



Writing and Bliss

By Diana Raab, PhD

BLISS MAY BE DEFINED as a natural direction to take to maximize your sense of joy and fulfillment. It is a more powerful word than happiness. Sometimes people equate bliss with being in a state of euphoria, but it is also about learning what brings you joy, which is often connected to what you do with your life. Mythologist and writer Joseph Campbell coined the phrase “Follow your bliss,” which is another way of saying to follow your heart or to listen to your inner voice.

Finding your bliss is about bringing into your life all those things that bring out your potential and help you live your life to its fullest. Once you open your eyes and are aware of your bliss, opportunities begin to come your way. For years, I’ve known that my bliss revolves around writing. I know that because whenever people ask me when I feel best, I respond by saying, “When I’m writing.” This can be true whether I’m writing poems, blogs, essays, or books. I also know that I am blissful when studying, which is one reason why I returned to school for two advanced degrees during my middle age.

Another aspect of following your bliss can apply to young adults when they are contemplating a career path. Most of us have an innate desire to please our parents. Sometimes this means following the desires and expectations of others while pushing aside our own dreams or the messages of our inner voice or heart.

While this behavior might be subconscious, many young people consider pursuing the career path of one of their parents or what they think their parents would like for them to pursue. They may continue down that path until they come to the realization that another path would bring greater joy.

My story is an illustration: My grandmother always wanted to be a doctor, but her dreams were shattered as a result of wartime. My mother was a medical receptionist. I began my journey as a registered nurse and nursing administrator, and, while I enjoyed working in the hospital with patients, I came to realize that what really made my heart sing was writing. Sometimes life flows in such a way that dreams easily become realized, whereas at other times, pursuing them is a more conscious decision. For me, it was the former, because the timing was perfect, as I had to resign as a hospital administrator and submit to bed rest when I approached the third month of my first pregnancy. This confinement led me to do a great deal of writing, thus returning me to the bliss of my childhood. I ended up extending that bliss by availing myself of my medical background to become a medical journalist, reporting on the latest medical research and findings.

As my experience shows, following your bliss usually entails connecting to a life theme.

Writing Prompt

Find a quiet and private writing place. Write about what you imagined your life would look like when you were just beginning it. Imagine that all has gone extremely well in your life and that all of your dreams have come true. Refrain from simply doing a recap of your accomplishments. Write instead about how you arrived at the point of fulfilling all your goals in the life of your dreams and what you were feeling along the way. Write from your heart.

Happiness is a function of our genetics, personality, and life experiences. Further, there are many factors that make us happy, but the key ones include having meaning, hope, and purpose in life. Writing can help identify what fulfills these factors for you, whether you're writing about a recent event or one that happened a while ago.

Humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow believed that mental health professionals place too much emphasis on disease, so he devised a pyramid called the Hierarchy of Needs. On the bottom of the pyramid, he placed our basic human needs and at the very top of the pyramid, what he called "self-actualization," or the point where we have found our true meaning and purpose in life and, ultimately, our bliss. For the most part, we all strive toward self-actualization, which essentially leads to a deep sense of satisfaction and bliss. Maslow identified peak experiences or life-changing circumstances as powerful moments accompanied by a sense of euphoria or pleasure or a deep sense of harmony that could lead to an individual's self-actualization and subsequent movement in the direction of bliss. He also believed that those who are highly evolved, such as mystics, are those who have experienced these peak moments that result in a state of bliss.

Figuring out what your bliss is can occur through the writing process, because when you write, you set out on a journey of self-discovery, and during this journey, you learn about all those things that you were meant to do to bring you joy. By writing about what makes you happy or sad or what are your triggers, etc., you can be guided to your bliss. There is always something to learn from your lived experiences. An essential part of acknowledging or honoring those experiences is to document them in

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Just 1 gram of DNA is theoretically capable of holding 455 exabytes—enough for all the data held by Google, Facebook and every other major tech company, with room to spare. It's also incredibly durable: DNA has been extracted and sequenced from 700,000-year-old horse bones.

—Full story “Glassed-in DNA Makes the Ultimate Time Capsule,” at www.newscientist.com.

Herbal Antiseptic Oils

To fight antibiotic-resistant bacteria, or “superbugs,” the pharmaceutical industry continues to create ever stronger and more dangerous drugs. Meanwhile, researchers are studying the superior antiseptic abilities of certain plant oils to avoid bacterial growth in the first place.

A recent study found that the oils derived from tea tree, lemongrass, and eucalyptus outperformed the common hospital antiseptics chlorhexidine and ethanol (rubbing alcohol) in inhibiting the growth of antibiotic-resistant bacteria.

The researchers tested these and other plant oils against the most deadly superbugs, including *Klebsiella pneumoniae*, MRSA, *Escherichia coli*, and the multidrug-resistant *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*. They measured the “zone of inhibition,” the distance to which a substance will repel bacteria and thereby prevent bacterial activity. The larger the zone, the stronger the antiseptic/antibiotic agent.

The tea tree, lemongrass, and eucalyptus oils all had significantly larger zones of inhibition than the chlorhexidine and ethanol did. In fact, the latter two showed “notably lower or no efficacy” in inhibiting bacteria.

Tea tree oil has been used as an antiseptic for centuries by the Aboriginal peoples of Australia, where the tea tree is indigenous. This new research shows evidence that natural substances can be used in preventing the spread of superbugs in hospital settings.

Adapted from “Herbal Antiseptic Oils Beat Disinfectant for Inhibiting Superbug Infection” by Case Adams, ND. Available at: <http://greenmedinfo.com>.

journals. Writing can also serve as a baseline to look back, as a way to guide us into our future. That's why it is important to date your writing, so that you can return to it at a later time and compare your feelings then and now, while at the same time observing the evolution of your musings. Bathing in joy brings feelings of bliss, and it can also radiate to those with whom you come into contact, offering a positive shift in perspective.

Finding bliss through writing involves a sacrifice. You need to be alert and mindful of all the things, situations, and people that make you happy. These are markers or life-enhancing moments that you can keep track of in your journal. By writing down your feelings, you are led to self-discovery and more easily able to ascertain what brings you joy and bliss.

Elizabeth Lesser talks about how in her classes she has students create what she calls an "autobiography of joy," which encourages them to remember and document the happy moments in their lives. She found this to be a positive exercise in that each anecdote or story can become like a shiny fishing lure that can be saved and used during darker times when we might need a reminder of the way toward the light. In a sense, this process is similar to keeping a gratitude journal in which you daily record what you are thankful for.

Lesser also claims that by creating grief stories we can see the ebbs and flows of our lives and identify the triggers and patterns that move us from one point to the next. This process can help us better understand ourselves and gain wisdom from the knowledge.

Ralph Keyes writes about the connection between writing and the state of euphoria, which to my mind is akin to the state of bliss. He suggests that when you take a risk with your writing, the reward is often a sense of euphoria, bliss, or exhilaration. The state

of bliss can be identified as a trance-like state that Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes as the feeling of "flow." The sense of flow is connected to the release of a flood of endorphins that can lead to an intense state of concentration during writing. I have often experienced this state when working on long book projects. When my writing is going well, it seems as if I am in a trance.

In fact, sometimes I have no idea where the time goes, but I look up and realize that all I've done all day is sit and write at my computer. One symptom of being in the flow is losing track of time.

Timothy Wilson believes that while writing doesn't solve every problem, it can definitely help us cope. He says that the writing process encourages people to recreate or reconstruct the story of what has been bothering them, and that in doing so they are able to discover new meaning or explanations

for it. Ultimately, this process leads to a sense of calm, happiness, and bliss.

Writing Prompt

Find a quiet and safe place to write. Write about a time or times when you felt joy, elation, and wonder. Then write about a time when you truly felt light-hearted and your life was filled with light. Δ

Well Being Journal editors adapted and reprint this article with permission of the author from her new book *Writing for Bliss: A Seven-Step Plan for Telling Your Story and Transforming Your Life*, which is to be published in September 2017 by Loving Healing Press.

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If we dump our negative feelings on others, they experience it as an attack and they, in turn, are forced to suppress, express, or escape the feelings; therefore, the expression of negativity results in the deterioration and destruction of relationships. A far better alternative is to take responsibility for our own feelings and neutralize them. Then, only positive feelings remain to be expressed.

—David Hawkins, MD, in *Letting Go: The Pathway of Surrender*, Hay House, Inc., 2012, page 13.