



Ruach (breath of life) Ministries



## The Canterbury Chronicles 61 The Power of Writing to Heal

*People who write about their traumas commonly experience fewest panic attacks and need least help recovering.*

*James Pennebaker*

Writing provides us with a powerful tool to organise overwhelming events and make them manageable.<sup>1</sup> It was on Pentecost Sunday, 1985, shortly after the breakup of our ministry team, that someone brought me this word from the Lord: “I have a message, I have a pen. If you are willing, I will be with you.” This is what I have been doing ever since, and in these next two sections we will be seeing how therapeutic both writing and music can be.

James Pennebaker is the author of several pioneering publications that demonstrate how recording our traumas on paper can lead to grief resolution. In a publication that pulls together the

fruit of ten years of research,<sup>2</sup> Pennebaker shows that if we simply *describe* some traumatic event in our past – even giving full rein to our emotions as we do so – we will probably derive no lasting benefit from the exercise. His great discovery was that if we then proceed to record not only how we felt about it at the time, but also how we feel about it *now*, that something remarkable happens. By confronting the past, we “remove its horns” and are free to move on again.

Can it really be so simple? Pennebaker discovered that people obtain the maximum benefit if they write four fifteen-minute bursts over a period of four days. Louise de Salvo, a creative writing specialist, confirms Pennebaker’s findings,<sup>3</sup> and goes on to warn that anyone who does not put pen to paper will become increasingly irritated and even depressed until they do so.

Despite such encouragements, many people many of us find the thought of committing our deepest sorrows to paper daunting. We are bound to find reliving our most intense experiences emotionally challenging, but both Louise and James see this as *appropriate* pain: something that is *worth* enduring in order to reap the benefits.

In his subsequent studies, Pennebaker discovered that people who have been made redundant reported a much higher success rate of finding new jobs, and those who had lost their spouses made much faster recoveries as a result of following this pattern of writing.

The studies also showed that doing this on a regular basis reduced physical and mental stress and boosted the immune system. By contrast, those who neither spoke nor wrote about their traumas fared less well.

Those for whom writing currently holds no special place in your life may be tempted to skim over this section. If you know that there are hurts in your life that you have not yet recovered from, however, I would encourage you to try doing precisely what James and Louise recommend: four bursts of fifteen minutes of writing, spread over four days.

There is no need to edit and polish these passages. You are not writing with a view to anyone else seeing your work: all that matters is to tell the story, taking care to record how you felt about it at the time, and how you feel about it now.

A word of warning. When you first set out to describe some trauma, you may (intentionally or otherwise) find yourself omitting some vital part of the story.

It takes time and courage to reach such a place of inner honesty, but this is when you will begin to discern the hand of the Lord in issues which, until now, may have felt only like severe loss. Grief resolution proceeds apace as you come to see hidden blessings springing from even the hardest times!

Taking time out to write about specific traumas is anything but self-indulgent because it has the power to stabilise our subconscious – which is, of course, the driving force behind how we really are. Just as the vast bulk of icebergs lie beneath the surface, so too do the greater part of our memories. Like a gigantic storehouse, the subconscious contains not only every experience we have ever been through, but also the imprint of how we felt and responded to those events. On a day-to-day basis we are largely unaware of these, but they are closer than we realise, awaiting only particular triggers to flush them into the open. As Mike Field commented,

*I found it valuable specifically to invite Jesus to be Lord of my subconscious mind. Doing this put an abrupt end to very troubling recurring dreams I had been having since I was a child.*

Don't expect miraculous results every time you pick up a pen – but do expect attempting this exercise to have beneficial effects in terms of helping you to come to terms with things that have happened in the past.

If at some later stage you feel moved to share your insights with a wider audience, you will benefit from the practice you have gained in “writing to order,” as opposed to writing only when you feel like it. This will help to school you for the serious discipline of shaping your original jottings<sup>4</sup> – for although writing may be the most portable of callings, that does not make it an easy option. Just as with anything that is of lasting value, it is less a question of *finding* the time to do the necessary work of editing so much as *making* the time for it.

Write to God, for God, and about God; write to loved ones and about loved ones. Pour out your hopes, dreams and memories. Turn thoughts and impressions into carefully crafted prayers for the people and situations you are concerned about. It can be incredibly powerful!<sup>5</sup>

### ***The Choice of the Day***

Here is a great idea to help us look forward to each day. I learnt it from Kathleen Adams, who lectures widely on the therapeutic value of using journalling as a means of removing trauma. Kathleen urges us to write out the details of two or three topics or appointments every day on a small card. (I use a sheet of coloured paper). She rather delightfully calls this “Le Choix du Jour” – The Choice of the Day.

I find that making a feature out of these events does wonders in prompting me to pray for God to bless these events – even those which I might not instinctively have been looking forward to. This keeps me focused in prayer, as well as providing an easy way of looking back to ponder how these events worked out.

Kathleen also encourages us to write short “vignettes” about special times together that we have enjoyed. She writes that these “Captured Moments” become “like a written photo album, preserving precious memories for all time.” This is a beautiful concept to explore. Why wait till a person has died, or a special season has passed, before recording it on paper?<sup>6</sup>

### **Endnote References**

1 Harvey, J. (2000) *Give Sorrow Words: Perspectives on Loss and Trauma*. p.11. Brunner/Mazel.

2 Pennebaker, J. (1990). *The Healing Power of Confiding in Others*. Morrow. New York.

3 De Salvo L. *Writing as a Way of Healing*. The Women's Press.

4 You may find my book *Craft of Writing* helpful in this respect. You can download it from:

<http://www.ruachministries.org/thecraftofwriting.htm>

5 See my book *The Still Small Voice*. p.73. New Wine Press. 6 See link to Managing Grief through Journal Writing at

<http://www.ruachministries.org/valeoftears/refs.htm>