

Witnessing and Self-Nurturing in Memoir Writing

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In her books *Drama of the Gifted Child*, *For Your Own Good*, and *The Truth Will Set You Free*, Alice Miller, a German psychiatrist, writes about the prevalence of child abuse, and how the wounds of child abuse affect people in adulthood. She believes that for victims to heal, the secret, shameful stories of childhood must be revealed and expressed to a compassionate, enlightened witness.

Miller believes that if another person becomes aware of the unfortunate situation we are in, and we are witnessed with compassion by that person, we don't become trapped in the darkness of it. She writes about the helping witnesses that many of us were lucky to encounter as children—an aunt, uncle, grandparent, or teacher: “A *helping witness* is a person who stands by an abused child . . . offering support and acting as a balance against the cruelty otherwise dominant in the child's everyday life.”

As adults, telling our stories to a therapist or spiritual teacher helps us to heal. That person becomes an “enlightened witness,” someone trained to fully understand the story. The enlightened witness sees us as the whole, beautiful being that we are. Miller says, “Therapists can qualify as enlightened witnesses, as can well-informed and open-minded teachers, lawyers, counselors, and writers.”

Witnessing Ourselves through Story Writing

Writing stories and sharing them in a group has been a powerful healing experience for all the students in my groups. People heal at different rates, often through surprising and seemingly ordinary happenings, but story writing often works quickly by turning us into our own compassionate witnesses as the story unfolds.

This witness is the narrator “I” as it tells the story of the “character,” a younger version of who we are now. The narrative line is the invisible thread that weaves through your story, connecting its themes and sections. The narrator “I” comments and connects the elements of your story, while also being the main character in it. This dual consciousness is integrative and healing, and unique to memoir writing.

Often we feel we need forgiveness for what happened to us as children. Even as adults, many of us feel that we deserved the abuse we received, or that decisions others made were our own fault. Unfortunately, children take on the responsibility of the adults when they don’t understand what is happening to them. They think that the anger of the adults is their fault, or that the reason their parents got a divorce is their fault because they were bad.

Your book may have different sections and separate narrative lines that together tell the whole story. It might contain:

- The story of your adult life and how it was shaped by childhood.

- Your childhood story, which could exist in separate chapters.
- An adult voice, looking back with wisdom on the events of childhood and the influence they had on your development.

When you write your life story, you are at once a witness to it and its narrator and author. When you write the true story of your life, you witness what happened, and take a position about your thoughts and feelings as you put the past in perspective.

Story as Witness

Pennebaker's studies complement what Alice Miller has been saying for years—that emotional wounds are carried in the body and need to be released through talking, writing, and expressing emotions. This release helps us integrate our experiences and frees us from self-destructive repetitive cycles.

How to shape the story of your life, and how much to put on paper about other family members should you decide to publish your memoir, are discussed later in this book. Your first focus should be on the memories you need to write about for your own healing, stories that witness your feelings and experiences and explore how you were molded into who you are, with all your strengths and weaknesses.

We are a part of all that has happened to us, and it is all a part of us. Our task as memoir writers is to come to terms with the negative experiences in our lives and balance them with the life-enhancing, happy, and joyous events that were also a part of

our pasts

Many Voices, Many Witnesses

There are various ways to witness ourselves and the stories of our lives. All kinds of artistic self-expression are powerful methods, including painting, gardening, and writing poetry. I learned another method of witnessing and being witnessed through Speaking Circles[®], a program created by Lee Glickstein.

In his book *Be Heard Now*, Glickstein talks about how the support of a positive group of people changes lives and provides a healing environment:

When people give us complete positive attention, we can let ourselves feel the old fears and know that nobody will criticize, interrupt, or psychoanalyze us. No one will take over the conversation . . . no one will imply that there's something wrong with anyone. We are honored for whatever we say, or don't say. It's our time and our space in which to be completely appreciated. That is the healing.

In this creative and alive listening environment, the deeper self is heard and received by the group. The stories are “listened out” of each group member in an environment of complete acceptance and unconditional positive regard. I found this to be a powerful and inspiring experience that helped me with my writing.

When we have not been received in this way, we feel inadequate and empty. We feel that there isn't enough of ourselves to support our own healing work, and this causes despair. We need to learn how to listen to ourselves as we are listened to by a

good friend, a therapist, a minister. As writers, we need to learn how to receive ourselves fully and unconditionally within our own skins.

Doreen Hamilton, director of training for Speaking Circles International and a colleague of Lee Glickstein and mine, offers programs that teach people how to create a positive listening environment and move into transformation.

If you have been abused or if memories haunt you, consider therapy along with writing about your past. If you become upset or overwhelmed, be sure to seek the support of friends and colleagues, as well as professional helpers. It is important to feel secure and safe when telling personal stories and to alternate painful stories with those about happy, positive memories. Creating a balance makes it possible for us to keep writing and not become overwhelmed when trying to write a complex story. The therapist holds the position of enlightened witness and compassionate listener. Often we need that objective person to listen the story out of us, to help us understand and reframe what we believe and how we hold our stories.

As we grew up, many of us felt out of control and unable to create the kind of peace and balance we wanted in our lives. It is important for you to understand how your family's dynamics apply to you, so you can make new choices to free your voice and tell your story. That is the process and purpose of focuses therapy work.

Hopefully you were blessed to have compassionate witnesses during your childhood who really saw you and noticed who you were, even if they could do little actively to help. For some children that witness was a pet, often their only friend. As an

adult, you can cultivate compassionate witnesses among your friends, relatives, and colleagues, or you can choose to work with professionals who play that role.

Sometimes, a sense of being witnessed, accepted, and embraced can come from quite an unexpected source, as the following story suggests.

An Accidental Witness

I am a part of all I have met.—Alfred Lord Tennyson

I still remember the moment when I first heard that line by Tennyson. I was sitting in my high school journalism class listening to Miss Scott philosophize. She sat at the big wooden desk in the front of the room. She wore cotton dresses over a generous yet contained figure, and she had Betty Davis eyes that seemed to see everything. Officially, she taught journalism, but I remember being inspired by all that she brought to the classroom.

At that time in my life, I was barely making it. A good friend had recently committed suicide, and my grandmother had changed from a kind caretaker into a screaming monster. I realized that the only way to survive was to get out of high school and out of town, but I often wondered if I would be able to escape. My despair came from watching the grandmother who had once rescued me, the grandmother who used to call me Sugar Pie and stroke my hair, turn into someone I didn't recognize. I had many secrets because one didn't "air the family's dirty laundry."

That spring afternoon in journalism class, the windows were open and the air smelled sweet and hopeful. I looked out at the fresh greening trees and the blue sky.

Then I heard Miss Scott: “I am a part of all I have met.”

The world stopped. I raised my hand and asked Miss Scott to repeat what she had said. She spoke the phrase again, and as she did, something shifted inside me. The usual tight knot in my stomach loosened and a sense of well-being came over me. Everything that had happened in my life—my mother’s leaving me, my grandmother’s going crazy, my friend dying—all of it knitted together into a fabric of meaning. Everything that had been painful and confusing was simply a part of my life. I could receive it in a new way. I was a part of everything, and it all was a part of me.

I realized that day that literature was about the exploration of the deep truths that underlie everyday reality. Miss Scott did not know what was wrong in my life, but it seemed as if she had witnessed me. Or was it Tennyson? My teacher, and literature, gave me something to hold onto.

Writing Invitations

1. Write about a witness who saw the *real* you when you were a child. Who was this person or animal? What was your relationship with him or her?
2. How did you know this person saw you? How did you feel about being witnessed?
3. Think about a compassionate witness who observed you well, who seemed to see and understand you. Tell the story of how you first met this person, how you felt about him or her, and when you realized that this person was paying special attention to

you or witnessing you.

4. Write stories about your witnesses. What positive aspects exist in your life thanks to those who witnessed you?

5. Select two nurturing and fun activities that you plan to do in the next two weeks.

6. Write about childhood nurturing you received, from people, pets, food, games, books, etc.

7. What activities made you feel comforted and secure when you were a child? What smells, sounds, and sights were soothing and nourishing?

8. How do you define listening?

9. How do you know you are being listened to? What people have listened well to you in your life?