

If you feel uncomfortable about sharing your writing with others, I invite you to write your own 'conquer-your-fears' poem, claiming your right to write, to express yourself safely, to learn and grow, and to be heard.

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I begin most of the writing classes with a warm-up exercise, and the following exercise is designed for the group dynamic (although you could do it solitarily as a Trust-the-Creator exercise).

### GROUP WRITING EXERCISE

Take a piece of paper and write at the top, “*During the last week I...*”, complete the sentence, ending with a comma, fold your page to cover what you have just written, and pass it to the person on your left. Then take the page of the person on your right, and write another thing *you* have done on *their* sheet. Make sure you write neatly so that everyone can read your contribution.

Eg. “During the last week I have washed the dishes, eaten banana custard with the boss, danced with my best friend’s lover, locked myself out of the car twice, broken the photo copy machine at work,” etc.

Keep going around the circle in this manner until you’ve filled up the sheets, and then read them aloud. Although no-one has ‘authored’ any entire page, read the one you end up with as if you wrote it all. Be prepared for lots of laughs – especially when gender inconsistencies occur, like a male reading “During the week I painted my toenails red...”.

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Why do I offer this exercise? It’s a great ice-breaker and simultaneously helps to minimise distractions while late-comers are settling in; it gives participants a chance to read aloud what they’ve written but without the nervousness that comes with

having written something you really care about; and each experience described is a window to a story – which leads us to the material of Part Five – Coming Soon to this book!

So far, I've introduced two tools to assist your inner Creator in 'getting started'. These were Clustering (or Mind Mapping) and Free Writing (also known as Automatic Writing) in Part Two. Now I'm going to introduce you to another wonderful getting started exercise called a **WRITING MARATHON**. I first learnt about this exercise in *Writing Down the Bones* by Natalie Goldberg<sup>3</sup>.

Natalie Goldberg recommends gathering together a group of keen writers in a café for the purpose of a Writing Marathon. The format is to brainstorm a number of topics, and then all write for a set period of time, on the same topic. Let's say your topic is "Cars I've known." Everybody then writes in response to that topic for anywhere from five minutes to half an hour. Upon finishing, each person reads his or her piece aloud, *however there is to be no editing or feedback of any kind*. This exercise is purely for the development and encouragement of your inner Creator.

Person A reads, then everyone says "thank you"; Person B reads and when finished everyone says, "thank you"; Person C reads... etc. The idea is to simply indulge in creativity; to focus on quantity instead of quality; to fine tune your ability to tune in. Anyone who attends an Open Mic event knows that there is no feedback after a writer shares, just applause to acknowledge their contribution. Same, same.

Here are some topics to get you started. The one I suggest you begin with, for obvious reasons, is No. 1: 'How I feel about reading my writing to strangers'.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 150

**GROUP WRITING EXERCISE: Writing Marathon**

1. How I feel about reading my writing aloud to strangers. (NB Notice how you feel in your body.)
2. Teeth.
3. Someone who has been influential in my life.
4. Describe an experience from last week. (Anything: a party, a fight, a meeting)
5. A meal I've eaten.
6. Cars I've known.
7. Write this opening sentence from 'Wilderness' by Tim Winton<sup>4</sup>: 'For five days and five nights the man and woman had been in the wilderness', and then continue the story.
8. I wish I'd never seen...
9. 'What I know.' (Vs what you have been told or have read. What do you know *from your own experience?*)
10. Brainstorming exercises: Make a list of as many uses for a paperclip as you can think of, OR, working with the Leonardo Da Vinci principle that 'everything is connected to everything else', take two 'completely unconnected' items such as a frog and a spaceship, and make a list of as many connections/similarities between them as you can.<sup>5</sup>

There are no right or wrong writings or answers. As you write, coach yourself to accept your ideas. As you read, coach yourself to validate yourself. As you listen, coach yourself to learn.

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<sup>4</sup> 'Wilderness' by Tim Winton, from his book of short stories *Scission*, Penguin Books, 1985.

<sup>5</sup> *Head First – 10 Ways to Tap into your Natural Genius* by Tony Buzan; Thorsons/HarperCollins 2000 pp. 12 and 19.

If just listening without giving any feedback is beginning to drive you absolutely nuts, on the last round allow yourselves to communicate something you enjoyed about each piece. There is no doubt that the ability to receive constructive feedback is an essential part of developing as a writer, but if you are newly emerging as a writer, the time for that will come. For now, concentrate on building skills and confidence. (Down the track you might like to join an Open Mic group and share your writing with others. What you'll probably find is that after reading, the group simply applauds – the equivalent of saying 'thank you'. They don't give feedback in that environment; they just appreciate.)



There is a lovely story about the process of tuning into the Creator energy in the film *The Karate Kid*. Japanese caretaker, Mr Miyagi, is sculpting a bonsai tree. He invites troubled teenager, Daniel, to have a go, instructing him to close his eyes and see picture of the tree in his mind, then snip at the specimen in front of him and recreate the image that is in his mind's eye.

Daniel asks, “How do I know if the picture is the right one?” and Mr Miyagi answers: “It come from inside you... always the right one.”

*TRUST...*

### **HOW LEARNING OCCURS**

Most people today are familiar with the idea of the comfort zone. We know that if we do the same old things all the time and don't challenge ourselves with new experiences, we stay inside our 'comfortable zone' and we don't grow. On the other hand, the more new experiences we embrace, the more we grow. Being uncomfortable is simply an indication that we are in new territory, and that's when our potential to learn is most heightened.

Joseph Chilton Pearce, in his book, *Exploring the Crack in the Cosmic Egg*<sup>6</sup>, explains that, after emerging from our original 'comfort zone', the womb, we move into an expanded zone, the world outside the womb, but we are kept close to our mother, who becomes our new comfort zone. As we learn to crawl and then walk, we gradually move further and further away from our mother, but we always return to this primary comfort zone when we feel threatened or to nourish ourselves and renew our confidence. This pattern of continually expanding our comfort zone persists as we grow up, until we are comfortable and confident about meeting new people, travelling to new places, and undertaking new activities and challenges on our own. If we've been ripped away from that primary comfort zone prematurely,

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<sup>6</sup> Washington Square Press/Simon & Schuster, 1975.

we can remain insecure for a long time, in which case we need to very gently and patiently encourage ourselves to take steps in new directions.



New experiences expand our comfort zone, build our confidence, and develop our character. They also determine our level of intelligence, since intelligence is not so much a function of how many brain cells we have, as of how many *pathways*, or connections, there are between those brain cells.<sup>7</sup> The more new experiences we give ourselves, the more new pathways we generate between the cells in our brain. And the more networked the brain, the more easily we can make those precious intuitive leaps that generate all sorts of benefits in our lives.

In the interests of expanding comfort zones – and intelligence! – I suggest that the participants in my courses choose different seats for each session. When we sit in the same seat every class, we become locked into a particular ‘point of view’, both literally and metaphorically. Finding a different seat each session allows us to have numerous perspectives, more sensory stimulation and multiple experiences. The student who ‘always’ sits in the front row now discovers what it’s like to be at the back and get a view over everyone’s heads; the student who prefers the detachment of the back row gets to find out what it’s like to be ‘up close and personal’ and to have nothing in between themselves and the ‘source’ of material

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<sup>7</sup> *Evolve Your Brain – The Science of Changing Your Mind* by Joe Dispenza – page 149: “The number and health of synaptic connections is more important than the total number of nerve cells.”

they are studying. This more richly ‘layered’ experience allows our learnings to be more deeply encoded in the brain, and also more widely ‘cross-referenced’.

In addition to challenging my students to a shift in spatial perspective, I invite my students to give themselves a temporal shift in perspective. We achieve this by doing a piece of writing that is set in the future. I ask my students to decide what they would like to gain from doing this Writing Mastery course. Do they want more confidence, more skills, information, friendship, a support group? What would they love to count as theirs by the time the six-week course is over?

**WRITING EXERCISE: Temporal shift in perspective**

Please take a few minutes now to consider this for yourself. Begin with the line, “I have just finished reading *Writing (and Life) Mastery* and I now...”

And write a list or a paragraph of all the gifts and benefits you would like to acquire in the process of working through this book – BUT wait! I want you to write that list *as if you already have acquired those benefits*. You’re going to write “... and I am now much more confident... I have mastered... I have finished... I have learnt... I have gained... I have discovered...”

Remember, write about what you want to achieve AS IF YOU’VE GOT IT NOW. You’re creating a deliberate time warp.

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It’s also very valuable to treat yourself seriously as a writer by joining a writing organisation such as your state Fellowship of Writers or your national Society of

Authors or even your local community or neighbourhood house writing group. Or, as I did, place an ad in the local paper for a writing companion. Just start to make contact with other writers; start developing a support group.

*N.B. During my Writing Mastery course, a group of complete strangers comes together to share their writings with each other, and I endeavour to create an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect. This book is based on that course, and presents you with a number of set writing exercises that are designed to trigger your creativity and teach distinctions about masterful writing. Writing Mastery is not designed to provide much feedback on their writing as it's more about getting into the habit of creative expression. I do, however, offer a personal writing and editing service. If you'd like to know more, please visit my website – <https://lilianegrace.com> – or email me directly: [liliane@lilianegrace.com](mailto:liliane@lilianegrace.com).*

## **SESSION 4: SUPPORT**

### **Part 2: Life Story Work**

#### ***YOUR LIFE SUPPORT TEAM***

*“Truthfulness, honour, is not something which springs ablaze of itself; it has to be created between people.”*

*– Adrienne Rich*

*“As the mind sinks into the heart there are moments when we feel how inseparable we are and always have been. Perhaps even a sense of connection that existed even before we were born, a sense of the deathlessness of our essential oneness.”*

*– Stephen Levine*

### **MY STORY**

I have always been something of a loner. People see me as very outgoing and gregarious and immediately decide that I’m an extravert, but for years I was very solitary. I had a couple of friends at school, the people who were least unlike me, I guess, as I never really had a ‘best friend’ during my school years, someone with whom I could share everything, who I felt understood me and had similar interests.

I would come home from school, take my dog for a walk and then do my homework. For most of my childhood my family didn’t own a TV, so I read and went to bed early. I didn’t participate in normal teenage social patterns either at school or

on weekends. I pretty much kept to myself. At school I spent many lunchtimes in the library or hovering on the fringes of other groups (usually girls who interested me but who I considered too unlike me to invest much of myself with them). I avoided parties. I never drank. I didn't smoke or do drugs. No-one even offered me a cigarette during my entire teen years. I think I lived in a kind of impenetrable bubble. I used to walk past a gaggle of teenage boys holding my breath and hoping they wouldn't notice me as I didn't know how to respond to them when they did.

Actually, I felt much more comfortable with adults than my peers. I could sit and listen to adult conversation for ages (probably unnoticed there, too), filing this information away for later. (When I was twenty, I wrote a play about a marriage breakdown. An adult friend who attended the amateur performance<sup>8</sup>, remarked wryly that it 'hit home'. I guess most writers are observers at bottom.)

I left school in a burst of joy that I no longer had to mix with those peers who made me so uncomfortable. University was a slightly more comfortable experience for me, but I still didn't find any 'soul mates' there. It probably wasn't until I began to attend personal development programs in the late '80s that I felt I was meeting people who truly shared my values and interests. In fact, I seemed to have much more in common with some of these friends than with my own family. Special-interest groups, such as the Home Education Network and the Demartini Study Group often provided more relevant support to me than I could receive from my family but, without a doubt, the old saying that your job won't take care of you when you're sick the way your family and friends will, is usually true.

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<sup>8</sup> 'The Path of Betrayal' – awful title! – performed by Studio Edav in 1986. I've renamed it 'Sticks and Stones'.

An idea I came across within the personal development community is that ‘a true friend will ask of you more than you would ask of yourself’. I like that idea because I value honesty and growth. I’d rather someone tell me the truth than protect me out of a desire to be nice or not hurt me, even though I might not enjoy hearing the truth when it’s communicated.

When my partner and I struck our relationship crises, a counsellor was enormously valuable to us. There is a saying that ‘when the student is ready, the teacher appears’, and that was certainly the case for us. We were fortunate in meeting a very wise and grounded guide whose support resulted in much growth, better communication and some degree of breakthrough. Seeking counselling can be regarded as a sign of weakness, but I consider it to be a resounding sign of strength: firstly, in the willingness to take responsibility for a problem; secondly, in the willingness to listen and communicate at a higher level; and thirdly, because emotional health is every bit as important as physical, mental and spiritual health.

My circle of friends has changed significantly over time as I have changed. I still have Helen, hanging in there 40 years later, and for a number of years another writing buddy, Jenny, who deeply impressed me with her brilliant, honest, sharp-sighted and creative prose and whose funny, observant letters I still treasure to this day, but most of my friends today came into my life in recent years as my values and activities changed. Perhaps you have friends who went to kinder with you, in which case, I salute your longevity and the depth of your friendships.



## YOUR STORY

Who can you turn to? Count on? Who understands? Who will ‘ask more of you than you would ask of yourself?’

Alternately, who in your circle of friends is holding you back, keeping you behaving in manners that no longer suit your values or desired direction? I’ve always remembered a story that personal development leader Bob Proctor tells about being in a bar and looking around him one day with the realisation, “The people in here are all bums.” As he continued to look around, the thought struck him that, “I’m in here so I must be a bum too!” He put his glass down, left the bar, and never returned.<sup>9</sup>

Dr Demartini says that we are *always* surrounded by people who both support and challenge us. Sometimes we feel that we are only surrounded by critics and attackers and nobody supports us. If you feel that way, take a more thorough look at your life. Perhaps your partner or parents or boss seem to be always criticising you and confronting you, but, on the sidelines, your grandmother supports you unconditionally, or your children do, or the team you coach on Sundays really appreciates you... Dr Demartini teaches that this combination of support and challenge is the true definition of love. Contrary to popular understanding, love is not just everlasting support; it’s actually a combination of assistance and confrontation, because that’s how we grow. We need both ‘yes’ and ‘no’ to develop strong characters. ‘Yes’ alone would probably cause us to develop a self-centred, indulgent personality that in the end would attract some pretty resounding NO!s from the people around us.

So...

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<sup>9</sup> Paraphrased from the You Were Born Rich™ program, Life Success International.

**EXERCISE: My Support & Challenge Team**

Take some time now to identify (and appreciate) those who are supporting you AND those who are challenging you. (If you can equally appreciate the challengers, you have arrived at a place called 'mastery'...)