

INTEGRATION

7 Steps to Embracing Your Full Story

THIS MAY BE THE LEAST EXPENSIVE WAY TO SOLVE OUR HEALTH CARE CRISIS.

TO UNDERSTAND one's own story is, quite literally, to take back one's own well-being. This well-being is not only physical, but also emotional and social:

If we don't understand ourselves, we can't really

understand others. And if we don't understand ourselves, we can't really stand up for our true authority and beliefs.

You might think that this sounds good for someone else, but you don't have a story to tell, or that no one would be interested in your story, or that you are not free to tell your story. If you find yourself thinking those thoughts, I invite you to push back: We *all* have a story to tell, and all of our stories matter.

The renowned social scientist James Pennebaker at the University of Texas has done numerous studies that show the positive health benefits of writing your story. The practice of writing strengthens the immune system, and one study found that when people write about both difficult experiences that happened to them *and* their emotions around those events, the number of trips those people made to health services decreased by 50 percent. That's powerful medicine. Think of this as a seven-step prescription for better health and well-being:

1) COME INTO SAFETY

Safety is a necessary condition for healing. Writing allows you to express yourself without needing to worry about whether you might hurt others or put yourself at risk. You can decide when, if ever, you share your writing, and with whom. In the first drafts of your writing you have absolute safety and freedom to explore your own truth. You can worry about revision and publication later—if ever.

2) LET GO OF CONTROL

E. M. Forster famously quipped: "How can I know what I think until I see what I say?" We learn about ourselves through what we say. Rather than thinking of writing as a process that we drive, we can think of it as a form of deep



« *The Traveler*
Misty Mawn

listening, play, experimentation, and discovery. Sometimes our greatest truths surprise even us and come in at an unexpected angle. As Emily Dickinson writes, “Tell the truth, but tell it slant.”

3) PUT ASIDE JUDGMENT

We may intend to explore, but our inner critic may raise its head as soon as we start to write. After all, in school, we were often graded—and judged—on our writing. But nothing cripples our creativity and our ability to listen deeply more than judgment. Judgment limits our ability to feel safe, to let go of control to explore, to grow, and to learn. So—don’t attach to that inner critic, but instead politely ask it to step aside. And if you start to judge any particular aspect of your story, remember that you are bigger than any of your parts and even any of your actions.

4) KEEP THE PAINFUL PIECES

We *all* have pieces of our story that are painful. We all have times when we wish we were different, and qualities that we wish were different. This discontentment can trap us: It can lead us either to deny or to overidentify with those parts of our story. These are both normal reactions, but they ultimately will limit your freedom and your growth. Think of *each* of your feelings and experiences as, in the words of Rumi, “an unexpected visitor” whom you can welcome with curiosity and embrace from the position of a benevolent host. Behind the distressing quality might lie, as Rumi says, a “new delight.”

5) RECONNECT WITH YOURSELF/MEDITATE

When we write, we often split the mind from the body. But our stories live not only in our minds, but also in our bodies. As you write, stay connected to your body and to your breath. I also recommend meditating before you write. Meditation helps you reconnect with yourself;

it helps stop the spinning thoughts and leads to greater perception and clarity. It also helps us step back from judgment and stay with whatever arises. If meditation is difficult for you, don’t worry—you’re not alone. Be patient. Try different forms. As you continue to practice, you will develop a larger perspective on your story and come to greater understanding and compassion.

6) GIVE YOURSELF THE SUPPORT OF TIME

This process of understanding our story, like slow cooking, takes time. Be patient. It’s not an overnight fix. *But*, you might be thinking, *I don’t have the time*. I assure you that if you want to get clear on your story and write it, you *do* have the time. You might only have an hour a week, but if you prioritize this important work and make a date with yourself—putting it on the calendar so that you can’t be interrupted—you *can* find the time. If you’re worried that taking time to attend to your own story is self-indulgent, I again invite you to push back: Remember that we’ve been given subtle messages our whole lives not to pay too much attention to our story. If you give yourself the gift of time, the rewards will be enormous—not just for you personally, but also for the people around you.

7) GIVE YOURSELF THE SUPPORT OF COMMUNITY

The work of understanding our story is not isolated work. Our story is always in relation to others, and necessarily takes place in community. If we are not able to understand our full story with compassion, we cannot offer understanding and compassion to others. So don’t do this work alone. Find supportive, empathetic readers. When you’re ready (and only when you’re ready), share your story with others and lend your ear to others’ stories. Embracing our stories helps us heal ourselves and be voices of understanding and change.

—NADIA COLBURN PHD

OWNING OUR
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