

Aug 2022 **Writing is good medicine: understanding writing for wellbeing**
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Presentation

I acknowledge we are gathering on the country of the Jagera and Turrbul peoples, and pay my respects to Indigenous people who are here in this session. I would also like to acknowledge the land that supports us and the non human creatures finding their way on this land.

For eight years I've been running around rural and remote NSW and Queensland facilitating workshops that use writing as a pathway to health, recovery and wellbeing, often in communities in recovery from extremes of drought, flood and fire. The work began when a rural resilience officer in the Department of Primary Industries (DPI) in Broken Hill asked me to write and deliver a journaling workshop. I said "what for?" I'm a journalist by trade and by training. I had valuable media skills to offer grassroots and community organisations and advocates. Why would she pay me to write a journaling workshop? Her answer changed the course of my life: "Because psychologists are always telling us to write things down but we don't know where to start."

So we began.

Over 8 years I drove around 200,000 kilometres delivering writing workshops to more than 2000 people. The workshops offered time out for isolated bush women, writing for proactive wellbeing, 3-day retreats – rest, renewal, recovery – for isolated women enduring an incomprehensible water crisis, professional development for

remote health staff, such as the Royal Flying Doctor Service mental health and dental teams.

Over the years and in our events, I observed 4 things:

1. most people, regardless of occupation, want to write *something*, even if it's just a letter home – that something is a haunting, a weight in their heart, a longing they cannot put to rest
2. almost everyone, regardless of literacy competency, needs encouragement, guidance and support to begin
3. a two-hour writing workshop can deliver outstanding wellbeing outcomes
4. people who do not identify as a writer will travel extraordinary distances for a writing workshop.

Writing for wellbeing is now my life's work – literally. I'm in the third and final year of a PhD that examines the complexities of the strange relationship between writing and wellbeing. Yes, strange. Why strange? Because we are primarily a literate society. Almost all of us have the necessary skillset. We can write. And it would be virtually impossible not have access to the necessary tools – pen and paper. Yet there is a common belief, accompanied by crippling hesitancy, that: "I can't write". You can. You can write perfectly well. And yet people who don't want to 'be' a writer take an entire day off the farm – including men – to attend a writing workshop. Is that not strange?

So Ellen the DPI officer and I are running workshops in old wooden halls and beside ancient rivers. Very quickly other organisations joined us, and the workshops became retreats – I'd like to give a particular shout out to the team at RAMHP, the Rural Adversity Mental Health Program, who are still working with us – right up to last week in Casino. We're running writing workshops – we're still running writing workshops

and wellbeing retreats. Yet when other health professionals and organisations ask us to describe the work, we look at each, bemused, and we laugh: “it’s not a writing workshop!”

And this is where we nudge up against the strange relationship between writing and wellbeing. So if it’s not a writing workshop or retreat – what is it? I’m in the process of writing up my thesis. This is what I can tell you so far: This work is about longing, and it’s about overcoming. It’s about trust, in the first instance for the workshop facilitator and then for the group, and then for self. Trust – in self – learning to have your own back: *you’ve got this*. It’s about growth and recovery. It’s about overcoming self-sabotaging behaviours and old voices that echo through time. It’s about overcoming loneliness and isolation through building connection and community. It’s about surrendering whatever the fight may be and finding ourselves on the page, and witnessing others as they too surrender through finding themselves on the page – *it is a gift exchange*. It’s tender work. It’s honest work. It’s precious work. And it’s brave work.

These are big claims. They’re woolly claims. And therein lies the problem. Those of us in the room or by the river or beneath the gum trees – we can describe for you what growth and recovery looks like for this woman and that woman and this man and those women experiencing extremes of natural disaster and personal tragedy, but we cannot give it to you as a measurement that fits nicely into a spreadsheet. Because for all the numbers in the world – this work, as with all our work – is ultimately about the human being doing the living. It’s about Jill: “I’m here to support my friend”. It’s about Cathie Colless: “I’m here to take my mind off the drought”. It’s about Marie, traveling with her notes. It’s about newly literate Indigenous adults, writing their story their way – shout out to the Literacy for Life Foundation, an indigenous adult literacy program I’ve

been working with since 2016. Diving deeply into this work through the doctoral thesis has shed theoretical light on the relationship between writing and wellbeing.

Why is it so life changing? I've been working with one specific theory: salutogenesis. Salutogenesis is a counterforce to the pathogenic paradigm predominant in the medical model of research and service delivery in our health system. Whereas pathogenesis focuses on origins of disease and ill-health, salutogenesis, which is the work of medical sociologist Aaron Antonovsky, focuses on origins of health. So while medical professionals want to know what makes people sick, Antonovsky was more interested in what keeps people well, particularly under extreme duress. If he were here for current global pandemic, he would be researching not the pathogenic nature of the disease but its salutogenic capacities: What keeps people well?

Salutogenesis is complex. This is the brilliance of salutogenic theory, its capacity for representing the complexity of the human condition in relation to the interior and exterior human self, and connections between, and relationships to and with, self, others and society. For the purposes of my study, I've extracted two key components of salutogenesis. The first is the Antonovsky's ease / dis-ease continuum and the second is the sense of coherence. Pathogenically, people are healthy or sick. The salutogenic model shifts the health/sick dichotomy of the Western medical model to a 'continuum model'. Salutogenesis does not ignore the resources that frame people's living, such as personal skills, community resources, and material reserves. Salutogenically, humans are not either well or sick. We are always to a degree well, and the focus is on moving individual and community wellbeing towards the ease end of the continuum. The sense of coherence is a driver on the salutogenic continuum. It has 3 key components: comprehensibility (cognitive), manageability (behavioural) and meaningfulness

(emotional). The sense of coherence is about our capacities for understanding – coping with – and making sense of stressful situations or events.

Several years ago I began offering a writing program online. It was a way of ensuring isolated individuals had opportunities to keep going with their writing projects, and for connecting with other isolated individuals on a regular basis. This online writing for wellbeing program formed the foundation of my doctoral research. This writing for wellbeing program, delivered face to face or online, is by nature salutogenic. It is strengths focused, capacity oriented. We put self-doubt and self-sabotage on the communal table early – in writing – and we leave them there, starved of oxygen and attention for the duration of our time together. And then, we turn our attentions to the longing of the human heart and the strengths and capacities of those in our circle, to comprehensibility, to manageability, to meaningfulness, and we find our way there through writing.

I'm reminded of a day Marie Kelly from RHAMP and I delivered workshops to women who live and work in the dust around Emmdale, the roadhouse between Broken Hill and Cobar. As the morning session drew to a close, one of the older women asked: "Does anyone else suffer for small shames they committed as a child?" From that moment on, the workshop took on its magic. There's a moment in every workshop where it takes on its magic. We can see you, and here, here is me in return. This is the spirit of the gift exchange. This is the sense of coherence in motion. The women beginning to understand comprehensibility: learning new coping skills through writing; manageability; and making sense of that which has caused so much ... so much what, you fill in the gap: this is meaningfulness. And so we move towards the ease end of the salutogenic ease/dis-ease continuum.

It's not a writing workshop. Some people come to the workshops because their friend wants them to come. Some people come because they secretly want to write their partner's memoir but they *know* they don't have the capacity. Some people come to take their mind off the drought. Some people come for the rest and renewal, for connection, or simply for something new to do. Many, many people come for support to write a family or community story. Many, many people come for help to write a book of wisdom. They want to share how they got through the experiences that upended their living, as a way of helping others through similar situations. Again, the gift exchange, the meaning-making of sense of coherence, thus facilitating salutogenic movement. Some people, let's call her Sylvia, come for no reason at all other than other people dragged them along.

Sylvia attended a three-day writing for wellbeing retreat on the banks of the dead dry Darling River. Her entire life had been frozen in time by a dreadful event seven years previously. Through writing, over three days, Syl found her way to the present. She realised the first thing that was outstanding in her life was the wishing well she'd meant to build a long time ago. She left the retreat and within a fortnight the well was built, right there in her front yard, her tribute to recovery. As she left that writing for wellbeing retreat, Sylvia said: "This morning was the first time in seven years I woke up feeling like I wasn't going to vomit."

How do we measure writing for wellbeing outcomes? What measure a woman who doesn't wake every day wanting to vomit? What measure a woman returned to volunteering in her extremely isolated community? What measure a grandmother once more available to pick up children from the school gate? What value do we give a wishing well on a spreadsheet?

Thank you.

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