



EXCERPT FROM HEART ON THE PAGE: A PORTABLE WRITING  
WORKSHOP by Wendy Brown-Baez

**Writing for Healing**

My healing story begins not with my own healing but with seeking solutions for my companion's depression. Michael's periods of depression seemed endless as he responded negatively to every circumstance. We lived in Santa Fe, New Mexico, a Mecca for alternative healing, and I began to search for alternatives to prescription drugs. *Earthwalks for Health* was part of that search. *Earthwalks* connected us to indigenous artists and local sages to learn about their traditional spirituality and healing practices. This is how I met Joan Logghe, beloved Santa Fe poet. Joan was the founder of Write Action, a writing support group. I was writing poetry with another group at the time. I knew how cathartic it was to write my thoughts down and encouraged Michael to attend Joan's group. He found it satisfying to pour out his brutal honesty on paper and not be judged. One week, he couldn't attend because he was going out of town so I suggested that I go and "keep his seat warm." I loved it and we continued attending together weekly. We both felt we had a home where we were supported and accepted. It was energizing to hear common themes go around the circle and to be reassured that coping with Michael's moods was not isolating us.

Joan had worked with Natalie Goldberg and used the same basic writing instruction that so many writing instructors and writing groups would come to rely on: spontaneous timed writing. Pick a time, put pen to the paper and keep it moving, not stopping to consider grammar or sentence structure or even if it makes sense.

Joan used poems as prompts. In this way, we entered the rhythm of language. The poetic associations and images we read inspired our own words. From her, I learned that by sharing my own work, I create a sense of intimacy and inspire confidence in others to share. I consider her a friend and a

mentor, someone who showed by her example how to lead writing for healing and how to create a safe, welcoming space.

Eventually Michael became more and more mentally unstable and one night he gathered up the courage to end his mental torment by killing himself. I wept until my eyes were swollen shut but I was released from care giving and uplifted by a burst of creative energy. To be able to pour out my grieving heart onto the page in the writing groups was cathartic. To know that others were willing to be on the journey, accompanying me through the muck, was lifesaving. From that point on, writing became not only a way of self-expression but a life raft that saved me from drowning. When emotions feel overwhelming, writing helps me to stay focused. Writing helps me to analyze and understand what I am feeling and to make a shift from emotion to clarity.

Ten years later, I received the Minnesota State Arts Board Artist Initiative grant. Pathways was one of my targeted organizations. I led workshops specifically for caregivers to have a break, for self-care. Every other Thursday afternoon became my niche from that time on.

Pathways: A Healing Center offers free mind-body-spirit workshops for clients and their families. The class I offered at Pathways was called Care for the Caregiver. Participants came and went in this writing group, depending on a conflict when other services are offered, energy levels, or the ability to have someone take over their duties. Often the participants had their own health challenges. Word of mouth spread about the benefits of the group and in 2016, I changed the name to Writing for Healing. Since then, at each session we have a group of 6-10 people. The poetry I bring needs to be very accessible. Most of the participants do not read poetry and attention may waver due to physical discomfort. Images from nature are especially appreciated. We take turns reading the stanzas aloud and then I suggest a prompt. We do not critique or workshop our writings. This gives us the freedom to be honest on the page. I'll share an insight or wisdom such as a meditation I use, acknowledgment that care-giving changes our identity, or the opportunities that come to us to further our spiritual practice

when we feel others, perhaps those we feel closest to or the person we are caring for, do not understand, approve or feel threatened when we take time out from caregiving to be ourselves. I share my own spiritual practice of paying attention to my thoughts and attitudes and deliberately changing negativity to positivity. I may suggest writing affirmations. I might comment on how our culture insistently gives us the message that we are not enough when we are not only enough, but miracles. I might share appreciation for writing that is especially moving or has deep wisdom. I might suggest how to develop writing that seems to be the start of something. Others may similarly comment on what has moved them or resonated with them. I always try to uplift the group if the writing has been particularly painful.



Writing opens our hearts so that we can be authentic. Many caregivers and those with health challenges are angry, frustrated, frightened, grieving, and exhausted. Caregivers succumb to being completely available, both emotionally and physically, to the demands of caregiving, and feel they must keep up a strong, cheerful, optimistic façade.

In our writing group, we can let down the façade and explore what we yearn for, what our passions are, and what give us solace and spiritual nourishment. We can plan for the future and coach ourselves through fear and grief by being present and reminding ourselves to focus on the present. We remind ourselves of the many gifts we have and the support system of family, friends, and organizations such as Pathways. We write about making choices based on knowing ourselves and accepting our limitations and honoring our vision of what can be. We realize we walk a path of compassion with strength, courage, and wisdom. We learn that others have also walked this path and we have a sense of

commonality and community. Our inner resilience becomes more certain and we acknowledge blessings along the way.

#### TYPICAL WRITING PROMPTS FOR CAREGIVERS

I don't have to be perfect, I just have to—

List all the things you do for yourself, from the smallest thing such as a bubble bath to taking yoga, walking, or calling a friend: how do you raise your vibration?

What brings you joy?

What gives you bliss?

What do you yearn for?

How do you have fun?

What do you do for pleasure?

I promise myself—

What my tears tell me

POEM: Kindness by Naomi Shihab Nye

PROMPT: what I left behind and what I was able to keep—

POEM: Antilamentation by Dorianne Laux

PROMPTS: what I regret and what I don't regret  
what you gave me—

POEM: Permission Granted by David Allen Sullivan

PROMPT: I give myself permission to—

POEMS: Rest by Richard Jones, Let Evening Come by Jane Hirshfield

PROMPT: Where do you find solace?

POEM: The Book of Myths by Joy Harjo

PROMPT: my beloved body—

POEM: I'm Going to Start Living like a Mystic by Edward Hirsch

PROMPT: I'm going to start living—

POEM: The Tao of Touch by Marge Piercy

PROMPT: what nourishes me

POEM: Prayer in The Strip Mall, Bangor, Maine by Stuart Kestenbaum

PROMPT: random Love—

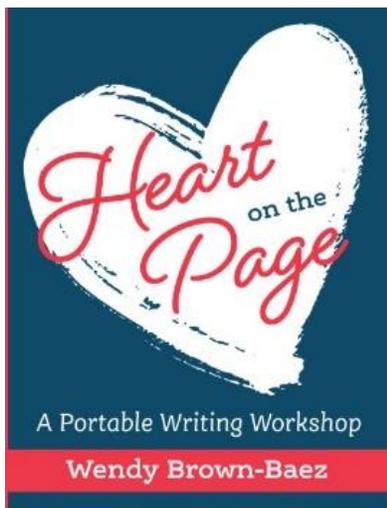
POEM: Discovering Gold by Wendy Brown-Baez

PROMPT: bless the coming darkness or discovering gold

POEM: For What Binds Us by Jane Hirshfield

PROMPT: what binds us, scars

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*Heart on the Page: A Portable Writing Workshop* is an inspirational guide for both individual writers and writing instructors who teach in institutions, non-profit organizations, and healing centers. It begins with Wendy Brown-Baez's own search for healing and interweaves stories of her workshop experiences with practical advice on how to inspire writers who may not think of themselves as writers but have a story to tell. Specific poems and prompts used to access intuitive guidance are interwoven with suggestions on how to engage participants with physical or emotional health challenges. Writing and sharing stories activates the ability to find meaning after trauma, loss, or transition. The book is a valuable resource for staff or volunteers who wish to incorporate therapeutic writing for healing, self-awareness and creative expression with clients and for their own self-care.

Wendy is available to present writing workshops for your support group, staff development meetings, writers group, and book club. She trains staff, volunteers, and writing instructors to practice therapeutic writing for clients and for self-care. [www.wendybrownaez.com](http://www.wendybrownaez.com)