

Journal for the 21st Century:

Personal Growth through Storying

by

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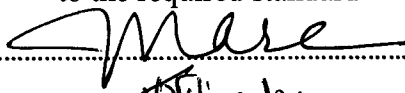

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ABSTRACT

As I progress on my life journey there are several days when my inner turmoil rises from deep within and it must be dealt with. I began to write as a way of coping with some of the many issues that had been held within my mind. This paper looks at what literature has to say about the ways in which writing within a journal can lead towards personal growth. Also, the role a journal has in an individual's journey towards personal growth. I look at my journey in journal writing from a narrative inquiry perspective. I chose to write and review my stories, and uses of the journal on my journey towards personal growth. I wanted to calm the inner confusion that would often take a firm grasp during times of stress and anxiety. As I began down my path of graduate studies I kept a journal to help me cope with the many challenges that I would encounter. It is through looking at my personal experiences that I was able to find my holistic self. As an educator, and student, I believe it is best practice to integrate the medicine wheel teachings within all of my work. I looked at the importance of reconnecting myself to each aspect: physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. Journaling creates a space where a person can perform however they wish; and share, or not, as much as they want about themselves. Utilizing certain methods can help bring about deep personal change. One of the most encouraging practices of journal writing is that one can use it to suit their own personal needs. This paper looks at a small amount of writing techniques that were the most effective for my journal writing journey. Journal writing can become a close and personal ally as one works towards finding a connection to their whole self.

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With my sincerest gratitude. Thank you.

INTRODUCTION

The world is but a page to write on ~ Sita-Rani MacMillan (2009).

Look around you and stare into the vast world of stories. What is the story of why you sit here reading this page? What is your story? As I sit contemplating the world and reading many books on journal writing; I am hit with the idea that: *the world is but a page to write on*. How interesting it is, then, to look up at the sky and see words flying through the air. They tell us a story about the society we live in; each person's personal story. The world is our page and we are all authors of the stories we read, write, and narrate to others. My journey began last year when I worked as an Aboriginal support teacher and was able to hear and read students' personal stories. I saw that although each student had a story to tell they were unsure of whether to tell that story or keep it buried deep within themselves. This is where my journey into using journal writing as a means towards personal growth was launched.

I was a beginning teacher; new to secondary school, new to working full-time, and new to the area I had moved to for the job position. I felt truly blessed when I met the team I would be working with. They were real pioneers in the field of Aboriginal education. They were kind, passionate, aware, and present at all times. I knew I could not call this a job. This was my passion, and a new chapter in my autobiography. I knew very little about the local Indigenous culture but I was eager to learn and that would keep me in the student role once again. A role I believe, even as a teacher, I will always be placed within.

I learned how to dance, sing and drum to the local Indigenous songs. The students told me their stories through writing, art work and oral storytelling. I felt honoured to be privy to such intimate knowledge. Many students still listen to the traditional stories passed down from

generations before. Some of the students did not value school or see why it was a necessity. They were lost and struggling for identity in what must seem to them a hostile world. I hoped that the work I do can help people to move forward and reconnect, or connect, to who they are. I want to create an environment where students feel comfortable and confident to explore their heart, mind, and spirit through the use of written personal narratives. I felt one of the best ways to do so was to come from an Indigenous knowledge perspective: the medicine wheel teachings. That would most definitely speak to many of my students and encourage growth within each aspect of the teachings (emotional, spiritual, physical, mental). I wanted to look at how students can honour who they are, and not only in the academic/intellectual realm, but also the emotional, physical, and spiritual areas of personal growth. To that end, I worked with some students closely in small groups or in bi-weekly one-on-one sessions. It was during these more focused sessions that students would open up and tell me their stories. For me it felt clear that many of the students I was working with were interested in looking at what they wanted from life and who they were. Students were looking for resources to help them cope with their past and move forward. This is where my journey in journal writing began. Although some students were comfortable writing their stories, other students chose to keep their stories to themselves. One of my goals was to write and see if using the journal writing techniques I read could actually lead towards a reconnection to areas I felt were unbalanced. I believe my heart and mind were not in very close communication and if writing would enable me to reconnect the two so I could live in harmony.

In order for reconnection to occur I believe it is important to tell the stories that are within us. I do not know how many students have continued to write in their journals, or how they felt

on their writing journey, I do know the impact that writing my story has had for me. As I wrote/write about my dreams, aspirations, goals within the story of my life I felt/feel a sense of healing. I began to look at the world in a new light as I authored my own stories. I shared, and will share, with students how I have overcome my own mental, emotional, and spiritual obstacles through journal writing. As my graduate studies progressed it was a time of peaceful learning as I explored who I was and what I wanted for my future. I reconnected to a spiritual side of me that I thought was lost forever. I have felt plenty of personal growth in all aspects of the medicine wheel and as I continue to explore my own stories my journey only seems to become more joyful.

My research interests are very much connected with writing and the role writing plays in personal growth. I want to take my understandings of the medicine wheel as a best practice will aid in helping those who are journaling towards meaningful self-discovery.

My Questions

This paper will explore the following questions:

1. What does the literature have to say about the ways in which story narrative may have a therapeutic effect on people dealing with inner turmoil?
2. What is the role of the journal in an individual's journey towards personal growth?

Rationale

My purpose in undertaking this study is to further my understanding of the importance of authoring our personal stories. I want to build my understanding of what Wendy Bishop (1997) writes about so eloquently: [W]e need to understand the degree to which writing may be a

therapeutic process and to which teachers and administrators can or should undertake counselling roles (p.144).

I want to step away from the text and look at the author. I believe it would be beneficial to understand why a student chose to write about a certain story and to enter into dialogue with them. Overall, I perceive that as I continue on this path of looking at the therapeutic effects of writing, that I too, will begin a journey towards self discovery. I find it important to spend time discovering who we are and authoring our stories so we can find connections with others. My students spent most of their time thinking about relationships and I believe numerous people in this world do so as well. As I write this paper I want to better understand the process of journal writing as a means to reconnection to the self so I can provide students with another resource to help them continue on a positive track with their life journeys.

Theoretical Framework

Narrative inquiry, a methodology for studying lived experiences, frames this study (Clandinin 2006, p. 44). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) write:

[N]arrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience. It is collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in this same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that make up people's lives, both individual and social... narrative inquiry is stories lived and told (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p.20).

Clandinin (2006) writes that arguments for the development and use of narrative inquiry are inspired by a view of human experience in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives (p. 45). This notion of narrative inquiry is rooted in the work of Dewey (1936) that holds that people need to be understood not only as individuals but also in relation to their social context. Thus, narrative inquirers study the individual's experience in the world, an experience that is storied both in the living and telling and that can be studied by listening, observing, living alongside writing and interpreting texts (p. 46). In short, narrative inquiry gives us a research methodology for engaging in the study of peoples' experiences.

Another key part of narrative inquiry is looking at how the writer is working from a performative positioning. Storytelling is regarded not only as the spoken word, but also as a performance by the 'self' with a past. Thus, the storyteller involves, persuades, and moves an audience through language and gesture (Riessman, 2005, ¶ 17). For example, studying the performances of Indigenous storytellers can help the researcher understand the story and the tellers experience(s) more fully or holistically. Much like the Aboriginal medicine wheel: physical, spiritual, emotional and intellectual parts create balance. Narrative inquiry can create balanced research by looking at the performance as much as the written word. The emphasis is on identity as performed rather than prior to language, as dynamic rather than fixed, as cultural and historically located, as constructed in interaction with other people and institutional structures, as continuously remade, and as contradictory and situational (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). The performance provides the teller with flexibility and fluidity in the telling. That is, the performers may choose to act out different parts of their stories during the telling in different ways: giving particular emphasis to particular parts of the story.

As an Indigenous-outsider I was often seen as “white” and my students were shocked to hear I was part Cree. After that discovery the dynamics of our interactions changed for the better. Their performances were relaxed and trustful. They knew they were safe to “be” themselves.

RUMINATIONS ON THE LITERATURE

This section is divided into three parts: part one will explore journals and journaling; part two will discuss the importance of the medicine wheel teachings in creating a holistic approach to self-discovery; part three returns to journaling to discuss writing techniques and implementation. I chose to include my own experiences and anecdotes which I have interwoven into the literature review to further explain techniques and how they worked best from my writing exploration. I felt these stories would help the reader connect to my background knowledge and where my journaling journey was taking me.

Personal Growth through Journal Writing:

What is a Journal?

A journal is a journey, your journey, and it can take you wherever you want to go ~ Lois Guarino (1999, p. 1)

The practice of journal writing requires certain instruments which are available to everyone. All that is required is a writing utensil and something to write on. The journal types, styles and formats will probably change over time as the writer finds what fits their needs best (Baldwin, 2007). It is a private space, a place of one’s own, a journal can be anything and the only real criterion is that the writer must feel invited to write with it (Nelson, 2004). As the quote reads, it is a place of journey. Within, *Life's Companion: Journal writing as a spiritual practice*

Baldwin wrote: "*There comes a journey...* And there also comes the urge to write it down, to bear witness to our experience, to share our questions and the insights that come from questioning" (Baldwin, 2007, p.3).

I find that most people are natural born storytellers and we connect with one another through stories. The life journey is founded on storytelling but perhaps some stories are more difficult to share or the person is not ready to commit to telling the story. The poetic words of Christina Baldwin (2005) assert the importance of stories: "There are many tools we humans have developed for moulding and influencing our journey on the earth, many technologies and social experiments: story is the oldest and most consistent survivor of all these tools. Story is the mother of us all, for we become who we say we are" (p. 78).

The journal is a place where a person can clarify their goals, focus on their inner being, free themselves from inhibitions and release their creativity in a safe space (Adams, 1990; Guarino, 1999; Rainer, 2004; Solly & Lloyd, 1989). Everyone's path is different and that is why it is difficult to state exactly what a journal *is*. It *is* what the writer creates it to be, but unlike any other thing it is a place of self-discovery (Grason, 2005). As, Robert Yagelski (2009) said: "Writing is therefore not only an expression of the self as a being-in-the-world but also as an act of meaning-making that inherently involves other selves. In this regard, *the experience of writing is an experience of our being as inherently social; it is the experience of the interconnectedness of being*" (p.14). What is a journal? A journal is a space where one can write what their inner-being wants to release and, perhaps, begin to heal. It is a space where self-discovery, balance, interconnectedness, and fear can be discussed without concern of others.

Why Have a Journal?

Perhaps we wouldn't eat so much, or smoke, or drink so much if we were paying attention to ourselves. Perhaps we wouldn't talk so much if we were paying attention to each other ~

Christina Baldwin (2005, p. 35).

I chose this quote to represent this section because of the words “paying attention” which I read as “connecting” to ourselves and others. I believe it is imperative if one is working towards personal growth, the individual must listen and connect to who they are. Jacquelyn Wiersma (1992) had completed a study with regards as to how story can create transformation. Wiersma wrote about Karen, one of the participants, and her story of transformation: She began to see that she didn't really know herself apart from her 'role' stereotypes...I'm becoming aware that I have been very role oriented. And so, who am I, apart from all these roles? There must be somebody else in there. (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992, p. 201).

Through the journal process of expression and reflection writers can discover new solutions to problems, enter into, and appreciate, the process of their lives and find a balance using creative means (Rainer, 2004). In the beginning stages of my journal writing I was too intimidated by the words I had written, so there was very little reflection occurring within me; such as with Karen and her story. As my courage and confidence increased I was able to accept my life stories. Some of the stories I wrote a response to and finally began to move forward in an area I had spent years contemplating. The journal for the 21st Century: “is a practical psychological tool that enables you to express feelings without inhibition, recognize and alter self-defeating habits of mind, and come to know and accept that self which is you” (Rainer, 2004, p.3). Journal writing towards personal growth will greatly differ for each person; therefore,

this paper will remain quite general, but still provide a basic understanding of the importance of journal writing. As G. Lynn Nelson (2004) wrote: "I have not always been aware of the power of language. For a long time, through my teaching and my writing, I have been finding my way to the power of writing and being. And I still have far to go. But my students keep teaching me and my journal keeps showing my way" (p. xiii).

Similar to Wiersma's study participant, Karen and her transformation story, the result of new actions can provide a fresh way of understanding life-long stories. Rosenwald & Ochberg (1992) wrote: "Between telling her first and second stories, Karen exploded in veritable whirlwind of activity, apparently (and by her description) *impelled* into new behaviour by the vacuum left by moving her identification out of her first story: Karen realized that not only her story but also her life was unsatisfying" (p. 202). Stories encourage the writers to look at life and create connections. As Christina Baldwin (2005) wrote: "Story shifts us into connection when only moments earlier we felt isolated" (p. 35). When a person can sit and write down their thoughts and feelings they are free to breathe.

Most importantly, the idea of storytelling allows a sense of completion for the writer. As I wrote my journal my mind began to release stories that kept me from believing that I was able to accomplish a graduate degree, or maintain a healthy, loving, and caring relationship with myself and others. I felt similar to what Wiersma (1992) wrote about the study participant Karen, "...it seems significant that *telling the story* gave her an opportunity to act and *through the story form* she began reintroducing lost pieces of her personal history to her current life. Story led to action, which led to a new story, which in turn...led to further action, ad infinitum, in an ever-increasing concentric circles" (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992, p. 205). The circles that she discusses remind

me of how important it is to see why the medicine wheel, or sacred circle, is used as a best practice within my work. The interconnectedness of the spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and physical self work in balance with one another so that a person can move forward on a harmonious life journey. Our stories are often cyclical and are “ever-increasing” and as a writer on a personal growth journey it is important to maintain balance to work with the abundances of our stories.

Journal Implementation

Write fast, write everything, include everything, write from your feelings, write from your body, accept whatever comes ~ Tristine Rainer (2004, p. 19).

Often times as I read over the books, articles, papers and personal notes; I questioned myself before I began writing. I had re-read the above quote several times before I even began to write this section of my paper. I continued to think about how others may read this, what will they think? How will they pass judgement? Has this writing become *too* personal for an academic paper? Those questions paralleled my journal writing as I sat staring at blank pages of the newly purchased journal.

As someone begins to write in their journal it may take some time to be reminded that it is not a place to worry about mundane things, such as, what one may have learned in English class throughout their educational careers (Baldwin, 2007; Nelson, 2004; Rainer, 2004). Nelson (2004) writes: You will want to share your words because you will have something to say, something worth sharing – gifts from the heart.

But, until that point, until something wants to work its way out and into public writing, there are no rules or standards. Any serious attention to them earlier in the process will only distract the writer from much more important concerns (p. 4).

The act of personal growth is, of course, personal, and directed by a person's inner guidance. It can become a very spiritual act which will be discussed in the "Using the Teachings" section. It is important to remember that as one writes their story, the journal will form the way it is meant to. The journal is a story companion and the format will evolve, the writing utensils will change, the people who are involved will leave and/or return as life continues (Baldwin, 2007). When utilizing the journal for self-discovery the writing style will continue to transform according to the direction of where the writer is headed. Baldwin (2007) writes: "All the journal requires is the most basic writing ability and the desire to articulate the journey. Whether you've been keeping a journal for years or are just planning to start, the gift of the journal is that we will write just as we are" (p.23).

A journal can be implemented in several ways depending on the needs of the people involved. Journal writing is popular with many professionals, to name a few: nurse educators, teachers in the classroom, and therapists. One nurse educator had the students write a dialogue journal where the students could reflect on what they were learning and write "themselves into understanding" (Heinrich, 1992, p. 17). Another educator, in Adult Education, believed that this writing tool helped his students in personal growth, synthesis, and reflection on newly learned information in order to obtain maximum amount of knowledge and personal growth in their learning (Hiemstra, 2001, p. 20). Reflection can play a key role with improving the understanding of what the writer has released into their journal: As Hiemstra (2001) noted: "I

also urge my students to incorporate such self-reflection through a journaling technique into the development of a personal statement of philosophy or a code of personal ethics” (p. 20). The personal statement of philosophy or a code of personal ethics can continue to reinforce who the writer is and what they want to accomplish with their life. The reflection can help to install a sense of mental order which in turn can provide relief (Baldwin, 2005; Rainer, 2004).

Heinrich (1992) provided her students with guidelines: be ritualistic and be creative. She developed the journal technique as one of the electives in her courses in order to meet all of the learning styles of her students. Some students required more structure and wrote about the assignments, and responded to them while others incorporated visuals and their stories (Heinrich, 1992). I could see this style of response to be inclusive since the outline of the writing assignment can be either structured, or open, for student interpretation. As I worked with my students I would offer writing ideas, such as: writing a list of 100 things they were grateful for; then allow them to creatively construct the passage. Heinrich (1992) implemented the journal in specific ways to reflect what she wanted the students to achieve within their writing: “When queried about how lengthy journal assignments should be, the 'qualitative' response is that better entries have specific details and examples, are more sustained, and have 'plenty of voice' meaning the entry reflects the writer's individual style and patterns of thinking” (p. 18).

Those in the therapeutic fields may have very different ways of implementing the journal because of the diverse needs of those they work with. Often patients seek professional therapeutic assistance when they have personal negative issues they want to work with. Writing can play an instrumental role in helping patients deal with trauma or other issues. Chris van der Merwe & Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela (2007) wrote: “In dealing with trauma, writers can,

vicariously, express what other trauma victims find impossible to tell” (p.58). The writing process in itself can be healing, or even, reading the writing of another victim of trauma may help a patient find relief in their life if they find a connection to what has been written. Lacher, Nichols and May (2005) write:

Language utilizes and links many areas of the brain (Cozolino 2002). Because new experiences can change the brain, early negative experiences can be repaired. Growth and healing are possible. Narratives or stories may be used to reorganize the brain. Trauma narratives can be used to help a child recover from past abuse, neglect, and loss. The telling of the child's life story facilitates a reprocessing of the events and decreases distressing emotions connected to the events. (p. 81)

The *telling* of story can have a tremendous effect on a young person's life since it may provide an opportunity to reflect and reprocess emotions that are connected to life events.

Summary

...for writing is indeed a powerful tool for communication; it is technology that extends the communicative capabilities of language ~ Robert P. Yagelski (2009, p. 23).

The stories, the writing, the journals can all play a grand role in moving forward in the quest of personal growth. At first it may be difficult to understand the words written, or the ideas that come forth, but as a person continues on their path the answers may come forth. It is a deeply personal journey where the writer can become fully immersed in playing with words, language, and ideas that they may never have connected with before. A journal is a place where the writer can explore what has been kept hidden deep inside, or expand ideas that they feared prior to beginning this writing process. Journal writing can be used by anyone with basic writing

skills and the aptitude to explore their words. Journeying with journals provides an outlet to work through problems, connect with the self and/or others, discover self, and recover from grief, amongst so much else. It can be used in a variety of fields with the guidelines, outlines, expectations, and writing techniques constantly shifting to meet the personal needs of the course, patients, teachers, children, and writers.

A Balanced Life: Medicine wheel teachings

The circle is a sacred symbol of life...Individual parts within the circle connect with every other; and what happens to one, or what one part does, affects all within the circle. ~ Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve (cited in Brentro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990, p. 46).

I chose to include the teachings of the medicine wheel because of its holistic and cyclical teachings it provides. The teachings are often represented within a circle, which means that there is no beginning or end. The circle connects the physical, intellectual, spiritual, and emotional aspects with each other with the self always in the centre. With such teachings I believe it to be best practice to include in this type of research and writing development. In order to create a balanced and harmonious life each area should have attention paid to it. As I wrote in my journal I realized that my emotional and spiritual self had little tending to and I knew that was going to be a focus on my journey through storying. Over the many years of schooling the physical and intellectual had often taken presidency, but I had never felt fully present or at peace with my decisions. I knew there had to be a change. As I contemplated my life choices I knew I had to return to the teachings of the sacred circle. I had to spend time in the quiet and begin my writing with a better understanding of where I saw myself in each of the areas: intellectual, physical,

emotional, and spiritual. I knew that this time I would concentrate my efforts in the two areas I lacked. My emotional and spiritual beings were going to become reawakened all thanks to writing my stories. This Indigenous knowledge, although not used by all Indigenous peoples, has contributed greatly within my writing due to the ability to see how I am interconnected with the world and to each person I interact with.

What is the Medicine Wheel?

(See Figure 1.1)

The Medicine Wheel plays a strong role in my life and teaching beliefs. It is a never ending circle which represents the four directions, relations, seasons, and interrelatedness of the physical (body and behaviour/action), intellectual, spiritual (metaphysical values and beliefs and the Creator), and emotional (Archibald, 2008). It is very common for most Aboriginal communities to include the Medicine Wheel, or Sacred Circle, within their teachings, but it is also important to note that not every Aboriginal group use/believe in these teachings. The teachings focus on the inside and then work outward. Within the middle of the circle is the “self” and then the circles expand into four levels: mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical (Pewewardy, 1999, p. 29). It provides a very balanced method of looking after the “self” and the beings that surround us; such as family, community, and the physical world.

The circle shows a holism and the idea of being complete. As one strives towards personal growth I believe they are looking to feel a sense of wholeness. Archibald (2008) wrote:

The image of the circle is used by many First Nations peoples to symbolize wholeness, completeness, and ultimately wellness. The never-ending circle also forms concentric circles to show both the synergistic influence of and our

responsibility toward the generations of ancestors, the generations of today, and the generations yet to come (p. 11).

The writing of Dr. Jo-Ann Archibald explains why I have chosen to include the teachings and how they can benefit writers who are working towards personal growth. We as journal writers have the responsibility to continue on journey of growth because it is up to us to show the way for those who have yet to find their way. The teachings explain how a person must be accountable for their actions and the affects those choices have on the surrounding world.

Writers telling their stories can help remind us of the traditional teachings and: “make our hearts, minds, bodies, and spirits work together” (Archibald, 2008, p. 12). The Sacred Circle is also a symbol system for interpreting healing and illness (Regnier, 1994, p. 135). When on a journey towards personal growth I believe a type of healing is often felt. Perhaps not for everyone, but I certainly have healed along the path with my writing. Regnier (1994) continued to write: “Healing is the transition that restores the person, community, and nation to wholeness, connectedness, and balance” (p. 135).

Using the Teachings

When we lose a part of ourselves, we lose balance and harmony, and we may feel like Coyote with the mismatched eyes ~ Archibald (2008, p. 12)

As I wrote I discovered pieces of me that I thought were lost forever. As I wrote I reflected on the Sacred Circle and watched as the gap between the emotional and spiritual began to reconnect. The Medicine Wheel teachings provide people with a way to self-reflect and direct

where they want to go next. The teachings encompass a holistic integration of humans and the all beings, processes and creations (Walker, 2001). I believe as humans we want to be able to connect with other beings. We look for relationships with others and with ourselves. It is through telling our stories through the written narratives that we are able to bring together the gaps of the circle. Without the spiritual growth or emotional knowledge I have gained I am not sure if I would have been able to be as successful with my students or with my own education at the academic institution. Emotion is a part of writing and to talk about writing apart from the people who do it takes away the magic (Nelson, 2004). This quote stood out as I read through the literature:

Too often in school, we study language and writing in isolation, apart from the people who speak and write and apart from what happens when people speak and write – apart from our being...Such isolated language has no heart. Its true purposes and its real vale are no longer there. It cannot fly nor sing.

To talk about writing apart from the people who do it, apart from their being, is to put writing in a small box and remove the wonder and the magic and the power from it (Nelson, 2004, p. xii).

Naturally, people who write want to include their magic and power within the words. When I write in my journal I think about the magic of the words. I want to wonder about how the words linked together as they did. The true purpose of my writing tends to come from a more spiritual aspect. The traditional Indigenous teachings keep me focused on fulfilling my being as I write. My self-discovery continues to develop all four directions. My spiritual is filled with other beings who tell me their journaling life stories. I feel privileged to hear the wonders and see them

look off into the distance as they are reminded of their first loves and heartbreaks. In the words of Cornel Pewewardy (1999): "The Medicine Wheel teaches us that we have four aspects to our nature; the physical, the mental, the emotional, and spiritual. Each of these aspects must be equally developed in a healthy, well-balanced individual through the development and use of volition" (p. 31). Yes, this is why I favour the use of writing as a means to create balance in one's life.

Summary

The Medicine Wheel offers one way of looking at the world with a balanced perspective. It is through the use of these traditional Aboriginal teachings I work with my students in journal writing for personal growth. The Sacred Circle allows the person to look at four aspects of the self: physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual. Fulfilling each of these areas creates a sense of holism and balance for an individual. As I wrote in my journal my emotional and spiritual gaps began to close. Balance and closing the gaps have begun to take shape in all aspects of my life. Writing can bring about a sense of interconnectedness because writers can reflect on what was written and include others on their journey.

Best Practices for Journeying with Journaling

When you intend to write about something in your journal, don't talk about it first. Talking dissipates the creative tension. Over and over again, journal writers notice that if they talk out a topic, when they finish the conversation and open their journals, the drive to write is gone ~
Christina Baldwin (2007, p. 27).

I want to preface this section by stating: this is only a small snapshot of best practices. They have been chosen because I attempted these tools/techniques while on my own journey and wanted to speak personally to each one for the connection concepts that I spoke about.

Lists for Personal Growth

Everyone makes lists. List making is such a common human activity that perhaps it is not often recognized as writing ~ Richard Solly & Roseann Lloyd (1989, p. 63).

Why make lists? Why do people create lists? There are a number of answers for such questions. In this section the literature explores some significant lists for writers on their journey towards personal growth. While listening to my intuition I sat down across from a student and said, "Let's create a list of one hundred things we want to accomplish in the next five years." We wrote in silence for thirty minutes and then shared with each other some of the items we felt comfortable with. It was encouraging to see how similar we really were as people wanting the best for ourselves. Writers tend to use lists for a variety of reasons and all lists are a process of self-discovery (Adams, 1990; Rainer, 2004; Solly & Lloyd, 1989).

In the literature by Kathleen Adams (1990) she has included one hundred things to write a list of one hundred about. Solly & Lloyd (1989) wrote about such lists as: Emergency Lists, Lists for Self-Discovery, Pleasure Lists, Lists for Understanding New Concepts, Lists that Work Over Time, and so forth. Creating lists is an effective start because it lets the writer look at what they feel is important to talk about, reflect on, and speak to within their journal. Rainer (2004) wrote, "A list will help you focus, tame, and comprehend way-ward parts of your experience. A list you particularly like may lead to further creative work" (p. 65). After a student and I had created our

gratitude lists we were able to have an open dialogue about the next steps of what we wanted to achieve. We had turned our lists into visual scrapbooks which continued to remind us of what we were striving for in each aspect of the medicine wheel teachings.

The Written Dialogue

One of the greatest powers of journal writing is that over time it helps us notice, influence, and change the dialogue the mind is having with itself. This conversation is nearly constant ~
Christina Baldwin (2007, p. 29).

This quote inspired me to write and include another voice. It was a voice I often did not let through my writing because it was the voice of: fear. I tried to delete fear from most of my conversations with others and myself. I felt that if I acknowledged fear I would give it power; instead it was taking over in different ways and shining through whether I acknowledged it or not. Baldwin (2007) noted: "The purpose of dialogue is to retrieve information and insight about a situation that we may not know we have" (p. 31). Writing in the form of dialogue can facilitate a writer in discovering a new voice or playing with two, or more, voices that may be inside their minds. It can help the writer deal with a situation that they feel confused about or want to explore further but include different point of views (Rainer, 2004).

As with any type of writing it can be difficult to begin writing. That writing utensil must touch the writing surface, but is easier said than done. As I sat staring at the blank, lined, journal page I knew I had to begin somewhere. I wrote the first word that came to mind: *Universe*. I did not lift my pen again until I felt our dialogue had ended naturally. I felt more at peace at the end of the page than I did when I had let those thoughts roam free in my mind. Baldwin (2007)

noted: "In journal dialogues, one part of the mind asks a question, and another part of the mind responds. Dialogue requires that you trust yourself to play both roles, to write in multiple voices" (p. 29).

It can be useful to write out imaginary conversations with people even if the writer may not feel comfortable speaking with them in their lives (Rainer, 2004). At times it may not be beneficial, or possible, to speak to someone in person, but to carry on a written conversation may help to have closure with an event. For example, in my writing I was sitting on a public bus many years ago and I was just taking off my headphones. An older man commented that he thought my music was obnoxiously loud. At that stage of my life I was too shy to retort, but I have carried what I would have said to him in my mind every day since then. I determined that he would be an ideal candidate for my first imaginary conversation. After I had written that dialogue entry my mind was at ease. I finally managed to have the conversation I had wanted to have for the past decade. Tristine Rainer (2004) points out: "By conversing with past events or with events as they occur you can come to understand the unseen meaning beneath their apparent meaning in your life" (p. 98).

Go with the Flow/Free-Intuitive Writing

Flow writing is practice in stream of consciousness, learning to trust that no matter where you start, words will come to you ~ Christina Baldwin (2007, p. 27).

As the title declares, this type of writing has a type of freedom associated with it, or not depending on what type of a writer the person is. Writing with feeling can encourage the flow of the written words to be released. Nelson (2004) writes: "So we must begin with our feelings. Feelings are where our words become flesh; they are the grounding of our writing and being. Our

words must then, be born in our hearts and find their way out to our heads” (p. 22). Free our feelings! When I finally touched the pen to paper – I could not stop. I was timing myself writing for ten minutes. I thought I would be at a loss for words and ideas, but the feelings flowed out of me like a river running over a high cliff. The language supported me and I did not need to know what I was going to write before I opened the journal (Baldwin, 2007).

The words by Christina Baldwin (2005) stood out as I continued my writing journey: “Life is all story, and it's our story, so we might as well empower ourselves to see that it serves us well” (p. 126). Free-intuitive writing provides the writer with a story that they may not have thought was important, but managed to escape into their works by not having the chance to stop and ponder at a great length. Rainer (2004) says: “Free association is the classical psychoanalytic method of discovering the underlying meaning...” (p. 167). This type of journal writing technique allows the subconscious and unconscious minds to empty before the writer so that they are able to look at what could have been long forgotten, overlooked, and what can be discarded (Adams, 1990, p. 138).

This tool requires a place where the writer cannot be disturbed. It is a very intimate process where hidden thoughts can shine through. I am forever grateful for learning this writing tool. Solly & Lloyd (1989) write: “If you actually record what this inner voice says verbatim you'll discover that this voice has a way of being correct and natural on paper even though it may violate standard grammatical errors. That voice may be called your personal writing style” (p. 20). It is not a writing tool to encourage proper usage of the English rhetoric, but instead the natural way one may write with, or without, those structures. Whenever I begin to procrastinate I pull out my journal and flow write. Right after I can often begin the task I was having difficulty

connecting to. In the words of G. Lynn Nelson (2004): “Human consciousness is a great and wondrous thing. We do not know where it ends” (p. 30).

The Unsent Letter

Using the unsent letter technique can help make conscious such 'thinking to' or 'writing to' another person ~ Tristine Rainer (2004, p. 85)

This writing tool is capable in helping the writer explore contact with a person they may not be able to anymore or cannot emotionally. Rainer (2004) writes: “It can be an exploration of whatever a particular person evokes when you think *to* them” (p. 84). The purpose of letter writing can be a part of the list making in the beginning. There can be several reasons why a person wants to write an unsent letter, but Baldwin (2007) notes: “The purpose of the unsent letter is to discover what impetus motivated it – which you may not know at the beginning – and decide what you need to do next, having discovered that impetus” (p.33). This style advances expressing deep set emotions and can provide clarity for the writer (Adams, 1990). I wrote several letters in my journals over the years. Some were addressed to me and others addressed to those who I had negative thoughts towards. I even wrote one letter to an ex-boyfriend; which I later sent. We remain friends and he appreciated the letter, but chose not to respond to it. The letter included several feelings and thoughts I had, but did not adequately express during our time together. Words play such a powerful role and I wanted them to be read. Our words only continued to grow stronger and deeper with one another after the letter.

Similar to the previous writing techniques there are quite a few benefits to using this technique. Hiemstra (2001) wrote: “Learning to trust that inner voice and interpret new thoughts or even dreams can increase self-confidence...” (p. 24). It is putting those words that one has

wanted to say for so long and writing it to the person that has taken up so much mental energy. It is learning to trust that inner voice, as Hiemstra wrote, and continue towards personal growth and development. The letters can come in many forms such as angry letters to deal with resentment (Solly & Lloyd, 1989). It is similar to the dialogue writing since this tool also has a focus to write *to* a person directly. The letters may or may not be sent, but it is wise to think that it will be unsent at first so the real words and feelings will come through. If afterwards the writer has reflected on the writing and feels it appropriate, the letter might be sent out, and can lead to even further discussion and possible personal growth.

Summary

There are several tools that can be employed when one begins their personal journey with journaling. As previously stated, these writing techniques are just the tip of the iceberg, and only the beginning of discussion of how they can be used. I am merely one person with personal objectives, beliefs, and writing techniques that worked best for me. Writing: lists, dialogues, flow writing, and unsent letters, were the techniques I connected with the most. Lists surround us everywhere and most people write them on a daily basis. They help to maintain focus on what they want. Dialogues occur every second of the day whether or not we write them down, but writing them down can bring about clarity regarding a situation that may not have been previously explored. Flow writing allows the intuitive nature of being to come forth, and the writer can acknowledge parts of their thoughts that may have been repressed. Unsent letters play a similar role to dialogue writing, but the letters provide a further focus on communicating with someone who may still be living, or passed on, and the words/feelings may still be spoken. Even if the letters are sent it may help the writer in furthering their self-discovery. Each tool only

provides a cornerstone for the journal writing process. Naturally, each writer will tailor the techniques to fit their needs; since, in the end it is all about the writer.

CONNECTIONS

At the start of this journey my question was: How can I work with writing to encourage my students to move forward? At the root of my question was the notion of writing as an instrument for healing personal inflictions that would lead to students feeling confident about being in school. As I advanced in my research and writing I thought about the tools I was reading and how effective each might be for me. I knew with the influence of the Indigenous teachings that my work was going to benefit me in a way that I would be able to become balanced. If I could honour, respect, and voice the aspects of myself that I had long abandoned, I would become a true benefit to my colleagues, students, and community. If I could heal and discover parts of myself that I had forgotten about I would be a more present and whole person for those I work with. As my journey through graduate school progressed, I began to realize that my personal growth was moving forward intellectually, but my emotional/spiritual growth was lagging far behind. I began to grow uncertain as to whether a graduate degree was meeting my needs. These uncertainties, and the ensuing confusion, were pulling me towards dropping my program. To counteract the feelings of uncertainty I began writing. I wrote feverishly. I wrote as if I had just learned what writing was, and if I did not write now it would be lost to me forever. I danced. I sang. I wrote. A new spirit had been awakened inside me. The fire for learning that had become embers was sparked anew and my joy returned. Yes, I am a writer. I want to devote my time and days to reading and writing. I want to teach these techniques to others. My love of

writing, and sharing my emotional awakening with young people, has encouraged me to continue on this path.

This section of my paper will be my journey. I offer it as an example of one journey and one story. Let us begin the journey with my personal journal entries. The ones I have chosen to include have all been written in the past few months. I started a fresh journal in January as I contemplated my thoughts, feelings, and ideas about the word: love. As I progressed I tried the journal writing techniques I had read about and examined in my literature review. Some of the tools were less intimidating than the others. The most daunting technique was the use of dialogue. I was not prepared to have a conversation with another voice inside of me. I kept looking at the blank page and then procrastinating. What was I going to say to myself? What if I had to actually listen to the other voice?

Here is the entry I finally wrote:

Dialogue w/Universe Day 46

February 20 2010

Universe: Ok, so I heard you wanted to ask me a question?

M: Yes, I did. I was reading, studying and writing and I wanted some clarification.

U: Well ask me again. I am listening.

M: What do you want me to do?

U: Be yourself. Sit in silence and write. Discover.

M: Sounds easier said than done to me. Why is life so complicated?

U: Because you make it complicated. You are complicated inside so it comes out.

M: How do I uncomplicate?

U: Be quiet. Be mindful. Listen to the world, listen to yourself and listen to others.

Listen.

M: But I hear so much. How do I know what to hold on to?

U: Intuition will help guide you.

M: I will listen more today.

U: Shhh...listen.

When I first began to write I did not know who I was going to write to. I did not know what I was going to say. I put my faith in the words and the pen to the paper. I spoke with the universe. I had not written to the universe before; but I felt we had accomplished a lot in our short dialogue together. I did feel an inner peace wash over me as I re-read the page. I spent the day being quiet and listening more than speaking. Life was changing as people began to tell me their stories of journal writing. I was in joy with their enjoying of reminiscing. This work spoke to my soul as I began to witness how I connected to not only myself, but to the nature, and the people I was listening to.

On another occasion I revisited dialogue writing because there was still a story that bothered me from years ago. The dialogue was with an elderly man who I sat near on a public transit bus. The man had commented that he thought it was my headphones that the loud music was coming from; but, in actuality it was the middle-aged man sitting behind me. I can still recall how embarrassed and insulted I was from the assumption he had made. I wrote about the discussion I wanted to have with him in my journal. After the dialogue the thoughts of the conversation seemed to vanish and that frustration had left. Slowly I have begun to dialogue to many people I had always wanted to have closure with. This is the journal entry:

Man: Geez, I thought that was her music I could hear.

Me: Oh, why is that? Because I am young and rude?

Man: Yeah, my experience is that kids these days don't care about others or blowing out their ear drums.

Me: Well that is a really closed way of looking at the world.

Man: It's the way it is.

Me: No, I disagree. It's the way YOU think it is. I do care about not annoying others or losing my hearing.

Man: Rare. Kids are rude.

Me: You are rude and an old man. So, I guess age is not the issue.

Man: Touché. Sorry young lady for my assumptions.

Me: Thank you.

The writing exercise let me say what I always wanted to say. I am grateful to have found that technique and I implement it on a regular basis. Now I recommend it to others who may face a similar dilemma and may want to explore dialogue. I felt I was paying deep respect to the sensitive, emotional, side of who I was. Over the years I had pushed many of my emotions deep within to be seen as someone who is in control of my composure at all times. Unfortunately, those emotions surfaced in other ways. I discovered my intellectual and physical being would not let me bury my emotions because it hurt my spirit too much. Through dialogue writing I can holistically honour myself and those I come into contact with.

Another journaling technique which I had not tried before was the Free-Intuitive writing. I found it to be intimidating because I was not sure what my 'plan' was. I set my timer and then

began by putting my pen on the paper. It sat there as I stared at the timer counting down for two minutes. I knew I was scared to read the thoughts that were in my mind. My intellect was trying to protect my emotional self, but the mask had to come off. It was time to deal with my words and the stories that formed. It was time to grow, and I did after such writing. Here is my journal entry:

Day 12

Write Off

Jan 17/10

10 minutes of timed writing.

An exercise I have taken from the book. I am reviewing for the course. What will I write about?

Healing.

Self Recovery.

Love.

I am often asked who do I want as a partner. What am I looking for?

Will I not get married already???

Nope.

Not interested at this time. I am fairly independent and finding love for myself first.

Plus, all I can focus on is having a home and doing my school work. Study and home. That is my love interest right now.

That is what I am committed to at this point. Myself, my finding a place to call home and a career I want. Something that runs deeper for me than going on what are empty dates.

I am not sure who I am so how can I step forward and find someone to be with?

Do I want creative?

Should I stick with my scientists?

Do I want romantic?

Or should I stay with realistic?

I am not sure how to answer those questions.

Can one be romantic, realistic, artistic and scientific?

Ah, maybe I want it all?

But, what do I have to offer at this point?

I am healing many years of selfless love.

Selfless? Is that the right word? I am not sure, but I will keep it. I like the way it sounds.

I miss Bell Hooks. I want to reread the book – that book she wrote

about love. I want to read it from cover to cover, like i had never read it before. I want to hug her.

I want to speak with her. I want to learn so much more.

This love and I are going so far. Much further than i ever thought I could/would/should.

It has always been a problem area for me.

Intriguing like a bat cave, but a place I dont want to spend much time in.

I have been in a bat cave. It was on my parent's property on Bocas del Toro in Panama.

We had a holy site on our property. People pilgirmmeged to it annually.

I walked through it with a \$1 flashlight and my baby brother wielding a rusted machete. It was for alligators he said...Should I trust my baby brother who is about 14 at the time to bring me through a huge bat

cave with a flashlight that probably wont turn on or off ever again...

Timer went off.

There was a sense of relief after the writing exercise was completed. I had previously ended a relationship with a man I dated eight years prior. I was questioning what romance was and/or what I felt I wanted while in a relationship. Since writing that entry I had reconnected to my thoughts and feelings on the topic. I can now better express my views of what I want and what I am looking for. Although, quite a personal topic I felt inspired to share this in my connections to practice because it was such a large change from where I was prior to journal writing. With an understanding of the Indigenous teachings of the medicine wheel I can feel the difference of working on living in a balanced way and attracting balanced relationships. I felt a sense of relief; and, soon afterwards I wrote a list of what I felt I wanted in a positive relationship. I had a sense of peace within, and I no longer felt as if I was drowning amongst a sea of question marks. My focus had led me to a wonderful person – a peaceful me.

Another useful tool I wrote about and enjoyed was list writing. I wrote a list about what I was grateful for. I was having a rough week but I wanted to see if writing what I was grateful for would alleviate some of the angst I was feeling at that time. I have left blank spaces in place of names for anonymity of those involved.

Jan 24 2010

Gratitude

Day 19

Today I am filled with gratitude.

What I am grateful for:

- * My _____ lending me her car so I could get groceries*
- * My _____ for taking out the trash and recycling without complaints.*
- * Speaking with _____ about careers*
- * Cuddling with my dog Ollie.*

- * Meeting _____ and his _____ at the park. Learning new things
- * Booking a hotel right at Niagara Falls so I can see them from my king sized bed.
- * Meeting my amazing friend _____ for chai lattes before Laughing yoga
- * Laughing with _____ and others for an hour
- * Receiving a positive email from _____
- * Packing my house/room
- * My writing.....

My list continued for another page, but for formatting reasons I chose to end it at that point. As I reflected on my list I realized how minor my ideas of angst actually were and the days continued in peace and little anxiety. Now when I feel a stressful situation beginning I retrieve my journal to write out what I am grateful for in the present moment. It has helped me to stay focused and understand that not everything is as difficult as I had first thought.

My last technique I share in my journal, at this point, is the unsent letter. I wrote a letter to an ex-boyfriend. I will share excerpts from the letter since it is quite lengthy:

29.10.09

I felt that the best way to communicate my thoughts would be in this way. I can let you know without being interrupted!

I wanted to write to you to explain, understand, and tell you a few thoughts I have not really shared with you. Or, maybe they were said and now I want to reiterate them....

This is it. All I wanted to say Which I never got to say in person to you. I don't want to say over the phone either...

Love, Sita

I wrote the letter to an ex-boyfriend because the relationship ended in an abrupt manner. We both knew it was ending, and we both felt it was the best choice; but there was still a sense of unfinished business to attend to. Since we did not live in the same area I knew that seeing him in person would be difficult. At the time, I was not even sure if I wanted to see him. As I wrote the letter it helped me move forward on my journey towards personal growth. I wrote everything I had wanted to say and kept repeating in my mind to him. I read the letter several times and then after a week I had decided it would be best for me to send it. Even though I never got a response my mind was at ease. I was able to move forward and we have been able to maintain a friendship.

As I wrote in my journal I developed my communication skills. I have been able to explain my feelings and thoughts with much more clarity than before my research literature review on journal writing. I have a new found respect, and appreciation, for the art of writing, and the healing that has come with my journaling tools. With writing I have reached a higher spiritual platform and reconnected with emotions I had previously repressed. My fear of living the life I have dreamed of has fallen to the wayside. I am proud of the work I do and I am devoted to teaching journal writing. It has helped me to become more confident and comfortable with myself. I feel that my journey towards personal growth will only continue to move upwards, with of course some detours, but overall writing has helped me immensely.

FINAL THOUGHTS

I find that this is only the very beginning of my looking at the benefits of journaling for personal growth. I still have many questions, but I believe the questions I asked in the start of the paper have been addressed: *What does the literature have to say about the ways in which story*

narrative may have a therapeutic effect on people dealing with inner turmoil?; And, What is the role of the journal in an individual's journey towards personal growth? There is quite a bit of literature stating the positive effects of story narratives for those dealing with trauma. It is a personal and intimate space where an individual can delve deeper within them and discover something new or work with something old. This type of work may be closely related to counselling it is best to do such work from a life coach/teaching perspective rather than a counselling role. If a teacher wants to implement such practices in the classroom then I believe there needs to be a counsellor present and/or willing to work closely with the teacher and their students. As I did my journal writing I knew that I had access to a counsellor if necessary, but as a teacher I worked closely with two counsellors who were always present and/or easy to contact.

The literature addresses several writing techniques for journaling and the gains a person can acquire while implementing them. Some techniques were new while others created quite a unique writing experience for me. With working from a narrative inquiry framework the stories of the person is of great importance. Understanding what one thinks, feels, and writes about plays a large role in daily life. I can begin to better understand who I am through writing down and reflecting on my thoughts, actions, and feelings. Stories and their meanings begin to deepen as a connection between the written word and the person come together.

For best practice incorporating the Indigenous knowledge of the Medicine Wheel, or Sacred Circle, is best since it helped me to explain the importance of connecting to all aspects of the self. Quite often the spiritual and emotional parts of a person can become forgotten. The balance between the emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and physical looks at the person as balanced. I find that utilizing the self-narratives and reflecting on personal life stories help to

create a sense of holism. As I wrote I began to reconnect with each of the four directions in the traditional knowledge system of the medicine wheel, especially to my emotions and spirit. The journal captured the many walks I took and the new places I wander to. It captured my emotional side as I began, and ended a relationship and then rescued a middle-aged dog; or did he rescue me? I searched for who I was as I began my journey through graduate school. It was a challenging and very rewarding time over the past months as I read about the journaling process. I found new mentors and people I want to connect to and learn from. I am grateful for the people who have guided me in this direction. I have become re-inspired to follow this new writing path. It is a path I have forgotten my intense love for. I have reawakened to parts of me I had long forgotten. Within my journal I "babbled and doodled" as highly recommended by Professor Dr. Carl Leggo. To babble is to write everything that appeals to the ears and doodle is everything that appeals to the eyes (Leggo, class discussion, March 3 2010). It was through the babbling and doodling that my personal growth began to take effect. My journal writing has only begun. The work and research I believe is still in its primary stages. I look forward to continuing a life-long journey on this path; or becoming open to new possibilities that are presented to me. I am not sure if it will ever be concluded, but I am quite happy to know that writing will always be a part of me.

Figures

1.1: Medicine Wheel

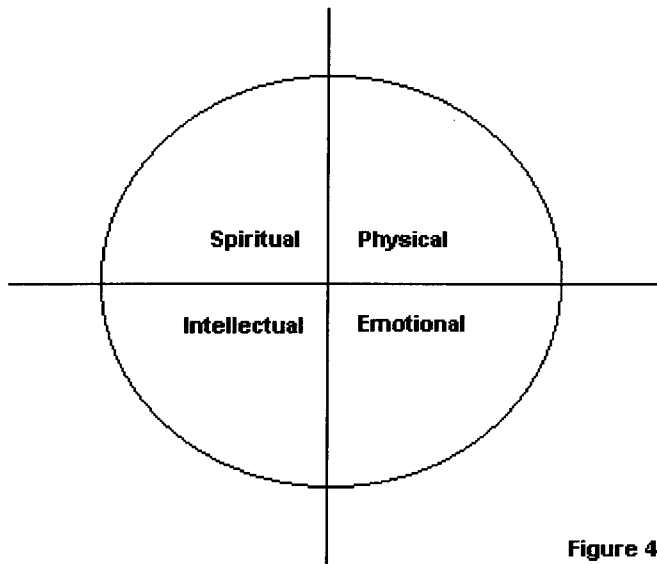


Figure 4.

From *The Vanier Institute of the Family*, Native American Medicine Wheel:

<http://www.vifamily.ca/library/cft/aboriginal.html>

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