

The Write Road to mental health and wellbeing—the power of story to shape confidence, courage, identity and destiny

Stephanie Dale

The Write Road, NSW

A woman walks into a wooden hall in a small settlement 200 kms from anywhere. She is not young, neither is she old. She is bent, huddled over a walking stick, leaning on her husband.

Two brief writing workshops later, the woman leaves the workshop. Her eyes are shining. She is walking tall, no longer leaning on her husband. She is swinging her walking stick.

What happened in those few hours to change this woman's sense of wellbeing so enormously, at least for a while?

I have a theory.

And this theory is that while all the creatures of the earth need three things for their survival—air, water, food—human beings have a fourth requirement, and that is creative expression.

Yes of course we can survive physically without painting, or taking photographs, or writing, or crafting the myriad objects a human being may be inspired to create. But when we do not allow ourselves time to create, by denying the inspiration that floods a human heart and mind, the human spirit will contract, collapse into itself.

Not acting upon our longing to create, will cause the human body to harden, tense, become bloated or brittle.

Without a willingness to risk creating, the longing to create will begin to devour our sense of self. It will haunt and hound and taunt and badger us. The longing may not kill us physically but it will smother our spirit. And when that happens we will withdraw. We may fall ill. And there's a high probability we will take our frustration with ourselves out on others.

So my belief—this theory—is that to be well, for families and communities to be well, we must create.

I have been stalking stories.

Twelve months ago, I drove west on a hunch, a roll of the dice, that people living in remote areas might want a hand telling their stories.

I gave my hunch a name—The Write Road—and began with two writing workshops, Song of the Soul and Creative Journaling.

Right from the get-go people came. They drove, and still drive, hundreds of kilometres through the dust for a two-hour writing workshop. They hitchhike when they have no personal transport. They gather in circles in libraries and old wooden halls. They cry with relief as they name—and claim—their 'right' to begin work on their story. They sit in awe as they witness friends and family, neighbours and strangers share their deepest longing to write and speak, until this moment secret, projects of gentle ambition and hope and practical value to their community and, even, the national heritage.

The Write Road has three foundational workshops upon which our work is built: two workshops, Song of the Soul and Creative Journaling, and an event, My Place.

Song of the Soul is billed as a workshop for people who long to cross the bridge between thinking about writing—and doing it.

Song of the Soul addresses the longing of the human heart—in this case to write; to share who we are and what we know. Through a series of small exercises designed to catch the expectant mind unawares, participants slowly excavate the way to their own heart.

And from there we identify the project they are most longing to begin work on—not the one they feel safest attempting, not the one their sense of identity says is the one that will make them feel important, not the one that others keep nagging them to write—we find the project that is the deep whisper within, the one that until now they have dared not acknowledge, the one that will ask them to risk all they think they know about themselves in the attempt, the one that dares them to *try* regardless, the one that threatens them with failure, the one that challenges everything they have told themselves they are capable—or more probably not capable—of doing.

And so they return from their expedition to their deepest self with a trophy—a project—a story with the potential to change everything they believe about themselves, and they return with a map for the journey ahead, and they return with a point of departure for the journey. And they return with the light of inspiration in their eyes, because they know where and when they will start.

It was this journey—just two hours long—that blew the lid off the small contracted world of the woman 200kms from anywhere who entered the workshop leaning on her walking stick and her husband, and sent her spirits sky high with faith in the validity of her own potential.

It was this journey that reinvigorated the spirits of a woman in a tablelands town who longed only to write a letter of hope to her husband and sons—with whom she lives—all of whom were withdrawn and incommunicative as a result of a drought that was destabilising not only their property and income, but also their family relationships. She wanted to write them a letter to remind each of them what was special about them.

It was this journey that empowered a very old woman in a small New England village to take giant, gusty steps to 'right a family wrong'. She had come along to Song of the Soul hoping to find the courage she needed to tell the truth about a family secret, so she might free future generations from the legacy of a terrible burden she had carried for nearly a hundred years.

It is worth mentioning that The Write Road is not an expedition to unearth latent talent—although occasionally, yes indeed we do. There are people out west with memoirs, science fiction trilogies and short story collections whose names you will hear in the future. But it is not the point of The Write Road and it is not the point of Song of the Soul.

The point is recovery—recovering a human voice that has gone silent, recovering a spirit that is suffering for lack of hope, recovering the will to claim what is rightfully ours, naming not just a story—but our own story—and then claiming our right to tell it.

Song of the Soul is usually paired with the Creative Journaling workshop.

Creative Journaling is billed as a workshop to maximise creative potential in everyday life. Journaling is a powerful tool for clarifying thoughts, solving problems and establishing clear pathways forward as people pursue life, family and business or career goals. Through a series of short exercises, participants are slowly introduced to the idea that they really—as in really, really—have the power to decide how they feel in any given moment.

It's your story—you can tell it anyway you like.

Creative Journaling is a wonderful workshop for the newly literate. It encourages the practice of everyday writing—easygoing writing on the initiate's own terms, no pressure to perform, to fill out a form, to represent themselves to a government institution. It develops the habit of writing as second nature.

Participants are also introduced to the idea that there is a range of intelligences available to them—in any moment—to inform their story about situations, events and encounters.

All of us meet situations in everyday life where we anticipate a conversation we fear will be awkward or difficult. It might be with a neighbour, a family member, a work colleague. Anticipating the conversation is stressful. We know we should be able to speak reasonably, yet we fear things will go awry, that we'll end up unnecessarily entangled, or worse, in a fight.

Journaling is a powerful tool for preparing ourselves for these encounters. By expressing ourselves in the safety of our own world, letting the pen run wild with our thoughts as we name everything that is there to be named without judgement or fear of judgement, we are in a position to familiarise ourselves with our fears, explore options for the way forward and, most importantly, give ourselves the opportunity to clarify the outcome that is most desirable before we enter the encounter.

It's your story—you decide how it goes.

Of all the wonderful outcomes I've had the privilege of witnessing over the past year running these workshops, the one that touched me most involved a young indigenous woman, seven months pregnant and in need of a great deal of support, who attended a creative journaling workshop in a small town far, far out west.

This young—very young—woman had already lost two children to community services. She was one among seven white women in the workshop.

At the end of the session, as everyone stood to leave, she said:

“I would like to read my writing.”

I looked around at the leaving women and invited those who needed to leave to do so, indicating subtly that those who stayed would be staying for as long as this took. Everyone sat down.

And so it was that this somewhat broken young woman exacted the attention of seven confident white women and shared her private journey. *Please, picture that scene.*

Later that week, she said to her support worker: “I have never felt as calm as I have since that workshop.”

This is the power of visibility.

The power of claiming our right to raise our voice and speak our truth as best we know it in this moment.

The power of story.

The Write Road's third workshop is an event—a community storytelling project that has two names: My Place, and, when all participants are women, Her Place.

Her Place is billed as ‘a weekend of creative empowerment, exploration and kinship’.

The event, ideally run over three days, is a short series of creative writing and photography workshops that give visibility and voice to women's connection to remote landscapes.

The more general My Place is a one, two or three-day event for small communities—a school, a town, a skate park.

Why Her Place?

With the notable exception of poets such as Dorothea Mackellar and Miles Franklin, women's experiences and artistic and/or literary expressions of Outback Australia have been largely absent from public narrative and, in turn, the national psyche.

For the past two centuries, Outback Australia has been the mythic domain of rugged men and bush poets.

In fact, women (colonial and otherwise) have long been a part of our remote landscape and yet precious little is recorded and preserved about their experiences and artistic and/or literary impressions. On a good day, if she is remembered at all, she may be remembered as ‘kind and gracious’.

That is in quotes because it is the only mention I heard of women during the entire week I attended an Outback festival last year.

When women are included in public celebrations of connection to land they tend to be defined by their relationships to the men of the land: wife, mother, daughter, sister. And they are categorised as a sub group; for example, 'women of the west'.

Does it matter?

Most people living in the NSW far west know women who are dealing with succession issues—her right to own the land she works, independently or in partnership.

So yes, the fact women's connection to land is not 'the norm', matters.

There are other shadows in this story. One station owner told me:

"It constantly amazes me what women put up with to be out here—isolation, violence, poverty. It's more than loss of financial assets or absence of resources that make her stay. In many cases she is unwilling to tear her spirit away from the land she loves."

These non-visible narratives inform women's connection to land, her 'right' to be there. The reality is women have their own, independent, fully realised, rich and identifiable connection to the Outback; their individualised understanding and wisdom informed by the complexities of what it is to be human in a harsh landscape, ranging all the extremes from love to hate, reverence to fear, sometimes all at once. Her Place exists to give visibility and voice—in an everyday way—to this connection

Again, the outcomes of this event are life changing. There is the older woman who drove the lonely dusty red road of the Outback alone for the first time in two years, because the opportunity to attend a writing workshop, to gather with other women in creative space, was greater than the fear that had immobilised her.

Four women—half of one workshop—in the beginning flatly refused to consider they might have something to write, making such absolute statements as:

Can't spell, can't read my own writing.

Nuh, no way, nothin' to say.

I'm here for the photography, not interested in words.

Can't write to save myself.

Without exception, these four women produced—and performed—singularly spectacular pieces of writing, sharing their story of connection to place in words and images with an audience, and most have gone on to publish their work on blogs and, in some cases, a magazine.

Another of these women said to one of her neighbours the following day: "I've told the kids they're on their own today with school (her children attend School of the Air)—I've got so many words in my brain I have to get them down."

All three workshops run by The Write Road have resulted in reinvigorated relationships in a small remote communities. Participants learn new things about their neighbours—in some cases they have met their neighbours! New conversations have been ignited around shared passions, fears, hopes and visions. Their vulnerabilities are shared, no longer hidden; they have invited others to believe in their dreams and goals. They have greater appreciation of their unique creative talents and are more confident in pursuing their personal dreams and goals.

The Write Road might be offering writing workshops—in fact our currency is optimism and courage.

Writing can enhance our physical and emotional wellbeing.

Writing can redefine a person's attitudes in situations of crisis and difficulty.

Writing can shape our short and long term destiny.

This is not theory—it's hard research.

A study on the effect of written emotional expression on immune function in patients with HIV (1), found that writing had a direct impact on the cells in the human body, leading to improved outcomes in the immune system of participants.

An article published in the American Journal of Public Health called The Connection Between Art, Healing and Public Health (2) analysed more than 100 studies to assess peer-reviewed research on arts and healing. It found "creative expression can make a powerful contribution to the healing process" and "creative activities (have) the potential to contribute toward reducing stress and depression and can serve as a vehicle for alleviating the burden of chronic disease".

US social psychologist James Pennebaker pioneered research into the connection between expressive writing (that is writing about thoughts and feelings) and mental and physical wellbeing. Across a range of studies, the findings of Pennebaker and others include:

- writing about upsetting experiences produces long-term improvements in mood and health (3)
- emotional writing can positively influence frequency of GP visits, immune function, stress hormones, blood pressure and a number of social, academic and cognitive variables.

Pennebaker says: "These effects have been shown to hold across cultures, age groups, and diverse samples." (4)

Other studies have found expressive writing results in improved control over pain, pain severity and depression (5), improvements in fatigue and psychological wellbeing (6) and immediate improvements in negative mood (7).

Specific, objectively assessed, physical outcomes include positive effects on blood pressure, liver function, lung function and number of days in hospital (8).

Specific, objectively assessed personal and social outcomes for those who use expressive writing include higher grades for students, less absenteeism from work, greater employment prospects after losing a job, better working memory, enhanced sport performance and better social interactions (9).

So writing doesn't just make you feel better—in every possible way it makes you better.

In pursuing the power of writing to heal, Dr Pennebaker was curious about how people with powerful secrets are prone to ill-health (10). Of course the definition of 'powerful secret' is deeply subjective, dependent on both the individual and the perceived burden that they cannot or will not speak.

We all have that which we do not speak, will not speak, fear we cannot speak—even to ourselves.

When we deny ourselves the right to explorative creative expression—the right to name and claim our story—what do we do with our own stifled story? Having shut ourselves down, we are highly likely to shut others down. We silence them. For how can we allow others their story if we deny our own?

Here's a small truth: every human being is born with longing in their heart.

That longing denied can lead to a closed and bitter life, one prone to expressing itself by reinforcing other bitter hearts. That longing expressed is a revolution, a burning creative force that allows for the truth of ourselves and others, and changes everything, for everyone.

The 14th century mystic poet Jalaluddin Rumi said:

when you come across a storyteller
know a house is being destroyed

The reality is claiming our story will change everything—it must.

Once the story is claimed our deepest knowable truth is exposed—and from there, there is no turning back. It may not mean we change our domestic situation, for example—it will mean we negotiate healthier terms for staying.

It's heartbreaking how many people believe that to take time out to write is to 'waste time'. It is a common thread in the Song of the Soul workshops. Much as they long to do it, the fear of appearing idle is greater than the longing.

Surely, everyone is entitled to sit on their verandah while the sun goes down with a book on their lap and a pen between their fingers, clarifying thoughts, exploring ideas, telling stories. Are they working or are they resting?

The French impressionist Claude Monet was sitting in his garden, gazing languidly into an unknown distance. His neighbour put his head over the fence and said 'm'sieur, you are resting'. 'No,' replied the great artist, 'I am working.' Three days later Monet was in his garden painting. The neighbour put his head over the fence and said 'm'sieur, you are working!' 'No,' said Monet, 'I am resting.'

Sitting idle, apparently wasting time, is as essential to the creative process and the human spirit as paint and brush, pen and paper, wood and adze.

Last year my granddaughter graduated Year 12. In the yearbook her biology teacher wrote: Krystle Dale—top of biology while spending 58% of her time on art. I laughed. We all laughed. And then I thought more deeply about the teacher's observation—it was astute. While studying throughout high school, Krystle would move around her room—art materials all over her floor, headphones on her head, one moment science, the next You Tube, the next line drawings on the floor, the next maths, the next paints and Disney quotes of the day.

I no longer believe it was a coincidence—or even funny—that while spending 58% of her time on art she topped not only biology.

Creative expression is as vital to our wellbeing as food, air, water.

Because our story, regardless of which creative means we choose to express it, IS the answer. Our story makes us strong. Inviolable. Free to begin. Free to begin again.

To do this we must recover from this destructive idea that to be creative is to waste time, that to sit quietly with a pen and a notebook is to be slothful, idle.

Because the truth is that stories are all we have.

Stories are the only thing that nothing—no person, no event, no weather, no circumstance—the only thing we have that nothing can take away from us. We can lose everything, *everything*, but we cannot lose our stories.

So ultimately, the only thing we truly have, the only thing we truly own, is our story.

Like the winds and waters that shape this ancient land, our experiences of life shape our identity, and the shape we give our story will mold how we see ourselves and from there, how others see us.

Our evolving story. The one that, claimed or not-claimed, with or without our consent, with or without our awareness, is shaping our confidence, our courage, our identity and our destiny.

To be well, we must create; to be strong we must know our story.

Recommendations

The implementation of a national public health campaign that recognises the value of creative expression—that taking time out to create is not ‘wasting time’.

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Presenter

Stephanie Dale is an award-winning regional journalist and author, with wide-ranging experience in media, politics and publishing. Throughout 20 years in the newspaper industry she was a passionate advocate for the visibility and voices of everyday Australians. She now works to encourage people and communities to identify their story and speak for themselves. In 2014, she founded *The Write Road*, a creative initiative that takes writing and communications workshops and training to the bush and beyond. What began as an arts program quickly evolved into a proactive mental health strategy that is achieving positive results for individuals and remote communities. Stephanie’s work was acclaimed at the 2014 Women Out West Awards.