

Excerpt from *Heart on the Page*: Chapter on Writing for Healing

Pathways is a resource center for those with a health crisis. They offer free mind-body-spirit workshops for clients and their families. The class I offered at Pathways was called Care for the Caregiver. I know the toll that caregiving can take and hoped to offer creative respite. I informed the participants that we are neither a support group nor a writing group with the purpose of improving writing skills but a way to connect to our deep intuition and inner wisdom. I believe that the soul knows what it needs to take care of itself if we listen to our inner voice.

Participants come and go in this writing group, depending on a conflict when other services are offered, energy levels, or the ability to have another caregiver take over their duties. Often the participants have their own health challenges. They may write while propped on pillows on the floor. The caregiving may have happened in the past rather than currently, but word of mouth spread about the benefits of the group and in 2016, I changed the name to Writing for Healing.

The poetry I bring needs to be very accessible. Most of the participants do not read poetry and attention may waver due to physical discomfort. Images from nature are especially appreciated. We take turns reading the stanzas aloud and then I suggest a prompt. We do not critique or workshop our writings. This gives us the freedom to be honest on the page. Occasionally I'll share an insight or wisdom such as a meditation I use to fall asleep, acknowledgment that care-giving changes our identity, or the many opportunities that come to us to further our spiritual practice when we feel others, perhaps even our closest relationships or the person we are caring for, do not understand, approve or feel threatened by taking time

out from caregiving to be ourselves. I might comment on a piece of writing that is especially moving or has deep wisdom.

Writing opens our hearts so that we can be authentic. Many caregivers and those with health challenges are angry, frustrated, frightened, grieving, and exhausted. Caregivers succumb to being completely available, both emotionally and physically, to the demands of caregiving, and feel they must keep up a strong, cheerful, optimistic façade. People with health challenges may be coping with an invisible disability and lack of understanding and awareness from others. Even those with obvious health challenges, using a walker for example, may find that others do not understand the depth of grief for losing abilities we once had or fear that we will not be able to continue to be self-sufficient or that we will not receive the care we need. I had one client whose husband had given away all of their money as his dementia took over and another whose dying husband was in denial and wouldn't let her prepare for a future without him. Clients with environmental sensitivities might complain that ordinary daily activities were a minefield of allergic reactions and the well-meaning but clueless advice of others abrasive.

In our writing group, we can let down the façade and explore what we yearn for, what our passions are, and what give us solace and spiritual nourishment. We can plan for the future and coach ourselves through fear and grief by being present and reminding ourselves to focus on the present. We remind ourselves of the many gifts we have and the support system of family, friends, and organizations such as Pathways. We make choices based on knowing ourselves and accepting our limitations and honoring our vision of what can be. We realize we walk a path of compassion with strength, courage, and wisdom. We learn that others have also walked this path

and we have a sense of commonality and community. Our inner resilience becomes more certain
and we become aware of blessings along the way.

TYPICAL WRITING PROMPTS FOR CARE-GIVERS

I don't have to be perfect, I just have to—
list all the things you do for yourself, from the smallest thing such as a bubble bath to taking yoga,
walking, or calling a friend: how do you raise your vibration

What brings you joy?
What gives you bliss?
What do you yearn for?
How do you have fun?
What do you do for pleasure?
I promise myself—
What my tears tell me

POEM: Kindness by Naomi Shihab Nye
PROMPT: What I left behind and what I was able to keep—

POEM: Antilamentation by Dorianne Laux
PROMPTS: what I regret and what I don't regret
What you gave me—

POEM: Permission Granted by David Allen Sullivan
PROMPT: I give myself permission to—

POEMS: Rest by Richard Jones, Let Evening Come by Jane Hirshfield
PROMPT: Where do you find solace?

POEM: The Book of Myths by Joy Harjo
PROMPT: my beloved body—

POEM: I'm Going to Start Living like a Mystic by Edward Hirsch
PROMPT: I'm going to start living—

POEM: The Tao of Touch by Marge Piercy
PROMPT: what nourishes me

POEM: Prayer in The Strip Mall, Bangor, Maine by Stuart Kestenbaum
PROMPT: random Love—

POEM: Discovering Gold by Wendy Brown-Baez

PROMPT: Bless the coming darkness or Discovering Gold

POEM: For What Binds Us by Jane Hirshfield

PROMPT: What binds us, Scars

POEM: from a Native Elder Teaching Story translated by David Wagoner

PROMPT: Have you ever felt lost / how do you find yourself

POEM: The Singing by Kim Addonizio

PROMPT: The knot of the self that won't untangle

POEM: Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front by Wendell Berry

PROMPT: Write your own manifesto as directives or commands

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