

Course Syllabus: Writing as a Healing Ministry

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Course Description:

Writing is an art form that belongs to every one of us. It is also a powerful tool for healing. In recent years, a growing body of research shows that the simple act of writing down thoughts and feelings helps people with chronic illness improve their health. (*Journal of the American Medical Association*, 1999; Pennebaker, 1996, 1999, 2002; LePore & Smyth, 2002). But the healing power of writing extends well beyond physical illness. Writing also reduces stress, discharges complex emotions and helps us gain perspective. When we suffer pain or loss, writing about our feelings can help to relieve our burdens, establish a perspective, and cope more effectively with life's hardships. Writing helps us integrate our physical, emotional and spiritual well-being. It can be a kind of prayer—one in which you don't ask for anything, except to know your own experience and to make meaning of it.

“Writing as a Healing Ministry” is designed to provide an overview of the field of therapeutic or healing writing for lay ministers, clergy, healthcare or helping professionals. In this intensive week-long course, we will explore how writing can heal ourselves and others. Class activities will include an overview of the research on therapeutic writing, review of several different writing methodologies used to help individuals heal from pain, suffering and trauma, small group discussion and individual writing exercises.

Recommended Reading: *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms our Lives*, by Louise DeSalvo. Additional resources and reference lists will be provided during the course.

Key Objectives

- Explore the history and traditions of writing as a way of healing.
- Provide an overview of key research findings on the healing benefits of writing.
- Introduce key approaches to healing writing (journaling, poetry therapy, group creative writing methods, healing memoir, spiritual autobiography).
- Examine how therapeutic writing gives voice to unique populations and offers healing benefits .
- Explore the necessary conditions for a healing writing group experience.
- Experience different exercises and approaches to expressive writing.
- Define the use of writing as a healing ministry.

Learning Outcomes:

At the conclusion of this course, participants will be able to:

- Describe the ways in which writing and storytelling have been used to heal the wounded spirit over time.

- Articulate the critical research results that demonstrate the healing power of writing.
- Compare and contrast various approaches utilized for healing writing.
- Understand the application of writing to heal in different populations and circumstances, such as prisons, cancer patients, at risk teens, low income, the bereaved, or others suffering from pain and trauma.
- Understand and articulate the critical skills necessary for leading a therapeutic writing group
- Articulate how writing plays a part in their lives and how they intend to use it in their ministries.

Proposed Format

The class will meet daily (Monday through Friday) from 9 a.m. until 1 p.m.. Class meetings will be highly interactive and feature a blend of didactic and experiential approaches. A mid-morning break will be provided each day.

Daily activities & assignments will include:

- Lectures and readings from the literature on therapeutic writing
- Experiential writing exercises from representative methodologies
- Exploration and discussion of the use of writing with different groups, such as cancer survivors, veterans, low income women, prison inmates, at risk teens, senior citizens, bereavement support, etc.
- A daily reflective assignment (A personal reflective journal will be kept by each student).
- Small group activities and discussion

This is a course about writing as a way of healing. As the week progresses, participants not only learn about the healing benefits of writing and its application to special populations, but will also experience how expressive writing can be personally healing.

In addition to classroom presentations & discussions, authors' readings and DVDs will be utilized to illustrate different approaches to writing as a healing ministry. DVDs include *Writing Alone & With Others* with **Pat Schneider**, *What I Want My Words to Do to You*, with **Eve Ensler**, an interview between **Maxine Hong Kingston** and **Bill Moyers** on writing with war veterans, and the work of poet **John Fox** with cancer patients.

Agenda for the Week:

- Day One:** Exploring definitions and beliefs about writing & healing; history and traditions.
- Day Two:** Overview & discussion of key research on writing and healing. Exploration of journal therapy.
- Day Three:** Exploration of poetry therapy and selected creative writing approaches.
- Day Four:** Continuation of expressive writing methods and exploration of reflective writing for professional growth.
- Day Five:** Writing as spiritual practice. Writing combined with other therapeutic arts. Reflections of the week. Summary and conclusions.

Instructor Profile: Sharon A. Bray, Ed.D.

Sharon Bray is a San Diego based writer and educator. She has authored two books on expressive writing with cancer patients: *A Healing Journey: Writing Together Through Breast Cancer*, (2004), and *When Words Heal: Writing Through Cancer* (2006), co-edited an anthology, *Learning to Live Again*, (2007), written and published a children's book, poetry, memoir and a number of professional articles.

She is a faculty member of the UCLA extension Writers' Program, where she teaches creative nonfiction and an occasional course in writing for healing. In addition to her regular workshops for cancer patients at Stanford Cancer Center and Scripps Green Cancer Center, she leads a creative writing workshop series for the Literature and Humanities program at the Stanford University School of Medicine.

Sharon has offered professional development courses in writing & healing for psychologists and MFTs through Alliant International University, and the Santa Clara University Professional Development Center.. She was an adjunct professor in Counseling Psychology at Santa Clara University from 1997 – 2003 and a faculty member of the CURE Magazine Patient and Survivors' Forums. from 2005 – 2008. Sharon continues to speak at conferences and cancer centers across the U.S.

Sharon holds a doctorate in Applied Psychology from the University of Toronto, a certificate in Literary Fiction through the University of Washington, and studied Transformative Language Arts at Goddard College, VT, and creative writing through the Humber Writers' Program, Toronto, Canada. A former Senior Partner of Amherst Writers and Artists, Sharon is currently a member of the Transformative Language Arts Network, Society for Arts in Healthcare, and National Association of Poetry Therapy.

She is currently completing a novel.
