

Course Syllabus: Writing as a Healing Ministry

Instructor: Sharon A. Bray, Ed.D.

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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 can help 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 the research on writing and healing and experience different writing methodologies used to help individuals such as cancer survivors, veterans, bereavement support, low-income women, at risk youth, senior citizens or others heal from pain, suffering and trauma.

Required Reading: *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms our Lives*, by Louise DeSalvo. Additional readings will be provided on the first day of 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 writing is used with different populations, e.g. cancer groups, at risk youth, older adults, bereavement groups, prisoners, war veterans low income and others as a healing or therapeutic methodology.
- Explore the necessary conditions for a healing writing group experience.
- Experience different exercises and approaches to expressive writing.

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 8:30 until 12:30. 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 Assigned readings from the literature on writing & healing
- Experiential writing exercises from representative methodologies
- Exploration and discussion of the use of writing with different groups, such as cancer survivors, low income women, prison inmates, at risk teens, senior citizens, bereavement support, etc.
- A daily reflective assignment on key topics discussed
- Small group activities and discussion
- A personal reflective journal will be kept by each student during the course.

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 written and published two books that describe her work 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), in addition to 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 a creative nonfiction and a course in writing for healing. She occasionally offers professional development courses in writing & healing for psychologists and MFTs through Alliant University, San Diego, and continues to speak at cancer centers across the U.S. Sharon was previously an adjunct professor in Counseling Psychology at Santa Clara University and the Center for Professional Development at SCU until 2006. She also leads regular writing groups at several cancer centers, including Stanford, Scripps, Sharp Memorial and Moores UCSD. She was a regular faculty member of the CURE Magazine Patient and Survivors' Forums held across the U.S. from 2005 – 2008.

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 a member of the Transformative Language Arts Network, Society for Arts in Healthcare, Association of Writers and Writing Programs, and National Association of Poetry Therapy.

She is currently completing a novel.
