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Trauma Into Triumph

By Stephanie Gunning, *Unity Magazine*



I'll never forget the experience of walking down a block in a posh Brooklyn, New York, neighborhood one day and suddenly realizing, *Wait a second, I used to live here!* The street, after considerable renovation, was almost unrecognizable. It was attractive now, thriving. I overlaid the scene with a mental picture of the dingy, decaying housing stock of nearly 30 years prior, where I had lived for five years during my 20s. At the time, the street was isolated and barren, on the edge of poverty. Yet I'd burned it into my memory as the location of my greatest trauma—as well as the place where I said my first true prayer and awakened my spirit.

The details of the trauma—a violent robbery—instantly came rushing back, knocking me off balance like an ocean wave breaking over my head: a hard slam, like running into a wall, followed by choppy water. I sensed the danger of being swept away by waves of emotion.

A memory associated with strong emotion has the power to take us over. It becomes a whole-body experience activating patterns of linked thoughts, feelings, and biochemicals. There's no escaping it.

Even now, just telling the story, I am transported not only to that Brooklyn sidewalk but also back to the essence of the 27-year-old woman I was the day the robbery happened. She comes alive in my body too. It's a gift of the human nervous system that we feel as much when we vividly imagine or remember doing something as we do in the present moment.

I've also discovered the extraordinary truth that we can use this whole-body remembrance to proactively transform ourselves through simple writing practices. We can create a space inside—a dimension at the core of our being—where it's possible to access different thought-feeling states at will to help us heal. By using our memory and our imagination to connect with the parts of us that lie beyond our trauma or problems or unfulfilled wishes—either by revisiting the period prior to those experiences or time-traveling into an imagined future—we can evoke positive whole-body experiences that redefine us. Putting words to what we learn when we journey in this way anchors the experience in the body as physical sensations. In workshops where I've supported small groups in activating such core healing states, this powerful process has never failed.

A Potent Past

On that day in Brooklyn, almost three decades ago, an intruder with a gun forced himself into my apartment. He raped my roommate while I lay tied up in the next room, wondering if he'd shoot me. When he'd pointed his gun at me minutes earlier, my muscles went floppy, like those of a helpless animal. I had no fight in me. No courage. No drive to escape. Facedown on a couch, hands bound behind me, I waited for death, heart pounding. Frozen.

Time distorted. With utter clarity, I thought, *I can't believe I'm going to die without believing in God.* I felt intense, aching disappointment.

This fundamental condition evoked an electric sensation. It was a wordless prayer, like a laser beam aimed at the mother ship in space, all to say, "Come get me!"

Then I didn't die.

After the intruder left, the police came. The guy was arrested some days later. He went to prison. For a long time I lived in a state of semi-shock. I was overly protective of myself and controlled my environment as much as possible, doing nothing that would keep me out of the house after dark. Nevertheless the timeless, fully embodied, authentic prayer that my spirit had sent out as a beacon was guiding me.

You could say I knew, without a shred of confusion, what was missing in my life. I knew exactly what it would be like to die with regret—since I'd already faced death that way. Something had to change, this was clear. But since I'd lost my footing and did not know the way back to shore, I had to let the light of my prayer pierce the darkness and lead my choices. I recognized my soul's desire to believe in God as a true and indispensable thought—the same kind of illuminated thought transformational writing evokes to show us what's valuable. The trick is arriving at it!

I've met other people who've survived life-or-death situations. I often ask them if they had a similar thought in the moment they recognized their lives were about to end—and what they did about it afterward, when they lived. One man who nearly drowned told me his thought was regret for leaving his children with little financial support. He soon devoted his mind, heart, talents, and energy to amassing a fortune. His identity was transformed.

So was mine. My career in publishing shifted in emphasis to creating books that would bring greater peace, health, and harmony to the world and make it a place where people were safe, free, and highly creative. This focus felt aligned with my innermost desire to know God. New friends entered my life as my values and priorities shifted. Old ones dropped away.

We can define *transformation* in different ways—one is drawing a beautiful meaning from pain as a balm for our spirit, like when mourning reminds us of how much we loved someone who died, or when a challenge leads us to discover previously untested strengths. Once our essence is known to us and we have directly experienced the truth of our desires, transformation is inevitable.

Transformational Writing

When I began experimenting with transformational writing, I found out that it's a relatively well-known practice. The honest expression of our thoughts and feelings helps us process complex emotions and triggers new insights. From the start, my intent was to identify a writing technique that would enable me to work with morphogenic fields of energy—energy that is taking on shape and structure. My approach was shamanic.

A Danish businessman gave me the idea to use an initiating prompt: "When did you feel most authentically like yourself?" People who start with this question—when led to understand that the closer they get to the core, the more energized, powerful, creative, calm, and joyful they'll feel—are capable of evoking memories of resilience and positive moods.

Once they capture these memories on paper, underlying themes begin to emerge—usually qualities of experiences, such as love, connection, curiosity, and peace. As a facilitator, I then help them find a word to symbolize the essence of their embodied experiences. For one person, *vigorous* is activating. Another is lit up by *fierce*. Another is motivated by the word *juicy*. The idea is to use the word to symbolize being, to let it pull them forward into a more desirable future. If you asked: "What are you being?" they could say *fierce*, *juicy*, *vigorous*. Their true essence would be self-evident in the moment.

Honesty is required at this step. You must be willing to keep going until you identify the word you feel most lights you up because it accurately describes the vibrant potential within you that is seeking to materialize. You're in a living laboratory. Once you activate it, the light from within you builds into a field of energy. This energy transforms everything and everyone it comes in contact with because this essence is already ingrained in your neural pathways and muscle memory.

The beauty of the process is that your soul will tell you what you need to know on any given day. At different times, different sets of memories arise in reviewing the past for authentic *you-ness*. You then use whatever spontaneously comes up to guide you to the essential quality you need to embody. If you want to activate the core energy of collaboration, for instance, going within, you might reexperience sensations of equanimity, receptivity, and fairness. Without effort, your mind, mood, and actions would shift. You'd begin to live collaboration in the present.

By changing the writing prompt, you can also influence the nature of the guidance you receive. For example, you could ask yourself, *When did I feel most purposeful?* or most in flow, most courageous, or happiest. Spend a few moments writing about the memories that surface. Close your eyes and

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look around in the space of each memory, like you're inside a hologram, using all of your senses to recreate and savor the memory. Write down everything.

Fast Forward

A final step to anchor this core essence, and activate it in your future, is writing more about how you imagine your life will be on a specific future date if it is organized predominantly around the one essential quality you identified. In other words, if you woke up every morning making that quality the cornerstone of your existence, what would be the result? Most shifts occur after a period of time, so this is easier when you write from a perspective that's reasonably far ahead—let's say two to five years.

After you've written about a timeline heavily weighted toward one quality, take another look around your projection and ask yourself if anything is missing. I once did this exercise with a music therapist who had been a child performer. She'd quit show business because of parental pressure. In reporting on a possible future incorporating performance, she told me she still felt tremendous anxiety. I pointed out that she might want to invest her energy in living in a future that *also* included relaxation and peace. This idea startled her awake, jolting her out of her in-the-box thinking.

Asking yourself the question, *Is anything missing?* allows you to name and activate all of the many qualities necessary to align fully with your soul's intentions. Whenever you feel dissonance—even a very subtle misalignment with your Truth—you can write your way to knowing more about the qualities of your core essence and then take actions to embody your discoveries.

Using transformational writing to revisit my 27-year-old self prior to the robbery, I sense myself as being a spirit guide watching over her, able to comfort her and keep her safe. I'm renewed by making contact with her resilience, her passion to create, and her curiosity. I'm deeply moved to discover how these qualities are now the foundation of my life. She has given me so much that a wave of gratitude washes over me, and I feel whole.

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