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- Practical advice for transforming private journal writing into public, published writing

With inspiring stories of personal transformation through journaling, J. Lynn Nelson shows how writing can heal the past, claim the present, and chart the future.

"When I finished the last chapter, I wanted to read more, to hear more stories, to witness more ‘speaking from the heart’"
—C. Jane Hydrick, president, National Council of Teachers of English

"A beautiful letter to all of us who are on this journey of life. Lynn Nelson shares so much of himself, as well as the joys and fears of his students, as he guides us through the deep waters of coming to know ourselves more deeply through writing."
—Georgia Heard, poet and author of Awakening the Heart and For the Good of the Earth and Sun

"Writing and Being helps you deepen your relationship to writing, transforming your journal into a source of guidance and wisdom. Lynn Nelson helps you translate your feelings into polished, literary treasures. The result is words that not only heal old wounds, but bring comfort and joy to others."
—Naomi Epel, author of Writers Dreaming and The Observation Deck: A Tool Kit for Writers

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Valuing Empty Spaces

Just as music depends for its meaning upon the empty spaces between the notes, our words must have silence around them or they, too, lose their meaning. If I do not seek quietness around me, I cannot hear the words that my heart whispers. And if I do not seek silence within, I will never know the power of my words as instruments of creation. But it is hard to find silence out there these days—and even harder to find the silence within.

Recently, I gave my class a writing-and-being Exploration. The assignment was simply to select a quiet place and “be with the sunset.” The
challenge was to sit quietly with their journals nearby and just breathe and be with the sun as it disappeared behind the turning edge of the Earth—and then, when the sun was gone, to reflect for a while in their journals.

As always, I did the assignment along with my class, and this is what I shared with the class the next week:

**Somewhere the Sun Is Setting**

I had planned to go find the sunset this evening. I had planned to put my journal and a bottle of water in my backpack, get on my bike, and make the long, hard pull to the top of South Mountain. I had planned to find a quiet spot there and sit with my back against a rock, facing west into the lowering sun. I had planned to close my eyes and breathe deeply, focusing only on the coming and going of my breath until my insides gradually grew still, until the muscles of my jaw relaxed and my brow smoothed and my eyes softened—until the evening began to breathe me... 

But this day had its way with my plans, and I didn't get there. And now I sit here weary by my computer. Willow-Cat is sleeping on my desk nearby. Somewhere, in another room, Springsteen is singing, “I'm on fire.” And somewhere, out there, the sun is on fire. Somewhere beyond my bedroom window and the garden wall, beyond the oleander bushes and the asphalt-shingled roofs and the TV antennas, beyond the drone of the evening news and the roar of the rush-hour traffic, the sun blazes silently above the blue Estrella Mountains... and I am not there.

**Conspiring Against Noise**

It seems such a simple thing to be still and then to write the words that come from the silence. But the world and its noise are too much with us, and we struggle to find the stillness. As we become writers, we carry our journals with us everywhere. We learn to steal bits of time to write on crowded buses, in noisy restaurants, in droning meetings. Amid the sound and the hurry of our days, we sneak a few minutes here and there to jot down memories and insights and feelings; we record bits and pieces to pick up later. And that is good; I do it all the time. But I know my writing and being cannot live and grow on such moments alone.

As I write this, I am home alone on a Sunday morning. I have had some tea. I have sat in silence for awhile and watched my breath come and go. No sound is in the house this morning, except for the occasional humming of the refrigerator and sighing of the sleeping dogs. Outside, the sparrows chatter distantly at the bird feeder. The wind plays the chimes on the back porch and rustles the leaves of the eucalyptus tree. This morning, because I am quiet, I can hear the wind. I can feel it nudging the long Arizona summer southward and bringing a hint of the changing seasons. Because I am quiet, I can feel my connections to this tilting planet.

But most days I do not have the luxury of this quiet morning that has come like a gift to me. So, we who do this writing-and-being work must take up our journals daily and seek silence like a lover. We must be deliberate. We must conspire against the forces of noise. On most days, my regimen of seeking silence goes something like this:

**Quiet Place.** At work, I get to my office early while the building is still quiet. I close the door, lock it, and unplug the phone, so I won't be disturbed. My office is small, but there is room to make a sitting pad in the middle of the floor with my old Mexican blanket. So my mind won't worry about the clock, I set my food timer for fifteen or twenty minutes...
and stick it in a drawer where I cannot hear its ticking, but its gentle ding will tell me when the time is up. Sometimes I light a candle to put on the floor in front of me.

**Quiet Body.** I fold my blanket so it is about four inches high, for a pad beneath my buttocks. I take off my shoes and settle into a half-lotus position with my spine straight and my hands resting on my knees. (This can be done as well by sitting in a straight chair with your feet flat upon the floor, your spine erect, your hands resting on your knees. The important thing is for the body to be relaxed yet alert—so sit as if your spine were suspended from the ceiling, and let the rest of your body relax and be supported by your spine.) I close my eyes and breathe deeply and fully for a few minutes, getting my body settled and comfortable.

**Quiet Mind.** Then I let my breath come and go naturally, easily, peacefully. I focus my mind on the coming and going of my breath. For this brief time, I give myself permission to be at rest in the universe, to be responsible only for attending to the wonder of my breathing. Inevitably, my mind wanders and worries and frets—but when it does I bring it, like a wayward child, back home to my breathing, gently and without judgment. That is all. So simple—and yet so hard. Some days it goes well, and I gradually settle in toward the center, toward the silence of just breathing. Some days my mind chatters and runs away no matter how many times I bring it back. But that is all right. There is no right or wrong to this—only the doing. Always, however it goes, my writing and my being are better for having had this time.

**Quiet Journal Writing.** When the timer goes off, I gently open my eyes. Then I set the timer for another fifteen minutes or so, turn to my journal, and write freely whatever words want to come from this quiet time that has taken me a little closer to my heart. When I read back over my journals, the words from these writing times almost always stand out as being simpler and stronger and more peaceful.

In a past journal, for example, I find this passage:

this morning the room is soft and gentle—it welcomes me with sighs of early sunlight—I breathe and stretch and settle in and very soon the center, the silence, is with me. now, as i write, i am reminded of ric’s poem about the homesick snail sliding down its silver track, “looking for the very thing/it carries on its back,” that fits so well for me, for this breathing/writing-going-in process—it is all here—in me—or it is nowhere ... and today i find it once again, enter once again into the fringe of that holy place—but just the fringe is enough, enough for now, enough to keep me going this day, this lifetime, perhaps ... and i know i will leave this room and wander from that fringe again, into the sound and the fury—but having been near that holy place, i will remember and i will find my way back—because it is the only home there is—the only home i need ... 

If we wish to tap the true power of the writing-and-being process, we must make time each day to seek silence, to be still and know. Set aside such times deliberately, faithfully, and hold to them against the roaring world.

**Writing to Share**

From here on, the Explorations in each chapter will have a dimension called “Toward Public Writing.” The previous chapter looked at the whole writing-and-being process with its beginnings in the feelings in our hearts; its movement out and into the personal writing of our journals; and,
ultimately, the movement of some of this writing into public writing to be shared with others. Once your writing is grounded in its source—your heart and your journal work—once you begin to find the beauty of your own voice and the power of your own stories, you may feel a natural urge to share your writing with others.

While the Explorations that follow are always grounded in journal writing, we will also look at ways to turn the discoveries of our personal writing into meaningful public writing. This is the natural movement of all writing, the way of all effective public writers. Even if you think you are solely a journal writer, I encourage you to work on the public writings, too—you may surprise yourself and, in working to tell your stories to others, you will continue to learn more from the stories yourself. If you are also an aspiring public writer, you will find that effective public writing flows naturally and powerfully from your journal work. And if you are a teacher trying to help your students toward articulateness in public writing, you will be amazed at what they begin to do once their public writing connects with their hearts.

In the “Toward Public Writing” suggestions, you will be encouraged to move some of your journal writing into another, more public dimension. As you work your words into effective writing for others, you need to be concerned about form and mechanics and punctuation, those things I told you not to worry about in your journal work. But now you have something to say, stories to tell, moments to show others. With each public writing piece you work on, you will discover elements of effective public writing—even as you continue to discover more about yourself.

The challenge in each of the public writings is to focus on some particular thing that has emerged from the jumble of stuff that has flowed into your journal, and then to give it form and make it sing. You will choose a focus, decide how to address your audience, decide what tone to use, and determine what to do with yourself as speaker. And of course, you will also try to do impossible things with your words—to somehow convey to another person the amazing, ineffable, contradictory, and complex world as you see it and feel it at this moment.

Yes, public writing is complex work. But don’t be like the centipede that walked easily and naturally until someone asked it how it could do that with all those legs, and then it fell over in a heap. Rather, just stay with the heart of your writing, your own heart, your own feelings, your own honest words. Keep your words grounded in the simple honesty of speaking from your heart. The rest will happen naturally as you keep writing and working.

**Exploration**

**Exploring Your Epigraph**

An epigraph (not to be confused with an *epitaph*, words on a gravestone) is a short quotation placed at the beginning of a piece of writing—a book or a chapter or an essay or, in this case, a journal—to set a tone for what will follow. I like using epigraphs in my writing. They give me a feeling of fellowship and support in my writing—and being work.

For this Exploration, first find an epigraph (or, better yet, let an epigraph find you) to put at the beginning of your journal. The quotation you select for your epigraph can come from anywhere—the whole world of words is your hunting ground, from the Bible or the Koran or the Bhagavad Gita to a song or the label on a soup can. Or a child might utter something that you will recognize as your epigraph. All that matters is that it feels fitting, supportive, and encouraging for your life and feelings now, and for the journal where you are working on your writing and being.
Find quiet time and begin by sitting and breathing for a while with your journal by your side.

- **Write your epigraph at the top of a page in your journal.** Read it softly to yourself a few times, savoring the words, feeling them. Then close your eyes and breathe, and be still for a few minutes. Feel the words of your epigraph still flowing through you without worrying about what they mean.

- **Open your eyes and write whatever comes to you in relation to your epigraph.** Wonder as you write. Wonder about how your life feels now and how your epigraph points to some of that feeling. Look beneath the surface of your life. Use your writing to discover more, to see more. Speculate. Imagine. Fantasize. Play with your words, remembering always that you do not know what you know until you see what you say.

**Toward Public Writing**

After you have wandered and wondered and explored in your journal, think about sharing with someone else your epigraph and something that has emerged for you in relation to it.

Go over the material you have written in your journal and find something you would like to share with others. Focus on some small, specific thing—a memory that came up as you worked with your epigraph, a discovery that surprised you, something you struggled with, or an insight you want to share—something you feel would be interesting or valuable or helpful to others.

Work on it further in your journal, or move it onto separate paper or into your word processor, however you work best as you move toward public writing. Do not take on too much material.

Think in small, careful terms. Let this small piece grow and emerge, and see what happens.

As you work, keep in mind this warning: The danger with this Exploration is the temptation to write the “truth”—to generalize or lecture or preach about your epigraph. Don’t give into that temptation—it leads to sloppy thinking and boring writing. This is a danger to avoid in all of your writing.

Keep your seeing and your saying alive by staying grounded in “real stuff” as you write.

This “real stuff” is a crucial concept for us writers—it is what good writing teachers often refer to as the difference between “showing” and “telling.” Powerful, meaningful writing is almost always big on showing and small on telling. The difference between showing and telling, for example, is the difference between a story about your mother’s awakening in the recovery room after surgery and being concerned about your need to get some rest versus a Mother’s Day card filled with generic words about “a mother’s love.” One shows the love, grounds it in story, in real stuff. The other only tells about the love, only uses the abstract word. One is alive and real. The other is weak and lifeless.

In effect, this Exploration asks you to take a “telling” (a quotation or epigraph) and turn it into a “showing,” a story that grounds the quotation or epigraph in the real stuff of your life.

So, in this Exploration, as in all of your writing, work to create a piece of public writing in which you share something particular, something real. Let it take whatever form emerges as you work.

Trust the process. There is no right or wrong—only learning and growing.

Here is a piece, for example, that found its way, after much
writing and rewriting, out of my journal and into public writing. I had given this assignment to one of my undergraduate writing classes at ASU—and then (since I always do the writing I ask my students to do) I went back to some of my favorite quotations. I quickly settled on one that tuged at my heart, wrote it at the top of a page in my journal and let the memories flow. Eventually, I shared this piece with the class:

**Teachers**

The quotation I selected for my journal epigraph is an old Buddhist saying that goes something like this: “When the student is ready, the teacher will come.” Years ago, when I first heard it, I thought the idea was mildly intriguing—but I didn’t believe it was true. After all, the world was a machine that operated on logic and cause and effect, and I was merely a smaller machine that operated on stimulus and response. There was no room in this world for such quaintness from some antique and irrational culture. Since then, however, my eyes have opened a bit more, and I can see a little beyond my narrow training—I can see that such a truth has indeed operated in my life. The “special children” are a case in point. They came along when I needed them, when I was ready for them. They taught me well. They changed my life.

On the surface, it looked as if I quit teaching high school and moved to Lincoln with my wife and two small daughters so I could go to graduate school at the University of Nebraska. On the surface, it looked as if getting a doctorate was to be my education. But I know now that my real teachers showed up late one September afternoon. Eight of them. They came to live with us. They were labeled “trainable mentally retarded.” They were slit-eyed and slobbering, gangling and gauche—and beautiful beyond my small seeing.

The children taught me well, and I was ready for their teaching. They taught me how to change beds and change diapers and change my life. When I came home in the afternoons, they taught me not to worry too much about tests and sonnets and semicolons; they taught me about crayons and cartoons and laughing and crying.

For four years, in this way, they taught me until I could see them as beautiful, until I loved them like my own. They changed my life—and then they left me to live their lessons on my own.

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**EXPLORATION**

**Reflections on Your Name**

As we will see again and again, doing this writing-and-being work we are always, aware of it or not, exploring the crucial questions “Who am I?” and “What matters?” Exploring and telling stories about our names pulls us into exploring who we are and where we came from. (Note: This is also a helpful Exploration to do early on if you are in a writing class or group, as it will help you to learn and to remember each others’ names.)

To begin, open your journal to a clean page, take a few deep breaths and get quiet.

- **Write your full name across the top of the page.** Look carefully at those combinations of letters, those words that somehow identify you. Think about where those names came from and where you came from, and think about all the memories and feelings and stories connected to your full name.

- **Begin to write, freely and openly, anything that comes to your mind and heart in relation to your names.** Wander and wonder
about your names—about nicknames you might have been called, about names you might have wished for, about how your names may have changed as you grew older or got married. Wonder about your names as symbol, as sound. How do your names feel to you? How have your feelings about your names changed? Think about your parents, your ancestors, the generations who came before you. What of them is in your names? Who named you? How did they pick the names they gave you? If you could rename yourself now, what would you choose? Think of specific moments, memories, stories that somehow involve your names.

- **Write in your journal without thought for form or correctness.**
  Write to collect the many thoughts and feeling and memories within you—in relation to you, your name, your being.

- **Go away when you tire.** Come back later and read what you have written and write more.

**Toward Public Writing**

There, in the pages of your journal, you now have the seeds of many pieces of public writing—stories, poems, essays, whatever.

For now, pick one particular story, memory, incident, or feeling that has emerged for you in your writing up to this point. Focus on that in your journal, and free-write again, getting down whatever comes to your mind and heart in this more detailed exploring.

Let it take a form, a “shape” on the page—a poem, a short narrative, a “memory-story,” an essay, a letter to someone about your name, whatever feels fitting for what you have to say. Begin molding it into a public piece. Work on it. Go away from it for a while. Come back and read it aloud to yourself; add to it and make changes. Do this over and over until it emerges and begins to feel tight. Give it a title and perhaps even an epigraph. Proofread it, and get it ready to go out into the world. Like all real writing, if you have done your work well, it will have taught you much about your writing and your being—and it will be meaningful and helpful for others.

Here is a name-writing piece that my friend and fellow writer Fortino did awhile back when we were writing together in a workshop:

**My Name**

*The first day of eighth grade, I hid from you*

*By approaching my first-hour shop teacher before he took roll,)*

*Asking, begging this burly man if he would call me Tino*

*Instead of reading my entire birth name:*

Fortino Martinez Gomez.

*At twenty-seven, I don’t hide from you anymore.*

*I understand you better now.*

*Fortino was my dad’s first name,*

*As well as his dad’s and his dad’s.*

*It’s a Mexican first-born male tradition*

*That will stop with me:*  

*A bad temper is nothing to give away.*

*Martinez was my mother’s idea,*

*And I love her for it.*

*It was her maiden name that she didn’t want to let go,*

*Even though marriage is one step closer to Catholic heaven.*

*She gave it to me*
So that we will remember who we are
And who she used to be.

My grandfather, Grandpa Martinez, was a copper miner
With the nickname of Mono.
Which means "big monkey" in Spanish.
He lied about his age to start working at thirteen—
Drilled for copper;
Drank whiskey like water,
And blasted underground tunnels;
Digging the earth for pennies.
So, Martinez, my middle name, my mother's gift;
Often brings me inspiration
To work hard for sometimes nothing.

Gomez is a last name that came from a grandfather I never knew.
My grandmother ran from him, never looking back.
I've heard stories, but I can't accept them
Because I have seen what they have done to my father,
Fortino, Sr.
The man without a father, who married my mother,
And gave me the name that I no longer hide from.

And Cornelia, a student from Germany who came to spend a year writing with me, wrote this touching poem about the nickname her mother called her as a child:

Munkel

Munkel
is what my mother called me when I was a child—
and it is what she still calls me

sometimes,
now that I am not a child anymore
Munkel
is a name that didn't exist until my mother created it
Munkel
sounds like a whisper like water like waves
and smells like damp earth
Munkel
is a fairy tale creature
Munkel
is a child hiding under a blanket
her mother coming in
laughing
I can see you—your hair is showing.
there are people I would like to call
Munkel
and I'm sad that I don't
but at night
when I can't sleep
I can hear my mother calling me
dark and soft
Munkel.

Cornelia was writing in her second language of English, yet still she wove this beautiful memory with her careful words—a memory of her mother's nickname for her. Like Fortino, she wove this poem from the stuff of her life, from her history. You, too, have such stories connected with your names. Find them as you
write quietly in your journal and remember. And then turn them into artifacts from your life to share with others.

Example:

Collecting Small Joys

Unless you are careful and deliberate, our society, with its blaring media and relentless marketing of entertainment, will dull you with its noise and pull you away from yourself. Unless you work deliberately to save yourself, you can easily just keep turning the volume up a little louder, watching another show, taking another pill, having another drink—and dying a bit more each day. In your journal writing, you are working in the other direction. You are working back toward the peace within your own heart. This Exploration will help you to refine your sensitivity, to sharpen your awareness, to live more fully in the precious moments of your life.

Begin by sitting quietly with your journal by your side. Breathe deeply and fully for a few minutes. Feel your awareness moving toward that quiet place in the center of your being. Just breathe.

- In your mind, look back over your day for small joys. Look for moments of meaning from your day—not logical, practical meaning but a deeper, quieter meaning. Seek moments that may have touched you so softly that you hardly knew it at the time.

- In your journal, write about one of those moments. Reach out tentatively with your words and pick up a moment—perhaps the half-remembered play of breeze and sun on your face as you walked to class this morning; the face of an old woman on the street, the almost forgotten brief touch of a friend’s hand. Look at the moment carefully with your words. Watch yourself having that moment. Live it again, more fully, in your journal.

- Reach out with your words and pick up another small moment of joy. Find several from your day, always feeling for the preciousness at the heart of each moment.

Initially, this Exploration may be difficult. It is a bit like stalking wild mushrooms in the forest: At first, you think there are none anywhere, but then you find one—and then another. And suddenly they are everywhere, and you are amazed that you could not see them before.

That is the way this work goes: The more small joys you find, the more there are and the more you have. You become more attuned to these moments, to seeing and appreciating them even as they take place. You and your writing and the very quality of your life change.

Toward Public Writing

Go back to the small joys you have collected in your journal. Pick out one or two that you would like to share with others.

Turn these moments into small pieces of public writing, capturing, with your word choice and imagery, the heart of each moment. Think of creating small, precise pieces of seventy-five to a hundred words. But do not be tied to that limit; always listen to the piece itself, and let it become what it needs to become.

Make it clean and strong, a bit like haiku, with no wasted words. Communicate by showing, by dramatizing, not by telling.
By the words and the images that you use, by the experiences you show, let readers feel the moment for themselves.

Suzanne, for example, looked back into her journal and her life and found this moment, which she then worked into a gift to us through her careful words:

**Pansy Water**

Waiting for her to get ready. I lie on the bed, my coat still on. The overhead light is glaring down—too bright. It's so quiet. I feel heavy, tired. What a day. And more to be done. I need to get going.

I catch the movement of the closet door out of the corner of my eye.

A smooth white cat peeks out. One blue eye, one green. A pink bunny rabbit nose. He stares intently at something on the bedside table.


Ignoring me, the cat stretches and silently jumps on the bed, walking over my chest and onto the table. Gently, he pushes his face into the velvety bouquet. Purple petals, yellow centers, green stems fall to the table in disarray, framing the white face pressed into the clear vase—eyes closed, pink tongue making soft noises, lapping water.

Pansy water.

My mind is no longer on the day and the things to be done. I feel light. Renewed by a smooth white cat with a penchant for pansy water.

Suzanne's piece is simple and powerful, like a painting. There is almost no telling—instead it shows the real stuff of her life. Her words take us there. We share her experience through her words.

Her story has a natural sense of form—beginning and ending with the words "pansy water" and focusing carefully on one small, exquisite moment.