

Humanities: Art, Language, and Spirituality in Health Care

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Letting Go: A Writing Exercise and a Discussion

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Abstract

There is much in the literature about the benefits of reflective writing for medical practitioners. This article outlines instructions for a novel reflective writing exercise that anyone can do, gives examples for how the exercise has been helpful for the author, and then relates an interdisciplinary discussion that resulted from the use of this exercise when paired with a prompt. *J Pain Symptom Manage* 2020;59:1153–1155. © 2019 American Academy of Hospice and Palliative Medicine. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Key Words

Palliative care, reflective writing, writing exercise, letting go

As palliative care clinicians, we care for patients who are always very sick and oftentimes are dying. We break a lot of bad news. We give prognoses that are usually far shorter than our patients or their family members believe to be true, and every time shorter than they want to be true. Sometimes, we become the target of their anger, as it ensues. This work is a calling, not a vocation, or most of us would leave it.

In the midst of this work, I began experimenting with reflective writing exercises that might help me process the most difficult of my days. There is so much in the literature about the benefits of reflective writing for clinicians but not very much on what it is, or how to do it, or how to get the most of it (even if you know what it is and how to do it). In my trial and error, I stumbled on a writing process that streamlines my thoughts and helps me remember the true purpose of my calling. The only requirements for the exercise are a quiet space without distraction, a writing utensil, and paper. It can be performed by anyone literate (grammarians and nongrammarians alike, writers, and nonwriters), at any time of the day, for as little or as long as one likes. It is, thereby, an exercise in letting go.

I now call it “Finding Meaning in Stream of Consciousness,” and here are the steps:

1. I sit and write everything that comes to my mind, whatever it is, for however long I need. The only rule I have is that I must keep my pen moving: the words do not have to make sense, or flow, or even be spelled correctly. I just have to keep writing until nothing else comes to my mind. Sometimes I have exhausted my thoughts in 10 minutes; sometimes I need 30 minutes.
2. When I am done, I go back through everything I have written and circle all the words that seem to pop off the page, that stand out, that will not be ignored. I write all these words on a separate page.
3. I then look at these words and choose the five or six words that felt most important; I then put them into a kind of order that speaks to me. Sometimes, it is a phrase or a series of phrases.

The exercise is one of purification, where the result is an exquisitely powerful revelation, an unexpected pearl, a precise truth. When I lost a friend from adolescence to cancer, my writing revealed not only anger at the injustice of losing such a well-lived life but also a determination to persevere:

Betrayal. Heart ruptured. Tangled love. Lean in.

Author's note: For more of my writing and wandering insights, please visit my website and blog at www.mendingthefracturedstory.weebly.com.

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The day my grandmother died—the person who had been my grounding presence since my infancy—and I simultaneously developed bilateral positional vertigo, I found words that both explained my predicament and gave me hope for future healing:

My Lighthouse-Amidst-the-Storm. My Stalwart Tree.
Hold fast with steady feet. New roots will emerge.

In caring for patients with a history of trauma, I have uncovered words that helped me better understand their individual journeys and what they might be hoping for going forward:

Rocking crazy. Unsafe. Unaware. Silence. Sit. Listen.
Notice. Trust. Wisdom matters.

And,

Let the envelope of condemnation fall away.
Behold: joy, celebration, beautiful expectation.

Always, the result gives me new insight; always, I am humbled. It is a process of releasing my conscious thoughts onto paper to make room for what is underneath: the still small voice that can only be heard once my conscious mind has let go and, thus, quieted.

After months of using this technique to help me crystallize my deepest thoughts, I wondered if others might benefit from it as well. As such, I began teaching the exercise, and the feedback I received was encouraging. Others remarked on its effectiveness in bringing meaning and insight into their experiences as well.

Sometimes, I will use a writing prompt as a source of inspiration or as a way to focus the group's thoughts. A few months ago, I brought together one of my team's social workers (Christine), my team's chaplain (Dorri), and my hospital's ethicist (Mary) to go through this exercise with me. I wondered how our different perspectives on caring for the seriously ill and dying might influence the outcome of this exercise. We went through the exercise, and then I interviewed them.

The prompt I found was a poem called "Let it Go," by Danna Faulds:

Let go of the ways you thought life would unfold, the holding of plans or dreams or expectations—Let it all go.

Save your strength to swim with the tide.

The choice to fight what is here before you now will only result in struggle, fear, and desperate attempts to flee from the very energy you long for.

Let go. Let it all go and flow with the grace that washes through your days whether you received it

gently or with all your quills raised to defend against invaders.

Take this on faith; the mind may never find the explanations that it seeks, but you will move forward nonetheless.

Let go, and the wave's crest will carry you to unknown shores, beyond your wildest dreams or destinations.

Let it all go and find the place of rest and peace, and certain transformation.

Christine's revelation was, "The illusion of control blocks flow and freedom."

When she is able to let go, Christine says she can find herself in an easy rhythm where it feels like she is moving with the current. She admits, however, "it's hard to get to that place, and then I forget how I got there, and I can't get there again." She expresses frustration around her frequent need to be in control such that letting go feels frightening, although the result is always better.

Dorri found, "Give something—fear—up. Live freely ... it feels great! Free-flowing me ... liberating!"

She states that the heart of this poem, and what we have each individually revealed from it, "are the things that I would preach to our patients and families and colleagues, as well as to myself. We are often so focused on death and dying in our field, but I always try to focus on life and living—not because it's happy, but because that's what it is!"

She goes on, "We might be dying at the same time that we are continuing to live. And it's such a rich time. I don't want to miss it, and I don't want others to miss it. What I embody—what we each embody as we care for those nearing the end of their lives—matters. Shouldn't we embody letting go such that the focus can be on life and living, for whatever time our patients have left?"

Mary wrote, "Unknown shores. Watery wildness. Clinging to faith."

Mary explains her revelation, "I thought about the ancient Celtic Christians who would just get in a boat and not know where they were going to land. I have been drawn all my life to wildness. I don't want to be tamed ... ever. I don't think Jesus would want me to be tame; I don't think Jesus was particularly tame Himself!" She admits, "I'm not sure I really understand what 'letting go' means, but what appeals to me about it is the whole notion of being willing and open to venturing out into the wild, to see where you land and what happens to you. My role as an

ethicist feels like that; I am always being taken to an unknown shore.”

Finally, I wrote, “Wade in and float. Holy submission. Sacred transcendence. Home.”

I confess, “As a medical student who wanted to practice disaster relief medicine, who then became an anesthesiologist, who now practices palliative care, my whole career has been one step at a time.” Although one could argue that palliative care is a form of disaster relief medicine, and thus I have really just come full circle, that insight did not come until I was fully submerged in the specialty. “In many ways, I have had to wade in and float—not swim, not sink—just stay there and wait for the next step or light of direction. It has been a process of letting go, or what I would call submission. Always, the result of that next step feels like a sacred transcendence, like a reward. I am able to rest, momentarily, in the comfort of that transcendence, and that rest feels like home.” If I had seen the entire plan for my career, at its inception, I would have become completely overwhelmed and no longer willing to submit. “By going one step at a time, however, each step feels like I am becoming more and more me.”

We all saw our individual responses to this exercise as aspirational: letting go is something we long for,

or hope to become, or are still working on. With smiles on our faces, we thought about how it can sometimes feel like we are striving to let go. But we also realized that this writing exercise itself—the physical act of letting all of our conscious thoughts out onto a piece of paper, without shame or a need to control or concern for what others might think—had been a practice in letting go.

Perhaps one purpose of reflective writing, of letting go in this way, is to quiet the mind. Perhaps the fruit of consistent practice is the ability simply to be present. Is not our presence sometimes the greatest treatment we can offer?

How much more in tune with our patients would we be if we momentarily let go of our own needs, agendas, and task lists and focused on the suffering right in front of us? How much more sacred would be their beauty if we let go our own fears and allowed our patients to take us to their unknown shores?

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