

Making Soup

A Reflexive Writing Group for Counsellors and Therapists

report by Sandy Hutchinson Nunns

Aim

The aim of the course was to introduce participants to reflexive writing practice for therapeutic purposes.

Objectives

1. To disseminate knowledge and skills: firstly for the participants to use for themselves and secondly as a tool to work with clients.
2. For participants to experience improvement in their own psychological well-being and so to be able to speak with authority of the benefits of reflexive writing practice.

Introduction

I feel that if we value reflexive writing as a technique, we need to pass the skills on. Yes, there are creative writing courses, but there is also a need to teach reflexive writing practice techniques to counsellors and therapists specifically so we can increase the pool of practitioners.

These practitioners will firstly see the therapeutic value of working in this way and secondly learn how to transform the written material generated from such practices into a finished piece of writing.

My course concentrated on the first element – ie enabling participants to experience for themselves the value of therapeutic writing.

Participants were encouraged to complete the exercises, morning pages and keep a journal. From that material they were then encouraged to develop their own finished pieces of writing which did not part of the assessment of this course.

This approach allowed counsellors and therapists with no previous writing experience to try the approach without the focus being the literary qualities of the writing produced.

My own research focused on the journey that they made, asking questions of themselves and how writing helped or hindered their personal therapeutic progress. It also focused on how they will use this practice in their work.

The model of therapy that I was trained in is Transactional Analysis. Within the wider body of theory of that discipline, Muriel James's work on self re-parenting is a concept that I have found of immense value when working therapeutically with reflexive writing. I have written previously about the use of myth and story as a way of appropriating the qualities of mythological figures to compensate for missing relationships or qualities in a person's upbringing. It is self-evident that we as readers and film and theatre audiences take what we need from the characters, and Muriel James offers a psychological theoretical framework for this process. I have worked successfully with this concept before in a psychological setting and felt it appropriate to approach this group as learning to self re-parent in this way.

Again borrowing from Transactional Analysis theory, I used the concept of impasse resolution in psychological settings, including it as the "meat" in my "soup". These links to Transactional Analysis offered the participants tools for treatment planning using the creative arts, making links that are not explicit in the Transactional Analysis or creative writing literature.

My original working partner for this project was the arts organisation 'The South'. Unfortunately they ceased operations whilst this program was in the planning stage and I approached the library instead.

I chose the library for several reasons. It is placed in the centre of the community and is the obvious place to find words. I discovered that they have a remit for outreach and are keen to encourage a wider range of groups to use their facilities.

I had several meetings with a senior manager as well as the senior library assistant of the branch where I was to work (Peacehaven). All the staff concerned seemed very enthusiastic about the project. As part of the collaboration, I gave a workshop to library staff, giving a flavour of the project. On their part, I was given the room at a reduced rate and the senior branch assistant collected as many books from my reading list as the library service had copies of. It was agreed that after the project, feedback would be available from the library's perspective. Unfortunately, no one has been able to provide this at the time of writing. Anecdotal evidence from the branch staff has been very positive.

Participants

12 participants were recruited by a circulated e-mail to the wider counselling community in Brighton and Sussex. I offered places on a reflexive writing course for newly qualified and volunteer counsellors.

One participant attended the first session only and dropped out when she realised she had other commitments. Her place was taken by a late applicant who then completed all other sessions. There were three other applicants who could not make the dates I had advertised and were inquiring if the dates could be changed.

Potential participants were invited to demonstrate their interest by sending a written piece of work to me; all applicants were invited to join the course.

Whilst no stipulations were made, all respondents were female and all between the ages of 30 and 55. This was not unexpected given the demographic of the population of counsellors and therapists.

Participants came from a wide range of backgrounds and therapeutic standpoints and cultural heritage.

The range of modalities practised include: – Integrative counselling –Person Centred - Relate – hypnotherapy – solution focused therapy – co-counselling - Transactional Analysis. Their employment background and settings include – private practice –

NHS – homelessness project – women’s refuge – probation service, family violence project – homoeopathy – bereavement counselling – School counselling.

Structure

The formal structure was for six sessions of teaching held fortnightly for 2 ½ hours. This was to allow sufficient time for participants to process the material and write in their journal in between sessions.

Two additional sessions were scheduled at the request of the participants; one to catch up unresolved issues that may have arisen as participants continued to process the material and a second to report back on the Bristol day to interested parties.

Week 1: -- Skimming the Surface.

Emptying out, making a start.

Morning pages - (Julia Cameron, Dorothea Brand)

Gillie Bolton: - "Writing or Pills" in Hunt and Sampson 98.

"Whatever you write is right, you can't write the wrong thing!

It doesn't even have to be in proper English."

Eileen Caddy - "Footprints on the Path"

"Life is full and overflowing with the new.

But it is necessary to empty out the old to make room for the new to enter."

Rowing boat exercise.

Writing assignment. To begin keeping 'Morning Pages'.

Week 2: -- Taking Stock.

Present: – where are you now? 5 senses exercise.

Past: - where have you been? – Time line, 5 year intervals

Future: – where are you going? Storytellers Tree exercise.

Now tell one of the stories. Tell the rest in your journal later.

Share experience and reflect on use in personal/professional work.

Writing assignment. "This is who I am".

Week 3: -- Vegetables.

a) carrots and onions: -- routine structure, journaling techniques (from Kate Thompson in "Writing Cures" and Kathleen Adams, "Journal to the Self")

b) exotics: -- sacred texts and poetry, envelopes as a journal exercise, discussion of Maura Dooley: "What Every Woman Should Carry"-- create your own poem from this.

Writing assignment. Writing in response to sacred envelopes.

Week 4: -- Meat

The heart of the matter -- impasse resolution.

Cheryl Moskowitz (in Hunt and Sampson, *Self on the Page*, p 37)

In Transactional Analysis terms, impasse work is about acknowledging and working to heal our internal splits. We are socialised by suppressing some part of ourselves. Which bits are allowed to flourish, and which not, is a function of the culture we are raised in. As mature individuals, our well-being will be measured to the extent to which we support the values we've been given. (I.e. we are actually talking about the relationship between our Parent, Adult and Child ego states.)

Working with impasse using writing, including the following: --

a) Melpomene, the Muse of Tragedy p99-101

Create rituals of forgiveness for yourself and others. What forgiveness work do you need to do -- for yourself and others?"

b)Pinkola Estes: *Marking Territory*, 'Descansos' p 364

Writing assignment: writing dates: from Julia Cameron, *Vein of Gold*.

Week 5: -- Spices.

a) A variation of Gillie Bolton's button exercise.

b) Politically correct fairy story – as a boundary between the two events, but specifically to demonstrate transformation in story form.

c) 7 deadly sins exercise. Gluttony, Sloth, Envy, Avarice, Lust, Pride, Wrath

Write about a time when you experienced one of these: examine your thinking feeling and behaviour.

Writing assignment. Transform the story in some way; make a poem, a different ending, a different feeling: try on a different way of looking at it etc.

Week 6: -- Blending it all.

Completion of CORE forms

Reading of finished pieces, feedback, strokes and general discussion

Pub for Soup Lunch.

Evaluation

I chose to use an instrument of measurement that, as counsellors, they would already be familiar with, the goal attainment part of the CORE system. (Available to download free of charge and is a recognised counselling analytical tool.)

Data was gathered in the form of self assessment of change. Participants set their own goals at the beginning of the course and self reported what they felt had been achieved at the end. I analysed the pieces of work participants chose to submit, using this to comment on their stated goals. I have also used my own journal entries from the time to note both my own and participants responses.

Data collection was of two types, one set of data came from the CORE form before and after taking the course. This section allows participants to comment on their personal goals and then give graded feedback on the nature of the course itself. The second set of data comes from the written work that participants chose to submit and it is analysed, along with my own journal entries, to demonstrating the changes participants have made.

The goals the participants have set for themselves are mainly personal but with a sizeable number of professional goals as well. Side one of the CORE personal goal attainment form asks clients (participants) to describe up to four major difficulties that the therapy (attending the reflexive writing group) will help with. After completion of the therapy (course) there is an opportunity to self report on the success of achieving this goal using a Lickert scale with a score of 0 recording no help at all and 4 extremely helpful. At this point participants also grade how helpful the course has been and how likely they are to recommend it to others.

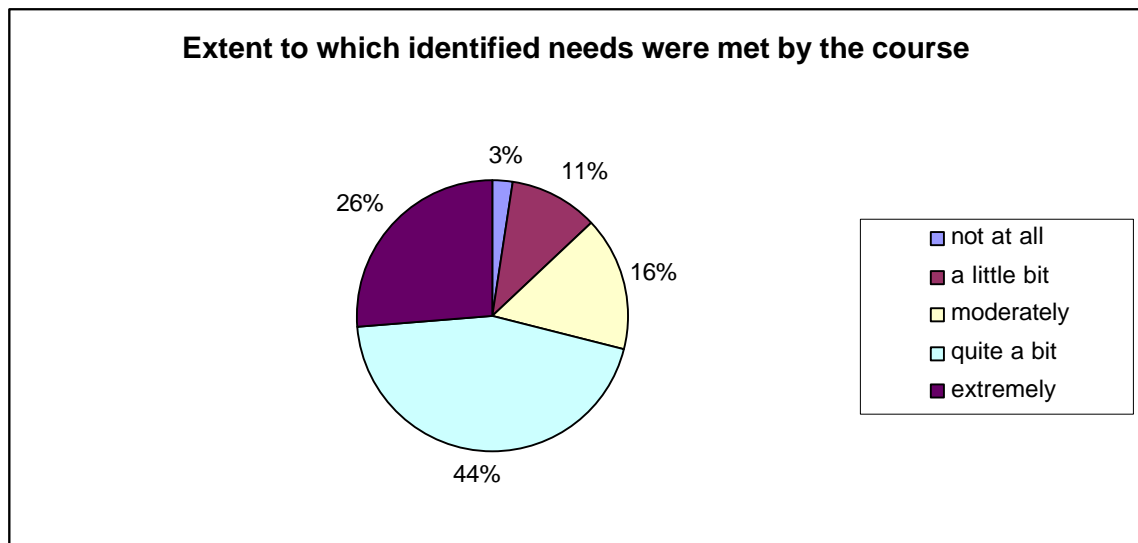
The CORE form allowed for a small amount of quantitative data to be collected, but not all participants chose to fill in that section and there are insufficient scores

available for formal testing. More formal qualitative data collection sections of the CORE pack were considered for use but rejected after clinical supervision because of concerns that the data may have failed to fulfil the criteria for the clinical threshold.

Analysis of Results

It was clear that the course as a whole has been exceptionally well received, with the possible exception of participant 11; the possible reasons for her scores are discussed below.

Out of a total of 38 'needs' identified by the 12 participants, 10 (26%) were totally met, 17 (44%) met quite a bit, 6 (16%) moderately, 4 (11%) a little bit and 1 (3%) not at all.



Eleven people (92%) thought that the course would be very helpful to them in the future; one person thought it would be moderately helpful.

Ten people (84%) were satisfied with the service they had received, one was satisfied and one had mixed feelings.

Eleven participants (92%) would definitely recommend the course and one probably would.

Ten participants gave details explaining their identified unresolved issues and two reported no unresolved issues. These details will inform the analysis of the submitted work.

Discussion

a) Analysis of the method.

The overall aim of the course was for participants to experience the process, to try the material for themselves and, if appropriate, to use it with their clients and get feedback from the group i.e. to disseminate practice. Some empirical data collection was carried out here from CORE, but as an integrative arts project, the majority of the data is of a qualitative nature, generated by the creative processes of the participants to attain their goals of psychological well being.

Also in my mind during this study was consideration of the need to highlight the efficaciousness of humanistic arts therapies in the light of the debate with regard to registration and the inclusion of humanistic and integrated psychotherapies in the current government plans. (See for example the debate in the BACP Journal “Therapy Today”, May 2009 and the ‘ipnosis’ website).

There are always problems with demand characteristics in self reporting by participants. This was possibly the case of participant 11, where her reported low scores are at odds with her reported increase in change.

Some of the problems that individual participants identified are not really “fixable” within the timeframe and methodology, and will have undoubtedly been reflected in the scores given, but the need is to honour the intent of the participant, using the reported change of the participant as an indicator. This is a common issue with open ended question setting where individual’s construction of meaning can be an issue.

The study does have ecological validity however as the results show clear changes by the participants and contains the seeds of future development, in this project with other populations i.e. any group that get burnout – teachers and social workers, GPs, medical students, health care workers and business personnel. All these groups need

safe ways to contain the projected nuggets of others' experience. Such safety is lacking in professions that do not provide personal supervision in this way. This need can be met in a safe way by exploring, possibly with a journal and a book of "moaning pages". (This was the wonderful rebranding of Julia Cameron's term by the participants on this course.)

Content Analysis

General themes

1. Many participants refer to soup in their work, for example submissions by participants two and three.
2. I noted a most profound effect of writing dates on all participants, highlighting the need for solitude and permission and recognition of their own self worth that the participants themselves identified initially.
3. Also profound was the introduction of Morning Pages, again identifying the need for time and space for themselves. I was moved by the need for permission, to see taking the time and space for themselves as legitimate work i.e. the need first to redefine writing morning pages or writing dates as "work", then accepted as pleasure and see its vital sustaining effect on their lives and practice. In transactional analysis this can be defined as 'a redressing of the negative balance of their stroke economy'. (Steiner 71).

Examples of Individual Pieces

Participant Two

This piece was written after the spices exercise, week five. She wrote about sea salt in her soup as a metaphor to deepen her understanding of herself. This supported her own stated goals to tend to her own creativity, to encourage herself and develop her self support network with like-minded others.

"Salt has so many good uses but it is often taken for granted."

" ... but what about those who are known as the salt of the Earth ..."

" ... what soup never benefited from the adding of a little salt?"

Participant Three

This participant also used the metaphor of soup and wrote a deeply moving piece in her journal about her delayed grief following the death of her father many years ago. This was directly related to her goals of finding ways to process her feelings, listening to herself and trusting her gut instinct. She read this piece to the group, directly relating to her goal to be less self-conscious with regard to her feelings of inadequacy in groups.

" I had soup for lunch today ... I close my eyes and was transported back to a Butlins holiday camp. "

" this memory was very sad because it reminded me of my dad. He died over 10 years ago and I still miss him ... although controlling he was the only person in my life who gave me any form of encouragement or attention. "

" I realise what it is I need .. it isn't food.. I just need encouragement and acknowledgement as a human being."

"Phew!!! All this from a bowl of soup!"

Participant Four

Did not feel able to share her writing with the group, but on her CORE form scored herself as achieving 9/16 in terms of succeeding with her own personal goals.

Participant Five

Wrote a very moving, deeply reflective piece following a writing date with herself during which she explored her spiritual development. I see this is a very important piece for this participant. The goals she set herself were all connected to her own personal process and the way she allowed herself to have time for her own development. Her piece can be seen as a bull's-eye transaction, hitting all four of her personal targets.

"My loss of religious faith over the last four years has profoundly changed my life in ways I could not have imagined."

" To understand the pain of my loss which was like a bereavement I have looked back to my early childhood ..."

"... as I no longer had any contact with my own father this (Catholic education) seemed like a suitable replacement to me .."

"... my uncertainty began before I started my counselling diploma but became more insistent as my self-awareness increased .."

"I stopped attending Mass altogether I felt a yearning and sadness so deep that I am still processing the feelings .."

"on my writing date, out on the Downs, ... perhaps I am beginning to be ready to set off as a hopeful but confused agnostic ... a subconscious defence to allow myself some time before I recommenced my spiritual journey."

Participant Six

This was the most experienced writer on the course and the only participant to move from a personal entry, transforming an observation into the beginnings of a short story. This directly related to her goals three and four. She had been writing in her journal about the bus journey home from work. The driver had been a young woman in a headscarf which she fantasised as being a Muslim, then realised she didn't know if the driver was a Muslim or not and went on to create a story about the bus driver.

" .. as soon as I said it I thought I don't know that she's Muslim."

"maybe she liked the way she looked in a headscarf .."

"maybe the great British public were being set up and the reaction is being filmed .."

"I used to fantasise about driving a bus, but I don't have a driving licence ..."

Participant Seven

This participant submitted a poem created from some reflections about her feelings whilst driving through a particular suburb of Brighton each week to attend the course. She was a very private person and didn't share this with the group. The piece seems intensely personal and cathartic, relating to all four of her personal goals, particularly goal three, to touch the reader.

"That woman:

Thorn in my flesh,

Grit in my eye,

Pain in my arse

But how sweet it is, to sit here now and know, with every fibre of my being, That all of that is forever in the past!"

Participant Eight

This, too, was a participant's journal entry; in this case her final reflection after the course was over. This participant did not score her goal attainment, but the submitted piece does address those goals, particularly goal three about being in the here and now, and goal four, finding time to write.

"The course was structured as an art, we were there to learn to give voice to our writing."

"... you can write about the space between the split that you see in your client, this was a very useful exercise."

"I no longer feel it is lonely -- indeed the writing takes away the loneliness I might otherwise sometimes feel."

"Even after the first week I came home and started doing some morning pages and I have done them every morning since."

Participant Nine

This was a most extraordinary piece describing a writing date. The participant had originally lived in London and had gone back for the day, travelling around the tube system and reliving her past wherever the tube took her. The piece was a wonderful honouring of the tube system, with her entries for each line being in the colour of that line and incorporating the map of the underground. The piece ran to five or six pages of notes and probably contains enough material for a book of memoir. It spoke most wonderfully to all four of her stated goals, exploring her creativity and been able to share it with others.

"My original goal of people watching was replaced by a sudden impulse to write about myself and not others. London Underground was a metaphor For the lifelines in my own life I realise that this exercise had enabled me to manage a lot of material and unfinished business. I have vast amounts (sic) of remembering to do."

Participant Ten

From the icebreaker exercise of writing from objects, this participant chose a ball of knitting wool and playfully and creatively surprised herself and us with her beautiful language.

"The thread travels and weaves -- an organic shape, raw tendrils of potential.

Waiting. Incubating."

"Memory of meandering trails mapped through time -- of snowy births in darkened dawns."

"twisted whorls of fibres strong and still tender soft -- to be passed over clever fingers, a vision warmed by breath, the birthing of cloth."

Participant Eleven

This participant did not score herself very highly on goal achievement. They were very deep and serious goals, possibly unrealistic to achieve in six Saturday mornings. Particularly goal 4, "to let go of body issue stuff", seems ambitious in this setting. She did eventually e-mail me a piece of work, a journal entry from the 'this is who I am' exercise, well after the course had finished. The piece seems to relate to goals 1 and 2, trusting self and overcoming perfectionist blocks, reflecting as it does, both sides.

" I'm grounded and my head is in the clouds."

"I'm the girl who looked confident and self-assured to disguise a myriad of self doubts."

"I need people. I need to be alone."

"No one is better than me. Or worse."

"I am a child woman, a woman king, a dominant submissive subversive. Strong vulnerable, hard as nails and soft as a kitten."

Participant Twelve

This was another participant who did not score herself for achievement of her goals. Her work shows that she has gone some way towards her goal of learning and growing and overcoming her anxieties with regard to creativity. She submitted two

pieces, the first from her morning pages and the second her journal responded to the exercise 'this is who I am'.

"The anxiety is a heavy dull throb in my chest ... but I am surprised and pleased now to realise that I feel I belong in the setting, no more or less able than anyone else secure in my place in the world -- a good feeling."

"I am how others see me - I am how I experienced myself today - I am who I believe myself to be - I am most of all perhaps who I want to be - I am a swirling shifting multi-levelled rich colourful being whose breadth and depth and scope and limits I will never understand or perhaps experience. How marvellous, how exciting to be me."

Participant Thirteen

This was another very experienced writer who chose to only set two goals, both appearing to relate to her professional development as a writer, but in fact also deeply personal. The piece that she chose to submit was her journal reflections on sacred text, the task from week 5, spice. Underpinning the piece is a strong sense of her integrating all the images into her personal experience and the making of personal meaning.

"It does seem a struggle to cope with men at times though I've worked mostly in a male environment. At the prison ... I had forgotten what a tough environment it was."

"I have often struggled in relationships with men to keep my independence ..."

"... my dad was hairy, though not a savage - he was much kinder to me than my mother."

"I also need to balance the male/female aspect of myself ..."

My Personal Journal

after session 1. Very excited -- huge amount of skills in pp's -- all counsellors but also probation officers homoeopaths social workers, also a vast range of work situations. Some of them are also very experienced writers, one who has done a

complete Julia Cameron artist way course and is very familiar with morning pages -- participant 1 has also done creative writing MA five years ago but not kept up the writing.

All enthusiastic about the course for themselves and their clients - taught morning pages by just diving in i.e. a show not tell of "skimming the surface". I felt elated -- it had happened! I write when they do and it worked very well -- I did the rowing boat exercise and found a therapeutic nugget for myself.

I'm a bit unsure about how I am in relationship with the library -- seems a bit of a one-way street.

after session 2. I asked how it had been and several had already used morning pages with clients. One participant described the group she runs for male perpetrators of domestic abuse. One particular member has been so angry "about his childhood" that she had been considering asking him to leave the group. Instead she asked him to arrive 15 minutes early and gave him pen and paper in the waiting room. She invited him to do his version of morning pages and "skim off" some of his anger. She reports he was more able to then access the group without angry outbursts.

Other participants discussed how they had played around with the timing of writing. Those new to it being surprised by its impact and old hands delighted to rediscover the comfort of the practice.

After the spice exercise (evoking the present time) participants who had chosen to work with the smell will often be the ones whose emotions were more deeply touched. When I wrote the timeline exercise (evoking the past) I found my attention drawn to a 15-year-old me who had spots. From there I found a link to the TA Game of Blemish and did some productive work in therapy myself that week. I really struggled with the future part of the exercise. I found myself censoring and learned a lot. More therapy I suppose!

after session 3. I know I was over prepared -- too much in Kate's article for half a session - but even so I was unprepared for what evolved - each heading led off with the tangent to an interesting discussion between the participants, how that aspect had

affected them or their clients and so to other consequences and other therapeutic issues. Miriam Halahmy's work from Diana Hedges book and participants were very chatty about the content which led to more discussion than writing - this led to an interesting and fruitful discussion about the differences between writing and talking about things. (In her final feedback one participant had not enjoyed this discussion and felt it had got away from the writing but she didn't say anything at the time.)

One participant described how she was taken aback by the different lines her thinking/speaking took from what came onto the page. I hadn't planned to get too theoretically technical on the program, but at this point I did talk a bit about Winnicott and personal space. We also got into a debate about the difference between reflective and reflexive writing.

In the second half using "inspiration from sacred texts" – I used my sacred Reparenting workshop material on sacred female images, linking this to Muriel James's Reparenting model. It was a very moving exercise for everybody, the group is already by pure chance culturally diverse -- Iranian, French, Scottish, American, Jamaican -- and the goddesses randomly chosen were Eskimo, Babylonian, Celtic, Japanese and Korean (just from memory). Some participants didn't want to reveal or share, some cried, some laughed, some were intrigued -- all had to be shoved out of the door as the session was refusing to end. For the second week they left in groups to have coffee/lunch together.

It was very hard work keeping all the balls in the air -- but extremely satisfying.

I chose a goddess too, Mens, -- 'menstruation' derives from the name of the Roman goddess of the "right moment". I laughed out loud when I saw what I had chosen.

after week 4. I love using this bit of Cheryl's writing and how I have linked it into TA's work on impasse theory - based on acknowledgement of internal splits. We are socialised by suppressing some parts of ourselves; which parts are allowed to flourish and which not is a function of the culture we are raised in. The book on the nine Muses has been a real find with both that and the Pinkola Estes offering insights for

how to work therapeutically in a writing way with the material produced from this therapeutic process. Boy did I have too much material!

Personal journal. On checking out with participants on their use of the journals, most report that they had persevered with the exercises and particularly the goddess image chosen even if it had appeared negative on first reading. For example one participant had been very tearful to find her goddess related to mothering and her current therapeutic issue was about her own mothering. The chosen goddess devoured children and when she was cut open the children were found not in her stomach, but in her womb. The participant was very moved having written and thought much about this image. She reported she had gained much by sticking with the image and writing her responses and had come out of the other side feeling she had gained much comfort and insight. The group was also moved and very supportive of her journey. Another participant had chosen a Korean smallpox goddess and had been both amused and horrified by this. After working with the image she had found it to be a powerful metaphor for her in working with the end of the relationship she was experiencing. Two members had been unable to attend a session and so chose goddesses the next session, at which point the other members wanted to choose another. In an amazing coincidence, this participant blindly chose yet another smallpox goddess from another culture out of hundreds of possibilities. She took that as some kind of incentive to explore the image further, but has not reported anything further.

References

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James, M: 1974: Self Reparenting: Theory and Process: Transactional Analysis Journal, 4, 3 pp32-9

Steiner, C: 1971: The Stroke Economy: Transactional Analysis Journal 1, 3 pp9-13
Therapy Today: Vol. 20, Issue 4: May 2009: pp10-30

Appendix 1:

Phrases used by participants on CORE

2 – tend to own creativity, encourage self, self support, not give it away,
meet like-minded others

3 – be more creative, in touch with self, lack of self consciousness, Intuition, trust ‘gut
instinct’, Listen to self. Find more ways to process feelings

4 – move on from negative feelings esp re father, Connect with creativity,
To find self and my direction, Stop ‘pleasing’ and being ‘perfect’

5 – time for self reflection, Intuition and awareness, Slow down and savour small
things, Be creative with writing and time – enrichment

6 – prioritise writing, Let go angst and self sabotage, Use writing to focus honestly on
past, Move from ‘morning pages’ to use writing therapeutically

7 – find own voice and express ‘essence’ , Write spontaneously and coherent
To write to touch the reader, Increase competence/write more effectively on client
work

8- honest/make friends with own Child, Working alliance with writing, Be here and
now, not stuck, Find time to write

9 – more in here and now, Explore dormant creativity, Extend range of tools as
therapist, Ability to share this with others

10 – write regularly to find a place to develop creativity, To be friends with own
writing/play/authentic, Personal experiences of writing, To surprise myself/discover
something new about myself

11 - overcome perfectionist blocks, Trust self, Creative and emotional spontaneity,
Let go of body issues stuff

12 - anxieties re: creativity, Add to toolbox, Networks of others on course, Continue
to learn/grow/change

13 - Anxieties about the future, Disappointments over not writing full-time