

THE WRITING THAT SHAPED MY LIFE

By Diana Raab, Ph.D.

When I was ten years old, I found my grandmother dead in her room, which was right next to mine. On that sunny summer morning, I had knocked on her door to ask permission to swim in a friend's pool. I called her name, but she just lay in her bed beside the window, remaining perfectly still. On her stomach sat an opened Graham Greene book and a pair of eyeglasses. I touched her face and it was stone-cold. With a child's intuition, I sensed that something was seriously wrong. I ran out of the room to phone my mother at work.

Within minutes, emergency vehicles lined our once-quiet residential street. I remember two uniformed men carrying my grandmother out on a stretcher down the creaky wooden stairs. I prayed they wouldn't drop her.

After the commotion of ambulances, paramedics, and my parents frantically rushing about simmered down, the grief of my loss penetrated me like a deep-seated bullet. My true healing only began days later when my mother handed me my first journal—one with Khalil Gibran quotes at the top of each page—and told me to pour my grief onto its pages. Little did my mother know that her seemingly benign gesture set the stage for my work as a writer. In other words, that traumatic event transformed me and guided me during many years of my life. Since then, I've used writing as a form of healing, and teach others to do the same.

There wasn't much talk about my grandmother until about twenty years after her death, when my parents were getting ready to move from my childhood home in Queens, New York. While packing, they stumbled across my grandmother's retrospective journal, which she'd written after emigrating from Vienna in the early 1930s. Only after reading that document did I truly understand the deep roots of her depression, which tormented her for her entire life, and eventually led to her suicide at the age of sixty-one. I also realized how we carry a lot in our DNA, and my desire to write probably originated from my beloved grandmother.

I tucked her journal away, then pulled it out again when I was diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of forty-seven. In addition to wanting to figure out if my grandmother had taken her life due to a breast-cancer diagnosis and surgery, I wanted to become inspired by her words so I could write my own story.

During the days following my surgery, I lay in a hospital bed surrounded by orchids sent by loved ones around the country. Tear-saturated tissues lay piled high on my bedside table, and the early-morning sun peaked through the large window in my room. The emotional pain of losing a breast hit me hard. When my surgeon said he would soon remove the corset-like bandage wrapped tightly around my chest, I feared seeing what lay beneath. What would be the new condition of one of the breasts that had nursed my three now-teenage children?

Just days after my surgery, my husband reached out across the sterile white bed sheets to take my hand. Simon, an engineer and natural-born "fixer," had a difficult time watching me endure intense physical and emotional pain. He nestled up close to me and wrapped both his hands around mine. He looked deeply into my eyes, as he had years earlier on the day of my father's passing.

"Right now," he asked, "if you could do one thing that would make you happy, what would that be?" Aside from being guaranteed a long life and watching my children have children, I said I wanted to return to school for a master's degree in writing. For years, this had been a dream of mine, and the recent surgery suddenly slapped me face-to-face with my own mortality and my apparent race against time. I wanted this dream to come true.

When I was navigating difficult times, my writing mentor at Spalding University repeatedly told me, "When it hurts, write harder." As a result, during the years of my breast-cancer journey, my journal became the forum for venting my fears and frustrations. Eventually parts of my journal entries ended up in my self-help memoir, *Healing with Words: A Writer's Cancer Journey*. The book not only helped me, but assisted others in navigating their own healing journeys.

Ever since that day during my childhood when my mother gave me my first journal, I had always found solace in the written word. Journaling became a passion that I turned to during turbulent times—from my own adolescence, to difficult pregnancies, and finally during my two bouts with cancer.

My writing didn't stop with my MFA in writing. I continued to journal and write, as this has always been my life's calling. Six years after my breast-cancer diagnosis, I was diagnosed with multiple myeloma, a rare and incurable form of bone-marrow cancer most often seen in men exposed to toxic chemicals. I continued to be a medical

mystery and challenge for my doctors. Once again, I turned to my journals to chronicle my journey, which included numerous travels and medical opinions. Woven into my accounts were my sentiments about my ongoing zest for life, and my desire to not be categorized as “a cancer patient,” in spite of the diagnosis. I realized the ongoing importance of following my passions and living out my dreams.

As a sixtieth birthday present to myself, I returned to school to get my Ph.D. in transpersonal psychology. My dissertation dealt with how other published writers had been healed and transformed through writing, and the results were powerful. Thus, I can truly say that writing has saved my life, as well as the lives of many other creative individuals.

Over the years I’ve learned that when in distress, many people turn to writing because it empowers them and helps them heal. We can say that when life takes an unexpected turn, journals can become our best friends. Poet Langston Hughes said, “When I feel bad, I write in order to keep from feeling worse.”

Writing to feel better is probably the most common reason why people crack open their journals. Therapists often suggest journaling as a part of the healing process to help channel problems. Poet Kim Stafford once said that the journal lets him wallow, if that’s what he needs. “But,” he said, “the act of writing lifts me out.”

During my own early life, the journal my mother gave me to help me cope with my grandmother’s suicide helped me come to peace with my loss. The journal became my best friend and confidant, especially when there was no one else to talk to. The challenges surrounding illness can also become a catalyst for journaling.

Writing has been a healthy habit for me, just like brushing my teeth or meditating. For the writer, the journal or notebook is not only a place to play around with words and voice; it’s a place to foster a more intimate relationship with who we are. The journal is also a place to gather momentum and excitement about writing, akin to an artist’s sketchbook.

Many writers, including myself, use their journals as catchalls for personal experiences and observations and as seeds for future works. In fact, the beginnings of all my books have begun on the pages of my journal. There’s something about the creative impulse that arises when one has a pen and journal in hand that is sometimes difficult to replicate on a computer.

As I think back to all that has occurred in my life and all the experiences I’ve both enjoyed and endured, I must give heartfelt thanks to my mother for knowing that I needed an outlet for my turbulent emotions at the tender age of ten . . . and giving me the Khalil Gibran journal that ultimately helped me save my own life.