



Writing Ourselves Whole: *Restorying Our lives*
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Survivors Write:
Writing practice for personal and
community transformation

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Introduction

Many of us who are trauma survivors feel fragmented, disjointed, and may come to believe our lives will always be this way. Writing can be a tool for recovery, integration, and re-distillation of the stories our perpetrators and communities indoctrinated us into.

As a graduate of the Goddard's IMA program in Transformative Language Arts and certified as a facilitator of Pat Schneider's original Amherst Writers and Artists (AWA) workshop method, as well as a survivor of sexual trauma myself, I've facilitated non-clinical, non-therapy AWA workshops with survivors since 2002. Although the setting is a supportive one, these workshops differ from therapy/support group in some fundamental and liberatory ways. In this booklet, I will describe how the groups work and my philosophy as a survivor and facilitator. At the end, I provide some further resources for those interested in writing in groups with others (or alone!): a sample 8-week syllabus, additional writing prompts, our writing guidelines, and a bibliography.

1. Survivors writing together



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I lead transformative writing workshops, using the Amherst Writers and Artists workshop method, in the service of transforming trauma and/or struggles around sexuality into art, and creating spaces in which individuals may come to celebrate/honor the artist/writer within. I have found that the Amherst Writers and Artists workshop method can create an ethically-boundaried and safe space in which all participants can write as they are drawn to write, and everyone will be encouraged in their writing. Because the groups are closed (not drop-in), participants come to trust one another and thus often allow their work to grow and deepen in risk and playfulness.

The AWA workshop method, as defined by Pat Schneider in her book *Writing Alone and With Others* (Oxford University Press, 2003), is an excellent container for transformative writing: writing that takes risks, that opens us to the possibility of change.

These are the guidelines we use in Writing Ourselves Whole groups :

1. Confidentiality: everything shared in the writing circle stays in the writing circle
2. Exercises are suggestions
3. Reading aloud is optional
4. Feedback is positive and responds to all new writing as though it's fiction



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Through this structure, we build trust as we hold ourselves and each other in confidence. Writers have the surprise spark of exercises offered by someone else, and the freedom of interpretation and play. We can then choose to read aloud our new writing, *and we can choose not to*. If and when we choose to share what we've written, we know we will receive an engaged and strong hearing that focuses on the artistry of our words, our language, our imagery. We ourselves are never deconstructed, analyzed or pathologized.

I want to break down the ways in which I feel that each of the AWA practice guidelines has particular resonance for those of us recovering/surviving trauma:

1. **Exercises are suggestions:** we move away from the fear that punitive measures will be taken if we “do it wrong,” as we may have experienced as students learning to write in the classroom. It's ok to question the prompt or ignore it: we reclaim the authority of our creative instinct, and claim the power to say yes and no. Through this practice, we remember how to trust in the glimmer of a thought, following it wherever it might lead; we remember how to trust in ourselves.
2. **It's ok to pass:** we never have to read, and sometimes the most powerful writing will come when we tell ourselves “I'm just going to write this and I definitely will



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not read it.” Sharing is optional – there are no forced confessions!

3. **Respond only with what works:** in response to our writing, we don’t hear ‘you should have...why didn’t you...’, which would act as an echo of the voice of negativity already so prominent in many of our heads; instead of reinforcing our survivor’s overdeveloped *You Did It Wrong* voice, we get to share with each other, whole-heartedly, the things we liked. For the one offering the feedback, the opportunity to share positivity may be a break with old patterns: the chance to say what we like instead of only and always focusing on what’s wrong.

4. **Respond to all the writing as though it’s fiction:** amid quite intimate writings, we offer one another spaciousness and a sense of objectivity. We meet each other as sexual trauma survivors and also as creators/artists. Through this practice, we as writers are free to stay true to a story without freezing around what we can't (or haven't yet learned how to) remember; we are free *not* to remember clearly what we don’t remember clearly and to write *anyway*, to interweave autobiography and myth and dream and song and question. We get all the layers of our true stories.

This is a different kind of testimony—when we respond to one another’s writing



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as fiction, we give each other that distance from deeply intimate vulnerable work, we free one another, I think, to take more risks—because no one is pointing at us in response and saying “You Said!” (Even if it’s attached to a positive thing, there’s a weight to that pointing, that finger, that ‘you.’)

5. **Confidentiality** – what’s shared here stays here: and that puts us, as tellers and artists, (back) at the locus of control around the revelation of our own stories, around where those stories go, and when.

6. **Facilitator is also a participant:** the facilitator also writes along with everyone, shares, puts themselves on the line, which breaks that sense of leader as separate and fixed/well/better – the facilitator risks vulnerability along with everyone else.

Those of us who are survivors—so many of us, in so many different ways—were trained into an experience of ourselves as wrong, trained into silence, trained into the invisibility of our language. When I say that the workshops are “transformative,” I mean that we create ourselves a space in which to alter how we have come to know ourselves through language. When we tell newly-re-framed stories and we are *heard*... how can experience of witness not leave us feeling open and empowered?



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We come to know ourselves—what is possible for us—through language. And so it is that this freewriting practice can reawaken possibilities of self and life that got foreclosed upon when we were just (*just*) trying to survive, to keep ourselves alive.

2. What Writing in Community Can Do

“What I believe is not what everyone believes. It is this: There is no place for hierarchies in the heart, and the making of art is a matter of the heart. Art is the creative expression of the human spirit.”

– *Pat Schneider*

These workshops provide for me an ongoing reminder that every person—yes, every person—has artistic brilliance inside that is seeking an outlet; that community *can* web together to support and encourage this creative release; and that we, as a community, can collaborate around healing and individual/social transformation.

We who participate in these writing groups—facilitator and other writers alike—engage



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in the co-creation of a space that allows for risk, performance and play. As a facilitator, I take the same risks the other writers do. I trust the writers to cherish what I offer, and I am open to their feedback. I put some skin in the game, as they say, just as others do. This willingness, in my experience, allows for an alteration of the power structure in the room—and this alteration of familiar hierarchies is transformative in itself.

When we as writers, whether or not we're survivors of sexual trauma, come together this way—assiduously working to remain aware and respectful of the differences among us—and share our words, we have the opportunity to acknowledge our beauty and strength, both because we can hear our own poetic phrasing and descriptions, and because others tell us what is strong and resonant for them in our writings. We hear, witness, and open (to) the splendor in ourselves and in others. There is transformation in those moments, particularly when we who have spent years reiterating to ourselves the lessons of ugliness that we learned at our abusers' hips are able to acknowledge beauty in ourselves.

I feel privileged to have the opportunity to walk alongside and sing the songs that rise when we are all similarly invested in a process of transformation, to witness and participate in empowerment and full-bodied joy of the deep connection and conversation that occurs when folks walk their transformation side-by-side.



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3. Begin now to write yourself whole

Want to write yourself whole? Pick up the pen and start now. Just let the words come. Don't lift the pen up off the page, don't censor, don't make sense. Don't stop to worry about whether your grammar works there or if you ought to use a comma or a semi-colon or if it's time for a new paragraph. Give yourself these 5 minutes, maybe 15. Give yourself a lunch hour. Give yourself a morning hour, an evening hour, a weekend afternoon. Shut off the phone. Follow the flow, the pull of your writing. Set down in ink or pencil whatever words come up, non sequiturs and nonsense and to-do-list reminders alike, stories and complaints, wishes and dreams and frustrations and remembrances. Let it all come and commingle on your page. Let it flow through the boundaries and the bridges that we build within and around ourselves, the containments and separations, the work stuff and play stuff, the now stuff and then stuff. This writing is just for you. It doesn't have to be shared or read aloud or posted anywhere, unless *you* want to do so.

Start it now. Do it again tomorrow. Keep up this pattern as many consecutive days as possible, over several years. Continue for a lifetime.



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This is what's worked for me. This is the kind of urging that Natalie Goldberg makes in *Writing Down the Bones*, that Anne Lamott sets before us in *Bird by Bird*, that Pat Schneider encourages in *Writing Alone and With Others*. Trusting yourself enough to write freely and broadly and openly and deeply—it creates change.

This kind of freewriting has introduced me to my thought patterns, allowed me to trace out language for experiences that I thought were unnamable, given me meditation and play time. And over time, I've learned again to trust whatever my writing wants me to put on the page, and then to share that new, raw, unedited stuff with other writers to revel in the surprise truths my pen leads me to and my peer writers help to highlight for me.

4. Facilitating groups for others

Maybe you volunteer in your community, maybe you are a therapist, maybe you've participated in an AWA workshop or taken the training. In any case, you love new writing, believe in the power of words, and want to help hold a space where you and others can find new language for old stories, find new poems and stories altogether.

I came to the work of Writing Ourselves Whole with personal experience of surviving



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sexual abuse, and also with the training and experience I received as an on-staff advocate for battered women; I did one-with-one work with survivors and also facilitated psycho-educational support groups. In 2001 I was trained and certified as an Amherst Writers and Artists writing workshop facilitator. While I don't think all of this training is necessary for those interested in writing with trauma survivors, I will say that the skills I amassed through these different sources have all come in handy during the writing groups I facilitate. I've also done an awful lot of on-the-job learning.

Before I was a writing group facilitator, I had training as a peer and crisis counselor from a number of social service agencies. This means I had experience with the fact that, often, the most helpful thing you can do for another person is to listen to them, attentively and devotedly, and reflect back what you have heard. Pat Schneider's AWA workshop facilitator trainings reinforce this: listen well, and model attentive listening for others. It's a necessary lesson, one that can be difficult to really internalize. The writers don't gather to be fixed. They gather to find words for their stories, to find community for themselves and their words, and to find witness. Listening is as essential a part of the groups as writing.

Difficult things come up in a writing group, whether the group is focusing on sexual



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trauma or when there's no particular focus at all. Despite the way we attend to all work as fiction, the experience of emotion is real: the terror, frustration, desire, anguish, pain, desperation is real. As a facilitator, you're not going to "fix it." You're not there to fix it, and no one comes to the group asking that of you. You're not going to offer folks therapy and you're not there to make it all better for them. That work will be done by the writers themselves over time. Your job is to bring the exercises and hold the space. Most times, you don't need to do anything but listen, deeply hear the writing as it is offered to the group, and to give your personal individual feedback about the writing itself, while modeling for others how to do the same.

The ability to attend to your boundaries is also essential. The work is an empathetic challenge, and there's nothing wrong with the desire to 'fix,' so long as we don't act on it: we have to save my energy for the work we can do, the work of bringing together and facilitating these writing groups. It's hard sometimes when you feel that all you can do is 1) offer a space, 2) keep the space safe by holding the group to the guidelines and practices we agree to in the AWA method, and 3) listen well and respond personally, heartfelt and ethically.

Learn how to take care of yourself. How do you get support and help after facilitating a



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group? Do you write and get stuff down and out of you? Do you call a friend or another writing group facilitator? Do you call your mom or sister or uncle? Do you do nothing? Do something, ok? I'm still working on this one, myself, and it's been ten years since I started with this work! Go to the gym, go for a walk or a drive, sing hard, run, go dancing, do something. Let loose the energy that builds up during each group meeting.

If you want to facilitate a group of this nature and you don't have the chance to go through the original Amherst Writers and Artists training, then I absolutely encourage you to participate in an AWA-model writing group in your area, or other writing group. It's helpful to be exposed to different facilitation styles, if only to learn what not to do, how you don't want to facilitate (as well as to do the opposite!).

I have just recently, and finally, been reading Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way*, and picked up *The Vein of Gold* to continue the work. Toward the back of *The Vein of Gold*, Cameron has a chapter dedicated to those who'd create and participate in creative Artist's Way circles, and her focus on a non-hierarchical structure and the importance of shared risk (that if there's a facilitator for the group, the facilitator must "do the work" along with everyone else) absolutely resonated with me as essential reminders for anyone who wishes to facilitate a non-clinical transformative/healing writing space.



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5. Dive in!

If you want to use writing as a transformative practice for yourself and others, begin now. We need one another's stories (and poems and more!) of trauma, resilience, radical self care, and resurrection now more than ever.

This is what I think of when I say that this is a liberatory practice: writing this way can teach us to trust ourselves and our voices, allows us to connect more vulnerably and honestly with other humans, invite us to be more fully human in the aftermath of an experience that sought to dehumanize us. This is a practice that tends to our tenderest places, a practice that feeds us and encourages us to feed others. Writing itself can constitute a liberatory practice, and writing in community can engage us in a deeply liberating process, one that unhinges us from the fear that we have been indoctrinated into, reintroducing us to the power of creative genius and human connection

Check out the books listed in the bibliography and use them as resources. I have offered a



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sample 8-week writing group syllabus here – use this to structure your own, individual, 8-week writing practice or to begin formulating a group with others. Visit my blog at writingourselveswhole.org or sign up to receive posts via email – I often post prompts and have written extensively about the power of this practice for survivors of trauma.



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Writing with Survivors: A sample workshop

The Writing Ourselves Whole survivors writing group has been meeting on Monday nights, 6:30-9:00, for many years now. We generally have time for two, twenty-minute “writes” per evening, except on the first night, when we take some time to get to know one another, then open with a short, introductory write for seven-minutes, followed by a longer write. In-between writing and feedback time, we break for tea, snacks, and some good conversation. We close every meeting with a poem that we read together as a group (we go around the circle, each person reading a line of the poem, so that the poem gets read in all of our voices).

For an 8-week workshop, I’ll generally work to build us up gently into a place where we know and trust one another’s writing voices, and can begin to dive into deeper and riskier more writing each week:

Week 1. Beginnings—introducing the method and introducing us to one another: *Sample intro exercise (something gentle): this is my favorite place to write, or this is when I knew I liked to write*

Week 2. Coming into body: *sample exercise: Write a love letter to your body, or to a specific part of your body; the tone might be funny, apologetic, serious, adoring, sad, or all of the above and more!*

Week 3. Myths & truths: *Sample exercise: Create a list of myths about survivors. Select one and write about it as though it weren’t true, or write*



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about its opposite: “This is what they say about me, but I...”

Week 4. Fearless words: *Sample exercise: 2 fragments: “I told you what I’m afraid to tell you ...” and “these are the secrets of my body”*

Week 5. Spirit: *sample exercise: create a list of deities or manifestations of Spirit: imagine your narrator engaged in a conversation with one of these manifestations, beginning with the phrase “I always wanted to tell you...”*

Week 6. Root Story: *sample exercise: begin with a brief centering/embodying breathing exercise. Then imagine yourself or your character in a time before now, and hear someone speaking in another room – who is it? Where is the narrator? What is the quality of light?*

Week 7. Role models / Reaching back through the fire—who has inspired us/how do we create space and nurturing for others?: *Sample exercise: Response to a song (writers will listen to “Ella’s Song” (“We who believe in freedom cannot rest / we who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes”) and will write as they are inspired about their own s/heroes, and ways in which they have been s/heroes to others).*

Week 8. Feeding the writer’s spirit—how to nurture our artist-selves: *Sample exercise: after a brief visualization, write letter to our artist-selves from our muse.*



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Writing Ourselves Whole: Further exercise ideas

- Begin with the phrase, “These are the stories inside my skin...”
- Generate lists:
 - *what my body loves / what my body doesn't love*
 - *This is what I remember / This is what I don't remember.*Then choose one item from each list and use those as your starting place: write into the complexity of your (or your character's) whole body and whole memory.
- Write down 7 action verbs with an -ing ending (such as *running, chasing, sitting, breathing*). Then, in front of each word, write the phrase “Safety is like...” or “Healing is like...” Use one of those sentences you've created to begin your writing
- Begin with a fragment from a poem or story:
 - Grandma, come back, I forgot... (Carolyn Forché)
 - Those who are dead are never gone... (Birago Diop)
 - Mama, I always see you there... (Sharon Olds)
 - I don't have nothing to write today... (Sapphire, in PUSH)
 - If I had no memory / I would say this is perfect (Jane Roher)
 - Dear god, I am writing you a memory I hope I will have... (Donna Gates)
 - The things I did, I did because of... (Marvin Bell)
 - Something has ceased to come along with me... (Jon Silkin)
 - Was it any wonder that my mind and body were going to stage a revolution? (*Blood On the Page*, Sutterwriters anthology)
 - On the book of my/her/his body lies the dust of...” (Lynne Gravestock)
- A few more body-centered prompts: write about or to a part of your body you are proud of, a part of your body you feel grateful toward, or a part of your body you feel apologetic toward.

Remember: any writing prompt is just a door we use to get the pen moving. Sometimes we stick with the prompt, and sometimes our writing goes in a completely different direction: however the writing emerges is just right! If while writing you find yourself getting stuck, try the phrase, “What I really want to say is...” and let yourself write what you really want to write. Follow your writing wherever it seems to want you to go.



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Writing Ourselves Whole: Our Guidelines

Here is how Writing Ourselves Whole writing exercises work, within the Amherst Writers and Artists workshop method:

- The facilitator provides an exercise,
- We freewrite together in response to that exercise,
- Everyone is invited to read aloud what they've just written, and
- We respond to each person's writing with what we liked about the piece, what was strong for us, what stays with us.

Now, given that description, here's our practice:

- **Confidentiality** - what's shared here stays here.
- **Exercise suggestions are just that: suggestions.** You are encouraged to follow your writing wherever it seems to want you to go.
- **Try not to edit as you write;** let the writing flow! Remember: this is a first draft.
- **Sharing is optional:** You don't have to read aloud what you've written.
- **We honor each writer by listening closely and carefully.**
- **When giving feedback, please talk about what's stayed with you from the piece, what was strong, what you liked.**
- **Talk about all the writing the way you would talk about fiction:** during feedback, please make reference to "the narrator," "the voice," "the character," etc. (rather than "you") when speaking about the voice in the piece. We focus on the writing, and avoid comments like, "That reminds me of a time when..."
- **Sometimes a writer will feel emotional when reading their writing.** We honor one another by holding the words gently, listening quietly, and giving space for the writer to continue if/as they wish. We only comment on the writing.
- **Each of us agrees to listen to our instincts and take care of ourselves during this group.**



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Some books that have been of use to Jen in doing this work

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A bit more about Jen!

Jen Cross is an extensively-anthologized writer, workshop facilitator, and performer. She's led transformative writing workshops since 2002. Jen received her MA in Transformative Language Arts from Goddard College, where she investigated erotic writing as a healing practice for survivors of sexual abuse and trauma. In 2003, Jen founded Writing Ourselves Whole, focused on individual and social transformation through writing and community. As survivor of sexual abuse herself, Jen writes to release, transform, and create space for that which has been unspoken. Jen believes in the potential of open-hearted writing communities to transform individual lives and create wider social change.

In addition to the Writing Ourselves Whole workshops she leads in the SF Bay Area, Jen has written with: survivors of sexual trauma (at San Francisco Women Against Rape, Bay Area Women Against Rape and Survivorship); folks living with life-altering illness; students at colleges and universities around the country; and many others. She presented three consecutive years at the Power of Words/ Transformative Language Arts Network annual conference. She has produced or co-produced numerous showcases for writers to share their work publicly, including a 10th anniversary chapbook entitled *Fierce Hunger*, and San Francisco Women Against Rape's *Artists Against Rape 2008*.

If you would like to schedule a consultation about workshops at your location, Jen would be more than happy to talk with you! Find out more here: writingourselveswhole.org.