

DONNA JENSON



HEALING MY LIFE

from Incest to



JOY

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*This book is dedicated to the tens of millions of us,
survivors one and all.*

*Like so many stars sparkling near each other –
scattered across a midnight sky.*



*May more and more of our lights reach out
and illuminate one another.*



Contents

Dedication	v
Introduction	I
Part I – Healing Paths	9
1. Writing as Medicine	12
2. Curative Connections	24
3. Mending through Social Change	54
Part II –The Good the Bad and the Ugly.....	75
4. Breaking Out	79
5. Coming Out as a Survivor	99
6. Coming Out to My Family: The Opening Act....	123
7. Coming Out to My Family: The Final Act.....	142
8. My Mothers Death	163
Part III – Weaving the Body and Spirit Back Together	177
9. Childhood Body, Teenage Body	180
10. Through Illness to Vision	187
11. Bodywork: Therapies and Yoga	196
12. Reclaiming Sexuality	215
13. A Spiritual Self	227



HEALING MY LIFE *from Incest to JOY*

Part IV – Using Art to Change the World 251

14. Learning a New Way to Speak.....254

15. Creating a Play 270

16. Performing the Play..... 297

17. Writing with Survivors;
A Healing Community 321

18. Writing as Power 345

Appendix A.....363

Appendix B..... 380

Appendix C 381

Acknowledgments.....383

About the Author..... 384

Introduction

The totality of this book is my expedition of climbing out from under a mountain of pain, shame and rage that was put there by incest. My journey has been, and continues to be, a winding and swirling, a twisting out and curling back to retrieve the crushed part of my spirit so it could reenter my body and be happy to live there.

In 1981, ten years into my work in the women's liberation movement, I started dealing, head-on, with my incest experience. I spent fifteen years gaining strength to become a childhood sexual abuse activist.

A most damaging consequence of the trauma was being silenced, through my mother's denial and my father's demands. From age seven he told me, after every rape, "You tell anyone and I'll kill you."

This tenacious muzzling censorship was at least as bad as the physical trouncing I took, if not more so. Holding such a secret festers and spoils the spirit. Such a large scale of pretense takes an enormous toll. It'll mess you up big time. What would it take to find my voice and use it?

It became important for me to distinguish between healing and

My journey has been, and continues to be, a winding and swirling, a twisting out and curling back to retrieve the crushed part of my spirit so it could reenter my body and be happy to live there.



surviving, even though the line between them can be hard to draw. Leaving home at age eighteen gave me space and distance to begin to heal – like air you give a spot on your wounded knee when the scab falls off.

Yet escaping wasn't enough. Eventually choices began to appear on my radar screen – a gazillion choices. Deciding when to grab hold of someone or something good as it floats by has been one big curative process.

There are many ways I've experienced healing – mending wounds, re-knitting broken places inside me, restoring lost parts of my spirit. What I want to say about healing

It became important for me to distinguish between healing and surviving.

from childhood sexual abuse is that it is possible. I didn't always believe this. In fact, I probably didn't start to heal in earnest until I let myself believe it *was* possible. That's not to say there doesn't remain a portion of pain and hurt, a residual puddle of gunk.

Somewhere in my forties, I came to accept that I probably wasn't going to be able to fully, absolutely, finally purge all the distress and fear the trauma installed in my body and brain. Disturbing threats in the present that have the flavor and smell of my original abuse can occasionally tip me out of balance. But, because of the amount of healing I've been through, and the healers I keep close, I now bounce back more quickly.

Much has been gained through conscious decisions I've made to enter into various processes and practices to bring me back to my original self, to restore my broken spirit. But there's been a whole lot of serendipitous healing, too, from and through unexpected people, places and experiences. The trick is to let myself notice and embrace it – to let healing happen.



As you read this book please remember that I am a white woman who has benefited from white privilege. Though brought up working class, I married into a situation that gave me access to the funds needed for my healing process. I am aware that many people do not have access to the resources I did on my healing journey. Some aspects of my healing cost a small fortune – or a big one depending on your perspective. This inequality is not lost on me. Still, I believe a person committed to healing *can* do so, regardless of the path they take to get there. Yes, I have been lucky and privileged. And, I have also witnessed throughout my decades of activism many survivors from different race and class and gender backgrounds who have found the courage, support and strength to reclaim their power and heal.

I...didn't start to heal in earnest until I let myself believe it was possible.

Look, healing is expensive – but not just moneywise. You've got to spend a whole lot of time and energy doing it; and creativity too. You've got to be creative, curious, a seeker – to find the right people, the right methods.

Another thing about the financial costs to heal – I believe offenders who commit sexual abuse should have to bankroll their victims healing. Yeah, like THAT'S going to happen. Such a tiny percentage of offenders even admit their crime. But I won't let that minor detail hold me back from claiming that a long-term goal ought to be reparations for survivors. I would tack on another provision: no one is allowed to say, "Thank you, _____ (fill in the blank)," when they hand over the dough. While I'm at it – how about we slice off a half of one percent of our defense budget and fund survivor healing.

* * *



Halfway through writing this book I realized I needed an image to represent my journey – something that showed what I’ve been through at one glance. I discovered the image through a crisis of confidence as I finished the first draft of Chapter Four. That chapter is about relationships, a mighty charged subject for survivors of childhood sexual abuse. After slogging through writing the chapter, I decided to retrace myself, my words. See how things were shaping up, see where I was repeating myself or giving away an important point on page 12 that belonged on page 42. Things like that; flow.

I finished re-reading (actually re-re-re-reading) the first three chapters and fell into that pile of quicksand where the underbelly of my ego lives, telling myself, “Chapter Four needs major revision. No, it’s unacceptable. It needs to be completely rewritten.” Phrases like that were playing ping-pong in my head. I shut the manuscript, hid it under a throw on my rocker and went to find something to eat.

*What I want to say
about healing from
childhood sexual abuse
is that it is possible.*

Enveloped in a thin mist of discouragement, I started convincing myself the whole book was probably not that good after all. It knocks me out how this banter of self-judgment can rise up and take over center stage. Then a tiny voice in the back of my brain whispered an idea.

“Go back to your e-mail and look at this week’s *Brain Pickings*.” *Brain Pickings* is a weekly e-newsletter for writers and artists that includes all kinds of stories and inspiration. I randomly picked an audio piece by writer Neil Gaiman.* I clicked it and heard him advise, “You have to finish what you started.” It reminded me of a commitment I took on when I started writing this book. It’s the same thing I told myself when I decided to write my play back in 2002, a play

* <http://www.brainpickings.org/index.php/2013/09/11/neil-gaiman-advice-to-writers/>



which would take me seven years to complete: “Get it all down on paper, finish it, and then see what you have.”

Neil’s directive slid down my spine and stayed there all night and the next day. Twenty-four hours after my crisis of confidence while lunching with my good friend Judi, I told her this story. She said, “Good thing you went to your computer instead of a bag of cookies, honey.”

Now I had a leg up. I still wasn’t touching my manuscript – it’s still too hot, too prickly, possibly too able to tip me back into the quicksand. But at least I wasn’t *in* the quicksand. It’s a slow, steady process, this act of returning to my self. But I was starting to think again. Thinking about what, if anything, needed to be added to the manuscript to make things clearer – first for me, then for you, dear reader.

Two days after this crisis (don’t get me wrong, it’s a little crisis, but a crisis nonetheless), I woke slowly at dawn, in a half dream state. I saw – inside me or around me or in front of me – a spiral. And my grateful heart said, “That’s it! That’s the image. That’s what’s missing.”

As I became more and more awake, I took in the view from my bedroom windows. The low hanging clouds between the foothills and Mount Toby looked like a lake. I’m not kidding. I thought I was seeing a lake in the view I’ve been looking at every morning for twenty-one years – a view that’s all foothills and forest. Given my Piscean nature, this water scene was extremely calming, extremely reassuring. I stared at the lake I’d conjured and knew a puzzle piece was falling into place.

A spiral is the image that explains how I’m thinking, seeing, understanding my whole healing process. A spiral is a representation of the pathway I’ve taken through all the different ways I describe in the book that helped me heal. And not a perfect spiral that simply gets exponentially wider and wider as it moves along the healing pathway. No, sometimes it widens then recedes then widens again. Just



like my spirit that at times feels large and all-encompassing and then, when things get difficult or challenging, it pulls in, gets smaller, quieter.

Sections of my spiral change colors depending on what I'm doing, what I'm traveling through. Like that crisis of confidence I just described – that was probably muddy brown. Listening to Gaiman, taking in what he was saying, “Finish what you started” – that would be sky blue. As I'm telling my story to Judi, reaching out and getting support

from a friend, the next stretch of the spiral is widening and turning lavender. And the vision at dawn – well, that's the bright, sparkling sunny yellow of my spirit in action.

This book is organized more along my spiral's journey than the chronology of my life.

From time to time I return to places, people and experiences as new challenges occurred, recognizing

the wounds and feelings I needed to understand and resolve. There are three core negative feelings I equate with incest – terror, rage and grief. And three core feelings I equate with healing – joy, gratitude and love. While my spiral is a multi-colored thing, my overall goal, wish, and hope is that I get it to be and stay as wide as possible, sparkling its sunny yellow color all over me and anyone I come in contact with.

* * *

In 2001, I began working on a play that would depict my experience of surviving incest and what I did to reclaim my life and make it worth living. It's titled, *What She Knows: One Woman's Way Through Incest to Joy*. It took seven years to write and prepare myself to perform it. An enormous



amount of healing took place in that creative process. And it continues, for I heal a little bit more every time I do the play.

After my daughter, Jen, saw me perform *What She Knows* she said, “Mom, you have to write a book that tells people what you did to heal enough to write and perform this.” This book is my answer to her call.



Me, 1950

Part I – Healing Paths

Prelude

It's 1981, Detroit, Michigan. Over six hundred activists from all over the Americas – North, Central and South came together. Liberation Theology brought us there, that promise of making the world a more tolerant and peace-filled place for everyone.

Each afternoon separate rooms would fill to the brim, one for feminists, one for people of color, another for lesbians and gay men, all talking and ranting with and at each other (the straight white men wandered the halls till we were done).

During meals and in the evenings small surprising groups of strangers joined up – foreheads leaning in like Talmudic scholars trying to figure out the unfigure-actable. The last night, was for dancing to drums – bongo, Cajun, pow-wow, steel – and acoustic guitars, dobros, maracas and tambourines. Arms and legs flailing with abandon – so different from the cool steps and tunes of my favored Motown oldies but goodies.

There was a Native American ceremony honoring Mother Earth – a hundred of us holding hands in a wide circle surrounding an Iroquois Chief as he planted a tiny white pine tree and burned tobacco as he prayed.

On the final day, in the auditorium – where all six hundred of us came together for a “speak out” – microphones



were placed in stands at the center of the three aisles leading up to the stage. A long single line of people stood waiting patiently at each microphone. I sat in the back grinding my teeth. Each speaker told a story – their story of yearning for a particular kind of liberation, liberation from some superimposed oppression.

I never moved an inch. When I wasn't listening to one of the stories I was questioning myself, "Why can't I stand up like everyone else?" and "Why am I so afraid to speak?"

I returned home with those questions stored in the back of my heart. It would take decades to answer them and scorn my fear and shame enough to tell my story.

I never moved an inch. When I wasn't listening to one of the stories I was questioning myself, "Why can't I stand up like everyone else?" and "Why am I so afraid to speak?"

* * *

This first section of the book explains three primary ways I have healed from incest. One way was taken by choice and with careful

deliberation – the curative connections I made with therapists and counselors. I turned to each of them for explicit help to recover from my trauma.

But it was different with the other two – writing and social justice work. I was quite unaware when I started down those two paths that healing would be coming my way. As the Detroit story mentioned, I'd be a feminist activist for ten years before the dawning of my need to find my voice as a survivor.

My actions and experiences of engaging in social change were healing me long before I even knew it. So too with writing. There a similar delayed reaction would occur; the evolution of awareness that the very act of writing was gradually empowering me to make sense of or peace with what I'd been through.



Depending upon where I'm at in my own evolution I might need to cry, create, think, be touched, travel, be quiet or talk my head off. My healing comes in both small and big ways: taking in a deep breath, saying "no" to injustice, walking on a beach, entering therapy or ending a hurt-filled relationship.

I see my healing as a journey, one I'm still on and suspect will stay on until they close the coffin lid. Somewhere in my thirties, I started making a conscious effort to notice, when I could, where I was on my path – to be the watcher as much as the walker. Herein I'm going to tell you what the watcher remembers.

*I see my healing as a journey,
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Chapter One

Writing as Medicine

I found strength and voice to say I'm an incest survivor in part through writing. The simple act of putting pen to page on a regular basis drew it out. Not all at once, not the first time or fiftieth, but after a decade.

Writing became medicine. My first dose was in 1976. I took a poetry-writing workshop with a woman I'd brought into the women's center I was running in Brooklyn. I think it lasted six weeks. The second week she encouraged us to start keeping a journal. How scary that was! What if my husband found it? And I suddenly wondered why the heck I was worried about my husband finding it. I talked it out in a support group, naming the fear that I might write something he wouldn't like.

I also pulled up a memory of my dad reading my diary when I was sixteen. My diary lay on his right thigh, his thumb pressing down onto a page to keep it open at a particular passage. I started to sweat as I told my support group about walking into my bedroom and finding Dad sitting on my bed, shoulders leaning against the wall, his legs dangling over the edge with a look on his face that was a cross between a smirk and a sneer.

I can't recount what we said precisely – we never had conversations. He did most of the talking because I was too scared of him. Sitting there on my narrow twin bed, he said I obviously wanted him to read the diary since I'd left it out on my dresser begging to be opened. Then he said he was



forced to because I'd become secretive and he was worried about what I might be getting into.

A big topic in my diary was the student minister at our church. I was dating him. He was a freshman in college, three steps ahead of me in just about everything. He wasn't a virgin, but figured I was – which was true if you didn't count Dad. I was having a blast playing with him, pulling his blood pressure practically out of his ears. We'd steam up the windows of his pea green Rambler parked in front of our house after a night of wholesome youth group activities.

No zippers were ever opened. All groping was done over at least one layer of clothing. But when I went to bed and tuned my transistor radio to WOKY all-night jazz, I went all the way with Mr. student minister in my diary.

That's what my father's thumb was grabbing hold of as we had a stare-down. My recollection is I said it was all made up. I don't know if he believed me, and I think I didn't care. The worst part of this whole episode is that it took me a dozen years to let myself write again.

Being able to tell that diary story to my support group unlocked a door I'd shut my writing behind. That door led to journaling. I've saved every one of my journals since 1977. They take up four feet of a shelf in my studio. I know there were earlier ones – from '74 – but they've been lost. A divorce and three moves will do that. I wish I still had them to pull out a quote to share here. My writing was thin, superficial; sweet little quips and prose, happy thoughts. Both fear of my husband reading my writing and not being ready to write about the incest in those years meant I wrote nothing of substance.

But it was important. I was doing the equivalent of bodybuilding for my voice. Getting familiar with a pen in my fingers, pumping words from inside me, down my arm and onto the page. Practice. I didn't know I was coaxing my voice out.



A great part of the damage of childhood sexual abuse is the silencing. When you break through the silencing – whether it’s communicating the truth to yourself, another individual or a whole group of people – you chip away at the wall, the prison, which was built around your voice, around your capacity to express yourself.

For many years no one heard or saw a word I wrote. Sometimes, on rare occasions, I’d admit, in an off-handed way, that I kept a journal, but talk of it ended there. But I know when my focus changed – from Little Miss Sunshine, ain’t the world a marvelous place, to truth telling. I remember the first two words of that journal: “I’m done.” It was my

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beginning at writing honestly about how unhappy I was in my marriage. My fear of my then-husband finding out got trumped by my need to leave him. I wrote myself through the divorce – some days a few pages, some days three words, some days nothing. There were stretches of a few weeks here and there

when I did no writing whatsoever. But I never left it completely – my relationship to the page.

In 1986 I signed up for a writing course at the New School for Social Research in New York City. Our teacher will go nameless. She was a popular, recognized author; I’ll call her Ms. M. She taught me a large lesson. In week two, she invited someone to read aloud what they wrote. I felt a thrill of respect lace through me as a young woman two rows away offered her raised hand. Ms. M nodded solemnly for the student to begin. She stared at her crossed hands on her desk while the student read two pages of prose.



When the student stopped, there was a pause of silence while we awaited Ms. M's response. She started out slowly, her voice almost inaudible, eyes still downcast. "Well, that was something," was her first remark. Gradually her voice gained volume, her critical comments moving from dissatisfaction to scathing. She ripped the work apart. I assumed it was her way of teaching. I did not return to class, forfeiting my tuition gladly. Five years would pass before I would dare seek out another writing course or group.

In all this time I was yet to write a single sentence about incest. I practiced writing in my journals for twelve years before the muscles in my heart and fingers were strong enough to mention it, describe it.

What ramped up my courage to write about it was reading two books. One was *Trauma to Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, by Judith Lewis Herman, M.D.* She talked about the similarity of incest to being a prisoner of war. The second was *Courage to Heal*, by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis,** the survivor's bible back then. Herman's idea about being like a POW within my family, my own home, tripped open a waterfall of words, images, and scenes. *Courage to Heal* launched a much deeper, more honest, not to mention upsetting level of writing for me (more about that in Chapter Two). I mean – check it out! Having those books sitting around in plain view – flashing their well-named titles on a regular basis – was a good thing.

I practiced writing in my journals for twelve years before the muscles in my heart and fingers were strong enough to mention it, describe it.

* Published by BasicBooks, a division of Harper Collins, 1992.

** *Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*, Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, HarperPerennial, 1992



Research shows that writing about traumatic memories can be healing. Professor James Pennebaker* at the University of Texas has done extensive research in this area. Basically, he tested three ways to write about trauma:

1. Just venting emotions,
2. Just writing what happened, and,
3. Writing about events and emotions at the same time.

People writing in the third form reported, four months later, that their spirits improved significantly. That's the kind of medicine I'm talking about.

I didn't know of this research until years after I started doing what Pennebaker discovered scientifically. All I knew was I had an inner compulsion to write out the memories of harm and describe how I felt when that harm was happening. More often than not I cried when I wrote these things. I kept doing it because I felt cleansed when I was done writing.

There's so much to get over: the physical assault, the emotional trouncing, and the slicing up of your spirit.

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Writing the stories of how I was hurt and how I felt while it was happening improved my spirit and moved me along my path. I've watched myself gain more color in my cheeks and strength in the muscle that is my heart each year I keep writing.

At times it's been a place to throw up. Instead of bile into the toilet, it was words on a page, spitting out pain and the rage wrapped around it. I need to not think too much about which words to use. I've come to call this

* Writings by Pennebaker: *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Confiding in Others*. New York, Morrow, 1990. With Sandra Klihr Beall: "Confronting a Traumatic Event: Toward an Understanding of Inhibition and Disease." *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 95, no. 3 (1986): 274-81.



“raw” writing, first writing, the “getting it out of my guts and onto the page” writing. It always works best when I’m not worrying about finding the perfect words. The phrase “spit it out” comes to mind.

I’ve used writing to extend what happens in talk therapy – taking ten or twenty minutes to freewrite my state of heart and mind after leaving a therapy session. It ends up being like a session and a half. What a bargain!

Eventually, solitary journal writing wasn’t enough. My feminist heart longed for a circle of people to share with; be with others doing the same thing. I started searching for a teacher, a group to join. Thanks to Ms. M, I knew this next teacher would have to have a style that was high on support and encouragement and low on criticism and disapproval. I found her in a network of writing workshop leaders called Amherst Writers and Artists,* based near me in Amherst, MA, using a method developed by Pat Schneider.** They have a principle – the teaching of craft can be practiced without damage to the creative spirit. Sign me up!

The first teacher I found was Carol Edelstein. She was everything Ms. M wasn’t – on the quiet side with a big smile and a gentle way of guiding people to write whatever they wanted to write in our one morning a week together. It was here that I began to write with others, explaining what happened when I was a child. The most common word I was given as feedback was “brave.”

Eventually I was bumping up against a wall. I couldn’t identify it, but Carol made a suggestion: “I know of a woman in New York City who developed a powerful writing process – I think you should check her out.” The woman was Linda Trichter Metcalf and her process is called Proprioceptive Writing, which she explains as, “...a method of exploring the psyche through writing. Easy enough for anyone to learn, PW is practiced to music in

* See web site: <http://www.amherstwriters.com/>

** Pat Schneider, *Writing Alone and With Others*, Oxford Press, 2003.



HEALING MY LIFE *from Incest to JOY*

twenty-five-minute sessions, alone or in groups, under conditions that are designed to promote relaxation and reflection. Through a process we call ‘Inner Hearing,’ PW teaches you to listen to your thoughts with empathy and curiosity and reflect on them in writing. Practiced regularly, this simple yet powerfully effective method gradually opens a path to self-trust.”*

Two days after Carol’s suggestion, a course catalogue came in the mail from a local retreat center in Rowe, MA, about an hour from my home. Amidst its offerings was an upcoming January weekend with Metcalf introducing her method. Sign me up!

At the end of the weekend I was hooked – on Linda and her process. Both were compelling and powerful. I took a teeny, tiny look at my “wall” on that weekend. It was the story of my mother – the other half of my experience of incest – the non-protective parent. Up to that point, I held my mother in the highest of esteem and compassion – for cryin’ out loud, she was a battered wife! Soon after, I received another catalogue, from the Omega Institute, with its summer schedule. Metcalf was running a weeklong workshop on her method. Sign me up!

That week in mid-summer I blasted a little hole in the wall that was my grief about my mother – and I made a delightful connection with Linda. She told me about the women’s writing group she was going to be leading in New York City starting in two months – a weekend, every six weeks, from fall to spring. And again – sign me up!

What was interesting about that year of writing weekends was that the primary focus of my writing was on one question: Why couldn’t my mother protect me? Over and over, again and again, no matter where I started my writing, it always went to the protection question. I never came up with an answer. I discovered it was a question only my

* Linda Trichter Metcalf, Ph.D., and Tobin Simon, Ph.D., *Writing the Mind Alive*, Ballantine, 2002; see web site: <http://www.pwwriting.org/>



mother could answer. This writing, this work, helped me to cease my relentless inquiry and move to a place of acceptance that I was born to a mother who couldn't protect her child. It's healing to work something like that out. What was yet to be worked out was the fury about it buried deep down inside me – fury that wouldn't surface for years.

Completing a year of workshops traveling from western Massachusetts to New York City, I needed a group closer to home – with a weekly schedule instead of weekends every six weeks.

This led me to Genie Zeiger's group – another teacher using the Amherst Writers and Artists method. Perched in the rolling hills of the upper Pioneer Valley, a forty-five minute drive from my place, Genie's yard and home were a haven for writers. She and her husband Bill designed it with her writing groups in mind. A large room on the lower level was set up with a big circle of three couches interspersed with easy chairs surrounded by hearty plants and lots of windows.

*Why couldn't my
mother protect me?...
I discovered it was
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mother could answer.*

What I was going to discover in that room was the power of a writers' circle to bring out more in me than I knew was there. Not any circle of writers, though. First, the group had a leader who wrote right along with us at her own edge of daring. She did nothing less than she asked of us. From novice writers to published ones – she encouraged every step we each took and found gentle ways to get us to take another. Second, the circle was made up of women who wanted to write and wanted to hear the writing of others.

With Genie's leadership and the group's support, I got better and better at describing what happened and how I felt about it.



Genie often invited us to write about our inner critics – that internal voice barking all kinds of nasty judgments about our lack of worth or value. Sometimes she'd suggest we write a dialogue with them. I named mine Pacasandra after that ground cover plant that spreads like crazy if you don't keep it in check. Getting to know Pacasandra and distinguishing her voice from mine was important. She inserts herself in the most annoying ways into my thoughts while I'm writing.

I've discovered that if I turn the pen over to her for a few choice words, a pithy statement, the toss of a barb, something remarkable happens with my writing. See, when Pacasandra emerges, she's basically getting in my way, in my words' way. Giving her the pen when I'm stuck is like scooping out bits of food from the drain in the kitchen sink – things start to flow again.

The group met from September through May, always stopping for summer. One summer I dreaded the idea of stopping. I bought Julia Cameron's* book, *The Artist's Way*, and worked at home by myself on her twelve-week program. A great tool she promotes is "Morning Pages" – three pages written when you first wake up, strictly stream-of-consciousness, in long hand. She calls it the "brain drain" because it's not for telling stories or organizing thoughts. It's simply practice; getting your hand moving across the page and writing down whatever comes to mind.

I stayed in Genie's group for many years. Sadly, she died of cancer on Christmas Eve 2009. It took me over a year to move enough through my grief to be ready to write with another leader. Luckily, tenderhearted poet Ann McNelly, who was mentored by Genie, started leading writing groups and I wrote with her for four years, mining many of the stories that landed in this book. I suspect I may always be

* Julia Cameron, *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*, Putnam, 1992.



in a weekly writers group – going to a place that welcomes and nurtures my voice.

Here’s a sample of the kind of writing I’m talking about:

I wish I could draw pictures. I’d draw that little room of mine when I was eight with my narrow twin bed pushed up into the corner to the left of the doorway. What color were the walls? I can’t remember, but who cares. There was a dark blue blanket and a flat pillow for my head. No night table, no lamp. But – if I were drawing a picture of it today, right now, I’d add two strips of bright yellow tape with the words “Crime Scene” written over and over and over. There would be a big “X” stretching across the doorway from top to bottom – like no one but the police could come in.

But that’s not how it was. He came in. Came in whenever he wanted. He never asked if he could come in. He never asked if he could stay. He never asked anything. He just did stuff and left. And while he was doing the stuff he did to me I didn’t say one word. It always felt like a mountain had fallen on top of me, and I needed to stay quiet if I wanted the mountain to go away. I hate writing this. Right this minute, though I’ve written things like this for years and years and years and years, my blood still gets all bubbly in my chest. My teeth grind. I’m sweating. This always happens. I’m mad that that all happened. I’m so sorry for frightened little me.

Here are the basic guidelines I use when I’m writing out a story or scene from my life:

1. Write about what happened,
2. and how I felt about it then,
3. and how I feel about it now.



HEALING MY LIFE *from Incest to JOY*

4. Sometimes I add how it feels in my body as I'm writing.
5. When I get stuck, judging the writing, or myself, I give the pen over to my inner critic, Pacasandra, writing in her voice to break the logjam.
6. I read aloud what I've written – hearing my words reinforces my awareness.

Then there's the how & where:

1. A quiet private place.
2. Favorite tools: mine's a Pentel rolling pen, medium point with black ink; either sheets of blank white paper or a spiral notebook with unlined pages (I hate lines and having to write between them!).
3. Music (without voices, e.g., baroque) or silence.
4. A lit candle.
5. Time: frequency and length vary: from twenty minutes a couple times a week to weekly or daily sessions lasting hours.

Four books that help me do medicine writing:

- ★ Julia Cameron, *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*, Putnam, 1992.
- ★ Louise DeSalvo, *Writing as a Way of Healing*, Beacon Press, 1999.
- ★ Pat Schneider, *Writing Alone and With Others*, Oxford Press, 2003.
- ★ Linda Trichter Metcalf, Ph.D., and Tobin Simon, Ph.D., *Writing the Mind Alive*, Ballantine, 2002.



I often use prompts: phrases or first lines to start the writing.

It's amazing where the writing will take me when I start with a particular prompt. Here is a list of some favorites I've used over and over:

1. "What happened was..."
2. "I remember..." alternated with "I don't remember..."
3. "What I'm grateful for today is..."
4. "The idea I had was..."
5. "I never loved..."
6. "The road I took was..."

Self-care is important when I'm writing the stories related to how I was harmed. I always have a support network available: friends, others doing this kind of writing, one-on-one body or talk therapy to turn to for respite and encouragement.

* * *

Ultimately this medicine called writing has contributed to draining my pain, patching my wounds, rewiring a batch of neurons, and smoothing my feathers enough to write the book you have in your hands.

To read more of Donna Jenson's Healing My Life from Incest to Joy please visit **Levellers Press**.

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