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published in *Black Fox Literary* 2016

*Shaped By Our Childhoods*

by

Diana Raab, PhD

*“We don’t see things as they are. We see them as we are.”*

Anais Nin

How do the events of our childhoods affect our adult passions and mold who we become? Some believe that childhood sets the stage for the trajectory of our lives. This has definitely been true for me. When I was ten, my grandmother and primary caretaker committed suicide in my childhood home. My parents were at work and I found her. It was ten o'clock in the morning; I cracked open my grandmother's bedroom door, and she lay completely still with an open book on her chest. On her headboard, lying on its side was an empty bottle of pills. The sheer curtains swayed in the breeze as if waving goodbye. I called her name but she did not answer. With a child's intuition, I sensed something was wrong. I ran out to phone my parents at work.

Within moments, my parents, an ambulance and a police car pulled up into the driveway. Commotion took over our quiet suburban neighborhood. My grandmother was taken away on a stretcher, never to be seen again. I didn't understand the permanence of death, and my parents didn't allow me to attend the funeral. Instead, my mother handed me my first journal—a Khalil Gibran journal with quotations across the top of each page. My journal became my best friend and confidant. I poured my deepest sentiments onto its pages. Little did my mother know that her seemingly benign gesture set the platform for my life's work as a writer.

Many children take such events in stride. Only looking back from the adult perspective do we realize the gravity of our earlier experiences. It was the 1960s, long before therapy was commonplace. For hours on end, I sat on the floor of my walk-in closet and wrote about how I missed my grandmother, reflecting upon all our special times together. Writing helped me cope with my loss. That was the beginning of my understanding that writing heals.

### **Healing through words**

When confronted with trauma, life transitions or epiphanies, many authors have found that writing empowers and facilitates the healing process. D.H. Lawrence sat at his mother's bedside while she was dying and wrote poems about her. He also began an early draft of *Sons and Lovers*, his novel where he explored their complicated, loving, and painful relationship. Marcel Proust wrote *Remembrance of Things Past* while sick in bed with asthma. Flannery O'Connor wrote some of her best stories while dying from lupus. I wrote my first book, *Getting Pregnant and Staying Pregnant: A Guide to High-Risk Pregnancies* in 1983 while on bed rest with my eldest daughter.

May Sarton and Anais Nin also used journaling to pull them through difficult times. In her book, *Recovering*, May Sarton chronicles her battles with depression and cancer. Anais Nin used her journals to help her cope with her deranged father, who left the family when she was young. Her journal entries became a springboard for her life as a writer. 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 people crack open their journals. These days, therapists sometimes suggest journaling in conjunction with talk therapy. Since my grandmother's death, I have pulled out my journal during other difficult times, such as while navigating a turbulent adolescence and three pregnancies laden with bed rest. Acknowledging its transformative results, I once again turned to journaling during my two bouts with cancer.

Indeed, the challenges surrounding illness can become a catalyst for writing. During graduate school, one of my writing mentors told me, "When it hurts, write harder." Writing provides an emotional release to vent about issues related to your work or personal life. Sometimes the loss of a loved one reveals inner turmoil or uncovers secrets that are revealed

during the writing process. Writing helps clear your mind while increasing your awareness. It can also provide, like my grandmother's journal, which I found many years after her passing, a window into our ancestors and their legacies. Sometimes journals even turn into books, such as my first memoir, *Regina's Closet: Finding My Grandmother's Secret Journal*.

### **Write from your heart**

The most important aspect of using writing to empower is to write from your heart. Dig down into your own emotional truth and write like nobody is going to read it. In this way, you will get a window on what is important to you--what inspires you and what irritates you, too. When you know these answers, you will be able to tap into a deeper sense of self-discovery; one that will lead to a sense of well-being and ultimately, to happiness.

The best way to start writing for healing is to find a journal and a pen that inspire you to pick them up and use them. Write for fifteen continuous minutes about whatever pops into your mind. You might decide to write a letter to a deceased loved one, or another life-altering experience. You might want to write about a personal obsession. Perhaps you want to jot down what you are grateful for or what can you do to change or put yourself on a path to greater joy. It is okay to begin writing about one thing and have it take you someplace completely different. The beauty of journal writing is its spontaneity. The idea is to just let it rip and get the words onto the page. In and of itself, this is a transformative and empowering experience.

Whatever the events of your childhood and your experiences since, through the process of writing about them, you will come to a better understanding. Though the debate continues as to whether we are shaped by Nature or Nurture, writing helps us learn more about who we truly

are. In a sense, our experiences prepare us for greater growth and are mostly always empowering.