

# Nurse Author & Editor

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### A Guide for the Perplexed

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There's no shortage of advice for writers. Search Amazon.com for "writing guides" and up pop a dozen of more than 66,000 "results" that are, purportedly, books on writing—all kinds of writing. Some are style manuals, like Strunk and White's venerable classic, *The Elements of Style*, and the all-too-familiar *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*—perhaps more dreaded than venerated. Many others are "how-to" books, everything from *Blogging for Dummies* to *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Writing Erotic Romance*.

Those who are struggling with writing or who aspire to be better all-around writers are usually looking for a third kind of book that, in addition to addressing matters of craft, offers time-tested solutions to some of the emotional and psychological difficulties writers inevitably encounter. Call them Guides for the Perplexed. They're a various lot and may include writing prompts to enhance creativity, strategies for dealing with writer's block or the harsh voice of the Inner Critic—if you can't silence him, you may be able to lower his volume—and memoir-like passages in which the author tells instructive tales about how she overcame difficulties in her own writing life. There are probably many more good and useful books of this kind than any one person will ever have the time or inclination to read. Several I've found helpful over the years are Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*; Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (Joy Jacobson and I have listed these two as recommended texts on our writing class syllabus); Gail Sher's *One Continuous Mistake: Four Noble Truths for Writers* (Joy lent me this one a few years ago and still has not gotten it back); and—a book that many artists and writers swear by and form workshops and support groups around—Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*.

There's another book that could be considered a Guide for the Perplexed, and I'd like to recommend it to everyone who's trying to start or maintain a daily writing practice. The book is Louise DeSalvo's (2000) *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives*. Joy and I have made it a required text for our graduate students and a recommended text for our undergraduates, and we've given it to nurses who have attended our workshops. We've adapted DeSalvo's method of writing "healing narratives" and present it to students as both the how and the why of the daily journal writing we assign them. DeSalvo's method also informs the other writing assignments we give students, particularly the semester's final project, a narrative essay in which student writers illustrate a larger health-related topic with a personal story based on their own experience. And there's a good reason why we've made this book central to our teaching method: DeSalvo links a pragmatic approach to developing and strengthening daily writing to a growing body of scientific evidence showing that a specific kind of writing about emotionally charged experience can have broad physical and emotional health benefits. It's perfect for nurses—and could be a valuable self-care tool for just about everyone else.

In the 1980s James W. Pennebaker, a psychologist, pioneered the science behind DeSalvo's healing

narratives. He began to study what he called “expressive writing” and its correlation with a variety of health indicators. In this context, expressive writing means uncensored self-disclosure about deep emotions and highly charged events; it may include accounts of trauma or of thoughts and actions that previously have been undisclosed. Working with many different kinds of test subjects, including school children and nursing home residents, medical school students and maximum security prisoners, new mothers, rape victims, and Holocaust survivors, Pennebaker and his colleagues have demonstrated short- and long-term health benefits such as improved immune response and wound healing, lower levels of stress hormones, and reduced anxiety and depression. They also have discovered that inhibiting the expression of thoughts and feelings about emotional upheavals can have negative health effects. (See [here](#) for Pennebaker’s website, where many of his publications are available free of charge.)

DeSalvo, now a professor of English at Hunter College and the author of several memoirs, chanced upon Pennebaker’s work in the early 1990s when she was caring for her dying mother. She immediately saw its relevance to her own writing and her need to cope with “painful life experiences—with loss, death, depression, abuse, and trauma” (DeSalvo 2000 p 19). She began using Pennebaker’s method, writing every day about these experiences. From her study of Pennebaker’s work and out of her own writing practice, she distilled five qualities of a healing narrative:

1. It portrays experience concretely, in rich detail.
2. It connects feelings to events.
3. It balances positive and negative emotion, even as it describes difficulties.
4. It provides insight and reflection.
5. It relates a full and comprehensible story.

Students are sometimes alarmed by the prospect of writing about themselves and their deepest feelings, but usually—gradually—they come around.

So how does all of this relate to the points Donna Nickitas made in the first article? I’ll leave you with this quote from DeSalvo (2000):

I believe, fundamentally, that writing is about cultivating and practicing autonomy. It is the way healing begins, especially if, in the past, our autonomy has been seriously compromised or even stolen from us. . . . Choosing—or rather, finding—our own subject, one that is personally, deeply significant, then, is the first step of the process (p 51).

Now that, I believe, is an idea nurses can take to heart.

## References

DeSalvo L (2000) Writing as a way of healing: How telling our stories transforms our lives. Beacon Press, Boston.

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