

Finding Your Writing Voice

— Toni Gilbert

Everyone has a story to tell. You want your stories to have an authenticity that is uniquely yours so that your expressions come alive with what you want to say. Your purpose is to write about your life with detail and meaning that will jump off the pages into receptive minds. Your voice is the identifiable part of your personality that keeps popping up in your writing style, so all you have to do is pay more attention, and trust what your subconscious mind says.

We aren't all gifted writers; it is our critical voice that interrupts the flow. Give yourself permission to be imperfect. Don't worry, just start writing. In the process, you will learn to trust your mind and your body. Remember your hands are part of the heart chakra, and when you write, your deepest and truest self emerges.

Not everything that emerges from your deepest heart is appropriate to publish, but that doesn't matter during the early writing stages. In the beginning, you are learning about yourself. There are times when your writing will surprise and delight you, and there are times when it will make you cry as shadows of your life's difficulties flood in.

During your writing you will begin to recognize your difficult times as your very own divine challenges. They provide the catalyst for personal growth, and they are nothing to be ashamed of. Remember how you surmounted these challenges, and consider telling your stories, for they may be useful to others.

WRITING TOOLS AND WRITING ENVIRONMENTS

The tools you choose for your writing projects are important. Use a computer if you want, but by all means experiment with paper and pens and pencils. Decide which tools are best for you. For myself, I like to have a couple of inexpensive note pads strategically placed, one pad by my bed for that special nighttime revelation, and one by my favorite place to sit and look out the window. When good ideas come, I like to jot them down fast before they leave my conscious mind. Other times, I like to sit at my computer with eyes closed and write from the preconscious level of the mind.

I always give myself permission to allow my thoughts to come out any way they want, never worrying about spelling and punctuation, because they can get in the way of the idea forming; I want to capture the thought while it breathes. I can always clean it up later if I think it's worth keeping.

WRITING PRACTICES

Writing is like working out in the gym—the more you work out, the more fit you become. And the more you write, the better your writing becomes. Working with words and ideas are like muscles, and they are meant to be strengthened and stretched.

So start a daily or weekly writing practice. Set aside five to thirty minutes every day, or once a week to explore your mind for material. While sitting at your computer, or with pad and pen on the table, shift into your right brain and

write down what ever comes up for you. You do not have to make complete sentences or dot every "i." Write as fast as you can, and let the "untamed" mind express itself, but whatever you do don't judge it while you are in this free-associating stage of writing.

TOPICS LIST

Sometimes you can't think of anything to write about, and nothing wants to come. You feel intimidated by the blank page, and your chattering mind says, "I just can't do this. I can't think of anything." We all know that one, but there is a simple remedy: Keep a page of topic ideas that are interesting enough to write about, and, whenever you think of something new, go to your notebook and add new topic ideas to the list. Later, when you want to write but are drawing a blank, go to your topics list for ideas. The best thing about the list is that you begin to see what interests you and what is in your world that you want to share with others.

ORGANIZING IDEAS

After filling up your notebooks with your thoughts, one of your journalled entries may jump out and entice you to write a longer piece. Again, continue to write spontaneously. Then use your left brain to organize and give your ideas structure. Once you have the backbone of your story, you can flesh it out with additions and deletions. Read through the work several times and **be sure to read it out loud to yourself or to a friend.** Continue to add details, changing and refining, until it you suits your own ear.

EDITING HELP

Some journals and magazines have editors who will help you edit your writing, but many do not. Before you hire a private editor, ask several friends (ideally ones who love to write) to read your essay and give you the honest feedback you need. Take a college class and join a writer's group. Your local library or bookstore should be able to recommend one, and there are even on-line groups you can join.

Then when you are ready, get an editor. Everyone needs an editor. Even Editors need editors, all the best writers are the ones who appreciate editors the most. Hiring one is the best thing you can do for yourself and your writing projects. You will find out (necessarily) just how much your ego is attached to your writing. While it is difficult to accept cutting a favorite passage out of an essay, at the same time you must consider the recommendations of the editor, who more often than not is right. Even so, it is your story and there are times when you are the best judge of what you want to say and you must always make the final decision.

In the process of writing, keeping these things in mind, your hands will get practice teaming up with your heart to express your unique perspective. And you will have a finished piece that has a professional polish that you can be proud of. Even a well-crafted Letter to the Editor is a personal and artistic accomplishment.

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REFERENCE: M. R. Waldman (Ed.) *The Spirit of Writing: Classic and Contemporary Essays Celebrating the Writing Life*, Jeremy Tarcher/Putnam, 2001.

QUEST FOR THE HOLY GRAIL: A Model of Personal and Communal Transformation

— Marijo Grogan

No other literature dominated the imagination of the West for the ten centuries comprising the Middle Ages like the Grail Legend. One of the greatest spiritual stories of all time, the Quest for the Grail is also a study in early psychological thought. Influenced by Alchemy, the oral text was finally committed to paper by Chrétien de Troyes, and Wolfram Von Eschenbach, during the 12th and 13th centuries, respectively. The Quest may be read on many levels. It is the sacred chalice used by Christ at the Last Supper, it is the Celtic cauldron of Life, and it is a symbolic manual outlining stages of growth and transformation.

The Quest for the Holy Grail has been a psychic template in my life, interpreting, giving meaning to my life experiences, and connecting me to a sense of destiny. It is not the romanticism of the Arthurian legends but a spiritual and psychological metaphor for the development of the soul and spirit life. Unlike the psychological studies that dominated my training, the realm of the Grail is one that expands our consciousness beyond the confines of the individual self. On the personal, communal, and cosmic levels, it explores the themes of suffering, death, transformation, wholeness, the integration of opposites, the personal as well as the communal, the microcosm, and the macrocosm. The Grail, in the deepest sense, is a symbol of the Source of Life.

On a societal level, The Quest for the Grail is particularly relevant

today in understanding the malaise affecting Western society. We don't have to travel far on the American cultural highway to find evidence of the Wasteland, the wounded Fisher King, or the despair and anxiety of a people. With clients out of work, facing cutbacks in health coverage, and confronted with reports of the latest terrorist attacks, symptoms of anxiety and depression may be the result of injustices in the societal realm as much as intrapsychic phenomenon. Parsival's personal transformative journey culminates in a reclaiming and transformation of communal values.

As persons practicing the healing arts, it is imperative that we follow his example. It is necessary to empower our clients in claiming their rights and responsibilities as citizens as well as dealing with feelings of helplessness, grief, and despair. Building balanced communities ensures a place for the health and healing of individuals to take place.

There are those in our profession who lead the way in encouraging this perspective. James Hillman, the father of archetypal psychology, has spoken often of the challenge we face moving from an exclusive focus on the individual to a broader grasp of "disorders of the collective." Likewise, Cloe Madanes, pioneer in Strategic Family Therapy, has written about honoring the subversive power of psychotherapy in challenging the preference within managed care organizations for encouraging "chemical behavioral modification" over "healing the collective family spirit" (**Family**