

Invitation to Therapeutic Writing: Ideas to Generate Welfare

Elena Fernández
Mexico City, Mexico

"Reading makes a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man."

-Francis Bacon

Abstract

This article explores the possibilities opened by reflexive and expressive writing. It includes research from medical and university contexts that describe the benefits of writing. The author illustrates the connection between writing, the collaborative approach, and the ideas of narrative and positive psychology through vignettes from her clinical experience, group work and the world of literature. She describes how transformations occur and how the narrative and identities of those who write are amplified. The manuscript allows the reader to use writing as a path to polyphonic dialogue and to consider how to incorporate writing as a source for conversation within different arenas. This article invites anyone who reads it to experience therapeutic writing through questions and exercises.

Key Words: *Expressive writing, reflective writing, collaborative approach, narrative, polyphony, positive psychology.*

My most cherished childhood dream was to be a writer. Like some of "futurism," I wanted to be a Mexican Jo, a Kipling who would narrate the adventures of the urban jungle, an Austen describing various adventures to survive in the twentieth century. I decided to study psychology for many reasons, one of which was to add this knowledge to my baggage and therefore be able to write. My graduate studies began in Palo Alto with the teachers and creators of Brief Therapy, Weakland, Watzlawick and Fisch.ⁱ In Mexico I had already worked in private practice, taught, and completed a master degree to better understand Csikszentmihalyi's ideas of optimal experience. Sylvia London, Margarita Tarragona, and I opened an institute to share and implement ideas. Silvia London contributed ideas from family therapy and in particular from the Milan group and Margarita Tarragona, her vision grounded in research and the contributions from the Ackerman Institute. Our interest in postmodern ideas and collaborative ideas helped us form Grupo Campos Eliseosⁱⁱ (GCE). A key support for us was and continues to be Harlene Anderson who through reflection invites conversations that open up possibilities. (Anderson, 1997, p.68)

One result of working with students and clients at the CGE institute is to integrate a collaborative approach with reflective and expressive writing. According to Gillie Bolton, reflective writing is a space where we can hear our inner dialogue, question our practices, and learn to be better professionals. Anderson (1997) believes that dialogue invites new possibilities. Expressive writing is also a tool for dialogue and transformation, or as suggested by Dr. James Pennebaker (2011) from the University of Texas at Austin writing

is a digital resource, a tool that allows us to translate emotions into words and therefore feel better physically and mentally. While Pennebaker invites us to write, the collaborative approach informs us on how I invite others and how to invite myself to write. "Create learning spaces ... where there is a collaborative atmosphere in which people can engage in constructing knowledge" (Anderson in McNamee & Gergen, 1998, p. 66). Bolton joins Harlene Anderson and Donald A. Schön's (1993) vision to invite us to think and transform our work.

My allies in this dream of connecting writing and psychology are many. Of particular importance are the therapist Peggy Penn and researcher James Pennebaker, feathers that weigh heavy. I will also refer to various literary authors like Borges, Allende, and Coetzee to illustrate the impact writing has on physical and mental health. In this essay, I want to share some of my experiences, invite readers to write in a therapeutic way since writing is conceived as a space for reflection that manages to sustain, enable, and relieve us. My dream of being a writer has been transformed. Now I write and invite others to do so.

◆ *This article is an invitation to you, the reader, you will find vignettes to illustrate the use of writing and at the end of each, an exercise or a question for you to experience with therapeutic writing.*

The Benefits of Writing

To Pennebaker (1997), researcher of expressive writing, verbally labeling an emotion is like applying digital technology (language) to an analog signal (the emotion and experience of emotion). "The self is a self narrator and if we had no self to narrate stories, we would invent it," says Roy Schafer, (as cited in Penn and Frankfurt, 1994). For these authors, adding writing to the therapeutic conversation "accelerates the discovery of new voices, and thus the creation of new narratives" (p.217). The therapists at the Ackerman Institute in New York use diaries, they ask their clients to write to persons living or dead, suggest they develop autobiographies, poems, and they sometimes invite their clients to put their dreams into words. Peggy Penn, writer, poet and therapist, has explored the use of writing as part of the therapeutic process. The clients' writing becomes an important part of the conversations that arise in the session. They report that when they write they have new ideas and feel deep emotions; and that they also express a sense of validation and acceptance (Penn, 1994).

Inspired by Penn's ideas, I invited my client Licha to write to her parents. This was an opportunity to put into words the emotions that seized her. Her situation with depression was terrible, she would arrive home from work every night and she would get into bed to cry, she did not have a social life. Her only activity was to go to work and accomplishing this required increasing amounts of effort. It had been three years since she had suddenly lost her mother to cancer, and she had decided to distance herself from her father when she discovered that he had another family. Licha and I thought it might be a good idea to write letters to both of them. She started with her father, to whom she had reproached his double moral since he had taught her to be an ethical person while he was not. Over several letters she never delivered, she ended up feeling grateful for the magnificent education that her father had provided, while still reproaching his disloyalty. Licha understood that what was

happening between her parents was theirs and that she could not or should not judge their decisions.

After doing these exercises, she sought out her father and they resumed a relationship, it was not close, but at least had the necessary proximity to be in communication. In the letters to her mother, she complained about her not being alive, not being there for her, not seeing her successes, and about her allowing her father to have a mistress and another family. I asked Licha to answer the letter as if her mother had done so. In therapy, she narrated that she felt extremely sad, so much so that she thought about abandoning the whole project. In the session we talked about the ideas Pennebaker (1990) posed: if the writing not beneficial to you, you should not continue to use it. She rested for a few days and when she finally took the letter again she began to feel proud of mother; she also felt empathy and wrote a third letter with admiration. She rescued and rebuilt their relationship in her memory. As posed by therapists Michael White and David Epston, Licha's story of being orphaned and anger was enriched to generate a narrative of a more mature relationship. Licha forgave her father and built a better memory of her mother.

The Effectiveness of Therapeutic Writing

Pennebaker (1997), explains that writing about thorny or traumatic situations may result in improved physical and emotional health since difficult experiences are processed through language. Monica Bruder cites the testimony of Isabel Allende. The Chilean author, believes that writing the novel, Paula about her daughter's terminal illness, saved her life. In describing her work as a form of therapy, Allende noted that "it is a way to recover what is lost," confirming with her experience that putting her feelings and deep thoughts on paper is a therapeutic task. Not only that, but also, through writing, suffering can be processed into art. Isabel Allende, like Licha, formulated a strategy of survival through the written word. Losing a loved one never ceases to be painful, but writing about it makes it more manageable and allows us to continue living.

Exercise:

- ◆ *Have you lost someone whom you would like to address a letter?*

Effectiveness of Therapeutic Writing II

Pennebaker and Chung (2011), clarify that "if you're expecting a straightforward and simple explanation for the effectiveness of writing, we have very bad news: There is no single reason that explains it" (p.13). Based on their research (Pennebaker and Chung, 2011), they are able to present some reasons about why writing works:

- Psychology has based its healing approaches on the idea of disinhibiting, giving people the opportunity to open their secrets and, therefore, release the energy the psyche uses to prevent their escape.

- Habituation involves the fact that, once accustomed to any situation, however difficult it may be, it ceases to have power, meaning that takes up less space in our psyche. This means that when we write about a painful subject we increase the possibility of taming the monster, we habituate.
- The exchange of sensory experience by language affects that experience. We will remember a critical situation in a different way after processing it through writing.
- Verbally labeling emotion is a form of applying the digital technology of language to an analog signal; the excitement and your experience. Pennebaker (2011) and his colleagues explain that to name emotions is like going from the analog to the digital.
- Generating a story is a way to create different kinds of knowledge. Translating the analog to digital implies the organizing of a narrative that produces a new way to understand a situation.
- The virtue of the use of the third person when writing. Incorporating another perspective into our vision of a problem is important and is reflected in the change of the pronouns we use. When people stop using the pronoun *I* in a repetitive way and exchange it for *you*, *us*, or *she*, there is a change in the understanding and evaluation of the event. The perceptions of the world become amplified.
- People who write expressively, describe their innermost thoughts and feelings. They start to talk more, increasing their ability to specify what happens to them and they share their points of view with others. Openness enables further opening, and a cycle of positive reinforcement is initiated.
- Writing gives us a space to reflect and to correct the course of life. It also allows time to think, to experience different scenarios in our minds, and raise various possibilities.

Pennebaker (1990) remembers that when he started his graduate studies he experienced a deep depression. He decided to sit down at a typewriter from 10 minutes to an hour each day. And within a week he began to feel better, to finally recover from his feelings of uneasiness. In the late seventies he had evidence that people who made public and talked about their traumatic situations had fewer health problems than those who did not. Pennebaker has since devoted his career to studying the effects of writing and found that therapeutic writing improves mental health and physical health.

And yet ... Warning!

The writing can promote negative emotions. For example, if I'm sad I can feel even sadder, and if I feel anger, I may become infuriated. The good thing is that as in any catharsis, I will feel better than before letting those emotions out. But the act of writing also decreases the positive emotions like falling in love, but not love.ⁱⁱⁱ (Slatcher & Pennebaker, 2006).

How did Jorge Luis Borges beat insomnia? In an interview he stated that he was cured when writing a story. In this story he gives us an unforgettable character that does not know how to forget, Funes. In the words of Borges, (as cited in Bruder, s.f):

I used to suffer from insomnia. I would lay down and begin to imagine. I imagined the piece, the books on the shelves, the furniture, the courtyards. From the garden of the villa of Adrogué, I imagined the eucalyptus, the gate. The various houses in the village, my body

lay in the dark and I could not sleep. From there came the idea of an individual who had an infinite memory, he was overwhelmed by his memory, he could not forget anything, and therefore could not sleep. I think of a common phrase, "to remember". One forgot about himself and upon waking he remembers. And now comes an almost psychoanalytic detail, when I wrote that story I did not have insomnia. As if I had found a suitable symbol for insomnia and it frees me through this story.

The experience of insomnia for Borges was just that, the anguish over not being able to sleep. When writing, the author created a new kind of knowledge: it became digital. Expressing a sense in writing, has a therapeutic consequence. As Anderson (1997) states, "in the telling and *retelling* not only do new stories emerge but the person changes in relation to them: the narrator self changes", the problem dissolves in the retelling. (Anderson, 1997, p. 109.)

Exercise:

♦ ***Do you have a problem about which you would like to write? If not a story like Borges, perhaps a short essay.***

Writing Opens Up Possibilities

The therapist Harlene Anderson (1997) places emphasis on the possibilities for consultants to find hope in the most difficult circumstances, or to quote Vaclav Havel, winner of the Prince of Asturias and first president of the Czech Republic, "the hope is to think that we will make sense of that which happens to us"^{iv} (Havel & Hvižd'ala, 1990, p.181). For Anderson (1997), each person is unique. She respects, appreciates and agrees that his or her "problem" and "solution" are defined according to the circumstances of each person's life, relationships, and context. This vision is what opens a way of engaging in dialogue openly and disables the hierarchies in the therapist-consultant relationship. Anderson stated that as a therapist, the goal is to be helpful to the customer with what they need, what you want and respecting their own plan about the difficulty you have. We are working with multiple realities, "the reality" of an event, the solution envisioned and the relationships between them. This working stance can translate to reflective writing. It is an invitation to expand a story with more voices and more ideas. It is an invitation to polyphony.^v Therapeutic conversations and expressive writing generate a space that supports different views, and different versions (Anderson, 2005). It is important to emphasize that by inviting colleagues, students, consultants and friends to perform this expressive and reflective writing I have concluded that two aspects of psychology are uniting, Pennebaker (1997) in research and in clinical practice: Anderson (1997), Andersen (1987) with his reflecting team, and Penn (1994), which results in a first class pairing for those who write using these ideas.

Anderson and Pennebaker agree on the idea of writing in the third person to incorporate another voice and find a different perspective. Saying, "*I always wanted to write*" is not the same as, "*Elena wanted to be a writer.*" Using the third person implies a different kind of reflection. Anderson (2012) says "I do not seek consensus, because I discovered that the

differences are important and that these differences likely emerge as we engage with each other" (p.11), the collaborative emphasizes that we respect individuality, the multiple possibilities of every person, every context and every situation and with that the space opens to generate transforming conversations. In a similar way, writing invites different identities and ways of being of each person to be projected onto the paper. For Penn (1994), any label, such as a diagnosis, runs the risk of creating identities with set limitations. The clients are more than their problems. The whole person, with their voices and multiple identities, and also in its relational context, should be the focus of treatment. Pennebaker (2011), in his research, has found that having a more ample view of oneself increases the likelihood of change and improvement. There are possibilities of generating a story and create new knowledge.

Writing to "Talk" Without Tears

Penn and colleagues (1994) found that including the writings of clients in therapy sessions promotes a better understanding of the different voices that inhabit us and this allows the creation of new narratives. The Ackerman Institute studied those voices in the *Language and Writing Project* (LWP). Writing is a way to invite the different voices we carry within. In establishing this type of communication in writing, we manage to turn the monologue into a dialogue; each voice can be responded to, challenged, or understood – so to speak. As Penn and Frankfurt have pointed out, "the changes in our internal dialogue can change the spoken conversation we have with others" ^{vi}(Penn, P., & Frankfurt, M., 1994, p. 218).

In my practice, a woman whose childhood had been marked by a debilitating disease narrated that the wonderful relationship she had had with her mother ended when she entered adolescence. "That's when my mother distanced herself," she said. I asked her what she thought about that distance, to which she replied that her mother appreciated physical beauty and she was just "normal". At eighteen her parents sent her to study abroad and when she returned the gap between them was even greater. If she proposed going to the movies or the theater, neither parent accepted the invitation, but would go on their own to see shows. The relationship, already beaten, eventually fractured. The client said she could not talk to them, because every time she tried her tears, pain and resentment made the conversation impossible.

Years passed, the client was married and later divorced, her health problems became worse and she was not able to continue living alone, so she returned to live with her parents. For a long time the relationship was "civil", but when her mother fell ill, the client was at a crossroads: if she followed her heart the relationship would remain distant, but she remembered her childhood and realized that it was her turn to attend to her elders, the roles had changed. Upon discovering this new situation, the client acknowledges a voice that comes from her childhood: the voice of gratitude is transformed into commitment. The client wrote a letter to her mother where she explained how much she admired her and that, despite her age, was still an extraordinarily beautiful woman, and she declared that now her daughter was going to care for her. In writing this letter, the client was able to use her voice of responsibility without tears in her eyes. From that moment a space opened that was comfortable enough for new conversations between the two.

Exercise:

♦ *Is there someone whom you would like to contact again? Do you think it is a good idea to write them a letter?*

Social Constructionism and Writing

One element that is emphasized in various disciplines today is "the social character" of what we deem as "truth". Gergen and McNamee (1992), two well-known social constructionists, pose:

All that can be said about the world—including the self and others—is determined by the conventions of discourse. For example, we cannot describe the history of a country or our own history on the basis of 'what really happened', we have instead a repertoire of narrative procedures, or forms of narration, and we impose them on the past. (p. 20)

In this way, they explain that what we label as "real", comes from contextual accounts and that they are not independent of people. The authors claim that "contexts are a byproduct of human relationships and they only acquire meaning from the way they are used in interpersonal relationships" (p. 21). They go on to say: "Our constructions of the world are limited by our language, but we are largely responsible for these limitations, since we are the ones who generate the conventions of discourse, both in science and in everyday life. "(1992, p. 21) Gergen and McNamee (1992) end their reflections with a postulate that is of great importance to the approach of this work: "And because we have the ability to generate acceptable stories, we also possess the ability to alter them" (p. 21). Through our writing, the opportunity to expand our identity to include other points of view or perspectives and develop these stories in which we are better able to build a version of ourselves that pleases us more or with which we can live better.

In *Autonarration in Social Life*, Gergen (1994) explains the multiplicity of the individual's selves, and therefore the person as a relational being. He gives us an example: "Like an expert skier approaching a slope has a variety of techniques to descend effectively, we can also construct the relationship between our life experiences in a variety of ways" (p.189). Writing also builds and helps us integrate our experiences. By not believing in an essential, immovable self, from the social constructionist perspective we have the ability to generate different versions of ourselves. Writing these versions makes them more obvious. We construct ourselves in relationship to others and we do not have a single life story, and as Gergen says, "effective socialization should equip us to interpret our lives as stable, improving, or declining. And with some additional training, we can develop the ability to imagine our lives as a tragedy, a comedy, a heroic saga" (p. 190). The author continues with another literary explanation: "The more we are able to construct and reconstruct our autonarration, the better we are able to sustain effective relationships" (p.190).

Pennebaker's expressive writing, which provides guidelines for living with fewer ties and the reflective writing which Gillie Bolton (2010) discusses, involve writing and thinking about what we write. These two types of writing give us the opportunity to trace ourselves or describe from the tragic to the comic without losing the complexity and thus expanding the possibilities of who we are. Thanks to Harlene Anderson (1997) and other postmodern authors, we know the importance of reflection for the professional. In the words of Shön, the professional who:

actively reflects tends to question him or herself about the definition of his or her own work, the theories he or she actively uses, and the active measures that control him or her (...) He or she also questions the organizational elements of knowledge structure in which she or he operates. (Shön, 1983 p.337)

This opportunity to reflect arrives at the possibilities which open expressive writing. In writing we have linked expression and reflection.

In an interview Andrei Sokolov (2003) conducted with the singer, Sting, he asked him about his book *Remedies for the Soul*:

--Mr. Sting, you have just written your autobiography: "Broken Music". Does the title have deeper causes?

- Yes, it follows the book. First, it refers to how my grandmother rated my first attempts at piano music. In the book, my early years are discussed. I did not have an easy childhood, and music became a winning force for me, and it still is.

--Did working on the book change you?

- It was a kind of therapy. Besides the beautiful and happy memories, there were also some bad and sad ones that I would have preferred to repress. After I attended to them and arranged them in a logical context, I did much better, however even though I was writing, I fell into a depression. Now I'm happy it's published. "

- You doubted whether or not to publish the book.

- Yes, after the writing had achieved its therapeutic effect, I thought maybe that was enough, that maybe I should see it as a kind of private memories. I also did not want to draw attention to my family, friends, or former lovers—people who had been protected until then. But I tried to treat each of them with the utmost respect. We had long conversations about whether the book should be published and they all said yes.

Exercise:

♦ If you were to write an autobiography, whose permission would you have to ask and who would you include in the acknowledgments?

Writing and Positive Psychology

Positive psychology, a movement that has gained momentum in recent years, researches the welfare of human beings. Dr. Laura King, of the University of Missouri won the Templeton Prize for her contribution to positive psychology of rescuing what does work and her

attempt to balance the excessive biases towards deficit and pathology, that over the last hundred years, have existed in psychology. Her research has focused on the power that meeting our goals gives us to create and sustain wellness. In an interview in Positive Psychology News Daily, Dr. King expressed her astonishment at finding that people do not always set goals. There she emphasized the importance of saying goodbye to our "selves that are possible and lost", that is to say, the people who at some point we thought we could be, and exchange them for new ideas and targets that will allow the person to find wellness. King proposed that we write our goals, even once, and they can be in list form. She suggests that doing so creates hope, less conflicting goals, and greater participation in the generation of welfare itself (as cited in Adams Miller, 2007).

For a project in my doctoral studies, I constructed a mock interview after reading the Nobel Prize winning novel, *Foe* by JM Coetzee. In recounting the story of Robinson Crusoe, Coetzee makes several changes to the Defoe's work. For example, the protagonist is not Robinson but a woman named Susan Barton and Friday becomes a mute character who had his tongue ripped out in a fight. My recount involves an interview of Susan Robinson. Following, I transcribe a fragment of the interview of Robinson Crusoe done by Susan for Sunset News newspaper.

- What kept her sanity on the island?

- The ink had long gone. I added water and it became so diluted that it almost left no mark on the media. I used it to mark the days when something special happened.

- What did you do to not go crazy when you saw the handprint of a human?

- I convinced myself that it was my own mark. I continued with my daily life without giving more importance

-But then you found Friday. Was he good or bad?

- Sorry to say that he was just a diversion.

- What can you say about him?

- Let him speak for himself.

-But Friday cannot speak.

- Become his muse. Teach him to write.

In his novel, Defoe may have thought to prevent Robinson's madness and thus marked a therapeutic possibility, since in his absolute solace, the character seeks an option: the ink.

Exercise:

◆ *Do you know someone who needs to talk through pen and paper? He or she can simply write a list of goals.*

Research Findings on Writing

In her analysis and description of Pennebaker's findings, Margarita Tarragona (1999), highlighted the following: in 1997, Pennebaker asked 46 college students to write for fifteen minutes on a daily basis for 4 days. They were randomly assigned to four groups. The first wrote about the deepest thoughts and feelings of a traumatic experience, the

second only about the feelings of this experience, the third on the thoughts of the experience, and the last, which was the control group, wrote about superficial topics. Pennebaker found that immediately after writing about painful experiences, people felt sad and their mood worsened. However, those who had written about their "deepest thoughts and feelings" around the traumatic incident- group one, showed a fifty percent decrease in the number of visits to the university hospital due to illness.

Dr. Tarragona highlights other findings from the same study that are related to physiological measures. Pennebaker's (1990) research team worked with a sample of the student population whose blood was measured for T lymphocyte cells before writing day, another after being finished with the last writing session, and a third, six weeks later. The people who wrote their deepest thoughts and feelings about difficult experiences showed higher immune function than those who wrote about superficial topics. This positive effect was at its highest level on the last day of the study but tended to remain high for six weeks. These results are confirmed since the visits to the university health center declined. Similarly, Smyth, as cited in Tarragona (1999) found that patients with asthma (either moderate or severe) or rheumatoid arthritis who wrote about stressful experiences showed clinical improvement in their health status four months after treatment, while the control group showed no significant benefit.

In a telephone interview from BBC radio (sf), Graham Green, a writer, offered another testimony about the therapeutic aspect of writing:

-In your opinion, is writing useful to the psyche?

-Writing is a form of therapy. Sometimes I wonder how those who do not write, do not compose music or paint manage to escape the madness, the melancholy, the panic, and fear inherent in the human condition.

Exercise:

♦ ***Do you feel emotions that paralyze you? Can you put them into words?***

One Way to Understand

James Pennebaker says that the participants in his experiments were approaching him and his researchers to share that writing had been useful and helped them "understand" and "manage" things. Argentine writer Julio Cortázar obtained the title of English and French translator after completing just nine months of studies that would normally take three years. The effort resulted in symptoms, one of which was the concern that his food was clean. This concern seemed to have disappeared with the writing of his story, *Circe*.^{vii} In the words of Cortázar:

When I wrote "Circe" I was going through a period of great fatigue in Buenos Aires, because I wanted to finish the career of translator and I was taking exams one after another. At that time I wanted to become independent of my job and have a career, in order to come to France. I did the whole career of translator in eight or nine

months, which was a little bit embarrassing for me. I got tired and started having neurotic symptoms, nothing serious, I did not think going to the doctor, but it was extremely unpleasant because various phobias haunt me and each became more absurd. I noticed that when I ate, I constantly worried and had a fear of flies or insects being in food. This was food that had been prepared in my house and about which I was confident. But again and again I would catch myself in the act of digging with a fork before each bite. That is what gave me the idea for the story: the idea of an unclean food. And when I wrote it, certainly without intending it as a cure, I discovered that it was much like an exorcism because I was cured immediately.

Exercise:

◆ ***Do you have any physical symptoms? Would you like to re-write it as a text in the style of Cortázar?***

In another study reported by Tarragona (1999), Dr. Pennebaker, in 1997, explored writing and its effects in the workplace. In 1991, a group of men had been dismissed from their jobs after working in the same company for most of their life. He divided participants into three groups. One group was asked to write for half an hour a day for five days on their "deepest thoughts and feelings" about their dismissal from work. The other group was asked to write about how they managed their time, and a third group did not write anything. After three months, 27% of men in the expressive writing group had a new job, while only 5% of men in the "time management" group were employed. Months later, participants from all three groups had had the same number of job interviews. Of the people in the first group, 53% had been hired compared to only 18% of the members of the other groups. The researchers interpret these results in relation to the way in which men could manage their anger or not while being interviewed.

Connection with Others

Following, I transcribe an excerpt from an interview on TV Cinco de Argentina of the novelist, Adolfo Bioy Casares.

- What led you to write?

- I wrote so that I would be liked: in part, to bribe, and, also in part, to be a victim in an interesting way. To erect a monument to my pain and by writing, turning it, into a persuasive claim.

Exercise:

◆ ***Is there any obstacle in your life about which you would like to write?***

Reflective Writing in Medical and University Contexts

Gillie Bolton works in the world of medicine. She uses writing with doctors so that they may reflect on their work. In explaining her stance about writing, she quotes many authors including Jean-Francois Lyotard (1992): "We write before knowing what to say and how to say it, and in order to find out, if possible." In one of her books, *Reflective Practice: Writing and Professional Development (2010)*, Bolton presents the importance of reflective practice and discovers how to invite both the personal and the professional part to inspire physicians and their patients. For Bolton, writing is also a method that contains its own autocorrection, or the continuous use of this tool allows professionals to be more reflective.

One of my clients had an accident that left him a paraplegic. Years later, given the uncertainty that he experienced in his life, he tried to commit suicide unsuccessfully. Immediately after the event we began working together in therapy. Months later, feeling better, we decided to space the sessions until finally he only came in a couple of times a year. One day he called to tell me that his aunt was dying. My client then asked a nephew who was a writer to put on paper his words of gratitude towards her. "*I want to tell you how important you have been in my life,*" he said. He told me that what had caused him to call was the anguish he was feeling. I asked if this anguish was due to the impending loss. He said no, that her aunt had lived well, but that he had trouble opening himself up and felt shame.

Dr. Brené Brown works at the University of Houston as a research professor. The topics she researches include vulnerability, courage, worthiness and shame. Brown states that vulnerability is in the heart of shame and that fear of being disconnected from others for something we said, did, omitted, or something we did not do. Brown states that the more you hide shame, the more you feel it. Faced with his own vulnerability, my client was distressed and his call was to tell me what he was going to do that day: to deliver a letter that freed him from embarrassment. He went from feeling isolated from others to feeling reconnected. Shame is fueled by being hidden and the antidote is to express it. The interesting thing about this interaction with a client, who I had not seen for a while, was that he did not have to share with me any details of the content of the letter, only that he was to deliver it. My client did not have to write it, what he did was connect with himself, with his nephew, leave shame aside, and ask for help in writing a letter of recognition for a dying aunt.

Pennebaker (1997), in another of his studies where he explored the educational medium, received positive results by asking a group of students to write. At the beginning of the class he would give a brief description of the main ideas of the reading and exhibitions. Next, students had to write without interruption for 10 minutes, "about their deepest thoughts and feelings about the topic". After writing, students participated in the discussion in a much more productive and creative way. Absenteeism decreased and test scores improved dramatically.

Exercise:

◆ ***Are you interested in writing something that you have not yet said?***

Writing is a Verb

I begin this section by making up a title (Writing is a verb, it could be Writing is a game), I begin in reverse order as it is usually expected, in academia, to write the text first and at the end make up the title. I want to play with this format in a counterdance, doing it differently, as a reminiscence and tribute to *Alice* and her adventure. Play is also a verb and is a way to become human, to grow, to practice who we will be. It is, like writing, an action; and if we learned to put one letter after the other and to separate them with commas and periods, we can, at almost any time, do this task: play at writing, writing while playing.

Homework is a word which refers to *obligation*. And it is not like this in *expressive writing*, where you can start writing as a requirement but it becomes easier each time. Without the constraints of grammar or intimidation from the potential reader who might criticize or judge, one can write about that which bothers us and this would imply an outlet, or one could write about that which gives one pleasure and this might invite pleasure or joy. Playing with words, that's all: language as a recreation, language as an activity, and as a way of life, as Wittgenstein (1953) would say.

From these speculations, I developed an exercise for a group of students; it also started with a title: "Make poetry." For a month, I e-mailed several verses ranging from romantic songs to classical literature. In the course we read poems by Pineiro, Huidobro, Paz, Neruda, Chumacero, Heaney, Borges, Cavafi, and others. I distributed more than ten books, each attendee took one, and they were randomly assigned to read short poems aloud. The request for the exercise was specific: "*Write out a list of your ten favorite words.*" After that, we talk about the process. I asked them to share from where they got the words, for some, the sound was enough to create *laughter, relentless*, for others it was the ability to identify with the words, like the words *sensitivity, bright*, and for some others, one word led to the following, until they were satisfied. Then the instruction was: "*Now, alongside your list, put a list of ten items that are currently in this room.*" After three minutes, I asked them to, "*Combine the two lists with pronouns, use your favorite words as adjectives or as verbs or whatever, bind them together with the names of objects you chose and add the words your poem needs. They are words, to play with them. Make poetry.*" They did it and there was a nice game of words. It was a game of ideas and emotions. Nora Renteria graciously gave me one of these poems:

The red incense
marks the way
like a spring
a bird stops, perched on the tree branch
Sunflowers are circles with turbans
that give the day dimension
A girl looks at the square
thinking about the mischief her shoes will take her to
with backlit waves
The bell rings hidden in a piano note.

In her *wonderful* adventure, *Alice* knows that not everything is perfect, the hatter uses a fabric adhesive that makes him crazy, the Queen of Hearts has a bad temper, Alicia knows that there are problems, problems ... Hence the second part of the exercise was: "*Think of something that bothers you, an idea that hinders you, or a person with whom the relationship is complicated. Write him or her a poem.*"

In ten minutes, the participants in the course were able to write a short text. The first five minutes were for writing almost instinctively, the next five to revise and transform the text into something they could share should they want to. So they did. Here's an example prepared by Monica Sesma:

Absence
 I do not like it
 your absence
 is not like the plant that
 begins to wither
 for lack of water and sunshine,
 (neither is it)
 like an afternoon-orange
 turned gray (cold)
 it is absence
 like a/the blank sheet of paper
 that was not a letter
 that was silence.
 A conversation- suspended
 on a train, in a tunnel
 Like the pause when speaking
 Due to lack of interest
 (Is absence)
 why I do not like
 Your absence.

The White Rabbit is not necessary to make a poem that describes how the pies return to their original owner. The magic is in the words that we use on a daily basis.

Exercise:

♦ ***If you want to write a poem, do it, if it is difficult for you, use poetry to dis-en-tan-gle.***

How to Write?

The writer Natalie Goldberg (1986), who has developed several texts and workshops to facilitate writing, describes seven rules for writing:

- Keep your hand moving, if you stop, you invite censorship.
- Lose control, it does not matter if what you write is correct or not.

- Be concrete, describe in detail.
- Keep the first impulse, do not think.
- During the exercise, forget the use of punctuation and grammar.
- Do not worry if you write the worst junk in the world.
- Go for the jugular. Write, write, even when the subject is difficult

Pennebaker's (1990) results give more ideas of how to write expressively, he tells us that the extremes do not help. If we over-represent or have a minimum representation of negative words, then we have not achieved a beneficial writing. For researchers, neither the excessive use of negatively connoted words or otherwise minimal use, help transform the negative experiences to neutral or positive ones. The ends do not assist us. Pennebaker (1990) suggests that more structure is needed to write than to talk. To organize a narrative in a coherent way is a marker that knowledge has occurred; it implies the use of causal words like "attributed to," "therefore", "as a result," etc.. People benefit more when they write a story that is coherent to them.

Pennebaker (1990) suggested that we prepare to write. Let's find a place and a time when we will not be interrupted. Ideally, at the end of the day, before we go to bed. It is good to write for at least fifteen minutes for three or four consecutive days. He suggests that we write without stopping, without worrying about grammar or spelling, and that if we cannot think of anything new, we just write the same thing over and over again. Similarly, the author proposes that we write in the way that seems most comfortable, either by hand, machine or computer; and that if we cannot write- we record our words into a tape recorder. The topic may be the same or different in the days of the exercise.

Pennebaker says you may write about what you think about excessively or that which tends to worry you. Whether it be about a traumatic event, recurring dreams, something you think is negatively affecting your life, or that you've avoided for days, months or years. This author also suggests that you express your positive and negative emotions openly, you build a coherent story where words like *cause, effect, because, reason, understand, know, meaning*, help make sense of the story. The author encourages you to shift perspective, to look at the story from different angles, and to write using the view of others involved in the situation you're describing. He suggests you find your voice, you do not need to be Cervantes nor Kant. He suggests that what you write be just for you. The goal is that you be honest with yourself. You can decide later if you want to destroy your writing, save it and re-read from time to time, or modify and edit it. The fate of the writing depends on you, you can throw it, erase it, break it into pieces, throw it in the sea or elsewhere, and even eat it (it is difficult to digest!).

Exercise:

◆ ***You have now thought about the ideal elements in your environment so that you can write. Now, be encouraged, write.***

The Nature of Sculpture

This is a reflection and writing experience with twenty sculptors who exhibited their work, dedicated to the environment, in a gallery in Mexico City. For weeks, each worked on one or more pieces to warn, scream or whisper that our planet and its inhabitants are at risk. On opening day, one of the artists asked me to analyze the sculptures in the exhibit ... I must admit that I am incapable of analyzing, either from the points of view of psychology or aesthetics, another human being or his work, but I did agree to meet with them to share an experience of reflection, a conversation.

The sculptors came to the showroom to have a different experience with their pieces. The first thing I asked them (inspired by messages on *twitter* and as a way to let loose the pen) was to write two short phrases about a piece that belonged to another artist. After having done this, they repeated the exercise with another piece. Finally, and this might be the hardest thing, they wrote themselves another short message in front of their own piece, all this was done in silence. Once they finished this first part of the experience we went to an area with chairs and tables, there I invited them to engage in the denial of the conversation with a colleague. The strange instructions were:

- Gather in pairs.
- One of you will be in the position to speak and the other in the "not addressing" position.
- One of you will talk about what you want. The other, will do what is necessary for several seconds, so as not to listen. Find something in your bag, look at the floor or ceiling ... Use any means necessary, no matter what, to avoid paying attention to what your partner is saying.

In this experience there was irritation, in some cases, distress and annoyance in others. The noise became heavy while some were talking and the others trying not to hear. Immediately after, we discussed the experience of not listening and not being heard. We changed the modality, and the decibels quickly decreased. Once they felt heard, I invited them to talk about the difference between the two experiences. The reflection revolved around the importance of eye contact, paying attention, feeling loved; they experienced the contrast and talked about it. We took a small break to stand up, get a drink, and socialize. Fifteen minutes later, I invited them to read the two sentences that had been dedicated to each of their sculptures. With that in mind, they wrote to their work of art for three minutes, they began with "*Dear sculpture ...*" Some of the sculptors shared their experience of doing the tasks or directly communicated to us what they had written, but, as in poker, in these reflexive exercises, it is okay to pass. Not all of them read or commented on the process. The last thing the group, whose works had been in honor of nature did was to ask nature to write to each of the artists, with an internalized voice, a letter that began with the phrase "*Dear sculptor:*" And it was to be signed, "*Nature.*" Their reflections ranged from gratitude to feelings of impotence while facing life cycles. Some said "*We are just observers*" others, "*we invite others to think of our planet,*" many, "*we were proactive.*" To close the experience, I asked them to choose a single word: Someone said *freedom* another said, *tenderness*, I also heard *sadness*, and also *confidence*.

Exercise:

- ◆ ***How can writing contribute to your creative process?***

Reflection

When someone uses the ability to talk to herself in order to think, to locate her feelings, she can feel better. When writing, the protagonist of the act is engaging a dialogue that helps her make conscious some ideas or thoughts to which she had not paid attention. The opportunity that presents itself to the expressive writer is to allow himself a reflective practice through writing. Thus, the person attempts to generate new frameworks to understand herself and her world. Finally, she can find new ways to act on it. How far one can go is something that is not yet known. What we can predict is that if someone manages to connect her ideas she might be able to build a bridge between who she is at the beginning of the exercise and the person who has different narratives at the end of it.

Writing can be used to roll the ideas around in the mind and return almost unchanged to the initial place, or you can make a hundred and eighty degree turn. We can write to think, write to feel, and therefore, reach a slightly different version of one's self.

References

- Allende, I., referida en De la Escritura terapéutica al cuento terapéutico de Mónica Bruder recuperado 18 de mayo de: <http://www.psiconet.com/argentina/articulos/bruder.htm>
- Andersen, T. (1987). The reflecting team: Dialogue and meta-dialogue in clinical work. *Family Process*, 26, 415-428.
- Anderson, H. (2005). Un enfoque posmoderno de la terapia. En G. Limón A. (Ed.), *Terapias posmodernas*. México: Pax.
- Anderson, H. (1997) *Conversation, Language and Possibilities*. New York: Basic Books.
- Anderson, H. (1998). Collaborative Learning Communities. En S. McNamee & K.J. Gergen, (Eds.), *Realities and Relationships*. (pp. 65-70). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Anderson, H. (2012). Relaciones de Colaboración y Conversaciones Dialógicas: Ideas para una Práctica Sensible a lo Relacional, *Family Process* 51, 1-20.
- Carey, M. & Russell, S. (s.f.) Re-Autoría: algunas respuestas a preguntas comunes. Marta Campillo y Gerardo Marín (Trads.) Recuperado el 23 de diciembre de 2011, de: <http://www.dulwichcentre.com.au/re-autoria.pdf>
- Kanakil. (s.f.). *Recordar: Harlene Anderson: Kanakil*. Recuperado el 23 de diciembre de 2011, de: <http://kanankil.blogspot.com/2010/10/recordar-harlene-anderson-kanankil.html>
- Bioy Casares, A. recuperado el 20 de mayo de 2012, de: http://www.citasyaforismos.galeon.com/6citas_escribir.htm
- Bolton, G. (2010). *Reflective Practice: Writing and Professional Development*. London, California, New Delhi: Sage.
- Borges, J. L. (1942). "Funes el memorioso". *Ficciones*. Buenos Aires: Emecé.
- Brown, B. (s.f.) *The power of vulnerability*. Investigación presentada en la conferencia virtual de TED. Recuperado el 16 de febrero del 2012, de http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability.html

- Bruder, M. *De la escritura terapéutica al cuento terapéutico*. Recuperado el 23 de diciembre de 2011, de: <http://www.psiconet.com/argentina/articulos/bruder.htm>
- Cortázar, J. (2003) "Comentarios de Cortázar", en *Dossier I*, Córdoba: Ediciones del Sur.
- Coetzee, J.M. (1987) *Foe*. Penguin Books: London.
- Defoe, D. (1719) *Robinson Crusoe*. Penguin Books: London
- Gergen, K. (1994). *La autonarración en la vida social. Realidades y Relaciones. Aproximaciones a la construcción social* (pp. 231-258). Barcelona: Paidós.
- Goldberg, Nathalie (1986). *Writing Down The Bones. Freeing The Writer Within*. Boston: Shambhala.
- Green, Graham, en http://www.citasyaforismos.galeon.com/6citas_escribir.htm
- Gillie Bolton (s.f.) Recuperado el 16 de febrero del 2012, de <http://www.gilliebolton.com/writing/reflective-writing>.
- Havel, V. & Hvižďala, K. (1990) *Disturbing the peace: A conversation with Karel Hvižďala*, New York, N.Y.: Knopf.
- Mc Namee, S. & Gergen, K. (1992). *La Terapia como Construcción Social*. Buenos Aires: Paidós.
- Penn, P., & Frankfurt, M. (1994). Creating a participant text: Writing, multiple Voices, narrative multiplicity, *Family Process* 33, 217-231.
- Pennebaker, J. W. & Chung, C. K. (2011). Expressive writing and its links to mental and physical health. En H. S. Friedman (Ed.), *Oxford handbook of health psychology* (pp. 417-437). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Pennebaker, J.W. (1997). *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions* (Revised edition). New York: Guilford Press.
- Slatcher, R.B. & Pennebaker, J. W. (2006) How do I love thee? Let me count the words. The social effects of expressive writing. *Psychological Science* 17 (8), 660-664.
- Shön, D.A. (1983). *The reflective Practitioner, How professionals think in action*. USA: Basic Books.
- Sokolov, A. "El ex The Police habla de la escritura como terapia, del sexo tántrico y de las canciones de amor". Remedios para el alma. *Clarín* (lunes 15 de diciembre, 2003), Recuperado el 18 de mayo de 2012 de: <http://edant.clarin.com/diario/2003/12/15/c-00501.htm>
- Tarragona, M. (2003), *Escribir para re-escribir historias y relaciones, Psicoterapia y Familia*, Vol.16, 1.
- White, W. & Epston, D. (1993). *Medios narrativos para fines terapéuticos*. Barcelona: Ediciones Paidós Ibérica.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1953). *Philosophical investigations*. Malden: Blackwell.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1942). *Blue and brown books*. London: Harper Perennial.

Endnotes

ⁱ The Mental Research Institute (MRI), is a group that in the 1970s redirected the course of psychology by introducing constructivist and postmodern ideas. Usually they are known for the idea "what becomes the problem is trying to fix it."

ⁱⁱ Grupo Campos Eliseos was founded in 1998, their interest is to connect people around the world and share cutting-edge ideas in psychology and psychotherapy.

ⁱⁱⁱ In the study, the lovers stopped feeling a sweeping emotion and saw their beloved more clearly after writing about the relationship.

^{iv} Havel's quote originally appeared in "Disturbing the Peace: A conversation with Karel Hvizd'ala" (1990).

^v Polyphony means many voices. According to Anderson this implies that differences in the therapeutic process and diversity are welcome, and that even silent voices are actively involved in the process.

^{vi} The authors note that the first draft of a letter should be reviewed and processed preferably in the therapy sessions; they suggested to start on a positive note in case there are complaints- they can be heard.

^{vii} Along with *Casa Tomada* and *Bestiario* (published in *The Annals of Buenos Aires*) it will be included in *Bestiario*.

Author Note

Elena Fernández

???

Translator Note

Adriana Gil-Wilkerson

Clinical Associate and Trainer at Houston Galveston Institute

Adjunct Professor at Our Lady of the Lake University

Current student in the Counselor Education doctoral program at Sam Houston State University