

CREATIVE/LEGACY WRITING MANUAL: WHEN LIVING THROUGH AND SURVIVING A TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE – COVID-19 AS AN EXAMPLE



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Introduction

Creative writing helps to promote personal well-being, reduces stress, and to remain resilient when facing challenges. It provides the opportunity to express feelings, thoughts, and points-of-view. During this public health crisis, writing can be used to remain empowered, to be productive and remain intellectually engaged, to hold on to a sense of meaning and purpose, and to buffer adverse effects from being isolated.

This brief manual provides you with writing exercises to guide you through the creative writing process. While COVID-19 and its ramifications for lives are a trauma, they may not be a traumatizing for everyone. However, confronting and living through this public health crisis may be a transformative experience, affecting the course of lives, even across generations.

Thinking about and responding to questions provided in the second section of this manual lays the groundwork for engaging in legacy writing about this “chapter” in your life. What do you want to remember always? What do you want to share with future generations? By working on these exercises, you’ve started the process of reflecting on what you’ve learned and what you want to share about this period in your life. How do you want your memories, words of wisdom, insights, and “your story” to be preserved? Options are not limited to writing (e.g., memoirs), but starting with writing down your thoughts is a powerful mechanism to leave your legacy.



PART 1

WRITING EXERCISES



Journaling is beneficial for remaining well and resilient, is a mechanism for expressing thoughts and feelings, and helps to reduce stress. Additions to your journal can be short statements when you “check-in” with yourself daily, lists, brief reflections about what you are concerned about during this pandemic, essays or poems.

Suggested prompts that could be used if you are “stuck” with what to write about:

1. Regardless of what is happening now, I am grateful for....
2. Oddly enough, this crisis has....
3. As I react to this crisis, I realize that I have strengths--....
4. I have come to believe....
5. What concerns me most now....
6. What truly matters to me
7. I am worried about....
8. What helps me most now....
9. Maintaining connections
- 10.Support
- 11.Physical distancing
- 12.When I think of the future...
- 13.The world....
- 14.If I had control over what will happen....
- 15.I am empowered....
- 16.I hope....

Diana Spore



Make gratitude journaling part of your daily life, if at all possible. Remembering what you are grateful for, even now, can be helpful for promoting well-being and resilience, and for maintaining a positive attitude

SUGGESTED WRITING EXERCISES:

1. With regard to gratitude journaling (It's OK to use a small notebook that you can tuck into your purse or pocket):
 - a. express your thanks for people who are part of your life or our lives, for experiences, for intangible "gifts;"
 - b. write "thanks" memories;
 - c. write quick notes of appreciation to others, simply one or two lines, for your eyes only.
2. Write about what you are grateful for in general – essay or poem format.
3. Write about what you are grateful for even now, as we face this public health crisis together.

Diana Spore



During this pandemic, heroes and heroines have emerged, making a difference in many ways. Researchers, medical staff, first responders, and mental health providers have risen to the challenge. Others are creating face masks, writing letters to those who are isolated to bring them hope, running errands, texting and making phone calls to help others to stay connected, so much more. Many of our heroes are hidden, almost overlooked.

Please write about what you define as a hero or heroine at this time. Think of at least two “groups” that are engaging in heroic acts; then, write a letter of gratitude that you would like to share now or after the dust settles. Then, write a list of three individuals who are heroes/heroines – particularly those who are “hidden.” Write a letter to each of these individuals, expressing gratitude and making them aware that their “gifts” are making a difference. Every act of kindness at this time is heroic, pure and simple.

Diana Spore

During this challenging time for all of us, continue to express your thoughts and feelings in writing. Hold on to your works, even if you decide that they should be for your eyes only.

Suggested trio of writing exercises, all of which require you to use descriptive language (e.g., refer to all five senses), similes, and metaphors:

1. Describe the coronavirus. Remember to write about what it looks like, what it tastes like, what it feels like, what it smells like, what it sounds like.
2. Describe the room you found yourself in the most during the required “stay-at-home” time period. With regard to the use of similes versus metaphors: My living room was like a prison (simile). My living room was a safe haven (metaphor).
3. Describe yourself as a warrior against the coronavirus.

Thereafter, write about hope (descriptive, use of all five senses, similes and/or metaphors).

Diana Spore





Especially now, it is important for us to maintain connections, to offer support. It is possible for us to be buoyed up by those who are supportive, and it is possible for us to buoy up others who are struggling during this pandemic.

Definition of buoyed – to be uplifted, to remain afloat.

Let's think about what is possible to do in writing, even just a simple message saying "hi, thinking of you, how are you doing?"

Suggested writing exercise: Create a written message (a poem, a letter, a note) to be read by someone who may feel very alone or who is struggling during this public health crisis. What would you want to read if someone was attempting to provide hope and comfort? It is OK for the message to be only two or three lines in length.

Examples:

"We have spoken by phone many times and that has brought me close to you. I wanted to write and share this message with you. I know that you can't have visitors in the nursing home and are kept apart from other residents at this time. Please know that I am always thinking of you and while we are separated physically, I hold you in heart. And please always remember how important you are to me, how much you mean to me. Hope surrounds us. I love you."

"Thinking of you, as always. Please know that we are all traveling this uncertain journey together. Staying close to you while apart means more than you'll ever know. Will be talking to you soon. Stay well and safe."

Diana Spore



Suggested Writing Exercise: After reflecting on the quote below, write a set of bullet-points about how it makes you feel, and what it means to you. Thereafter, craft a poem or short essay, even if you decide that it should be for your eyes only.

“There is something in the human spirit that will survive and prevail.

There is a tiny and brilliant light burning in the heart of a man that will not go out no matter how dark the world becomes.” – Leo Tolstoy

Diana Spore



During this pandemic, it is important to remain connected, to retain a sense of hope, and to consider what you can and cannot control. While this coronavirus public health emergency is a trauma, it may not be viewed as traumatizing by all. I'd like for you to think about the most significant challenge -- which may or may not be the pandemic and related isolation -- you are facing now.

Suggested Exercises:

Draw a line down one sheet of paper. On the left side, write down what you can control in meeting and overcoming this challenge/trauma (e.g., how you react to circumstances, your attitude). On the right side, write down what you cannot control.

Then review the quotation below. Write a short essay about what you believe when you look at your lists and this quote.

"Hope is a beautiful thing. It gives us peace and strength, and keeps us going when all seems lost. Accepting what you cannot change doesn't mean you have given up on hope. It just means you have to focus your hope on more humanly tangible and attainable goals." -- Julie Donner Andersen

Diana Spore



One mental health issue that is coming up or will arise is how to address the grieving process during this pandemic. How can we provide support to those who grieve – due to a new way of life, what may turn out to a “new” normal for how we live. We may grieve when we realize that those who are loved are at risk of being exposed to the coronavirus, who may become ill, and who may die. We may also grieve when we realize that there may not be time to resolve differences with others, to find a sense of peace.

Please consider what you would write to someone who you know is grieving. Keep in mind, however, that we may all be grieving in one way or another. What would you write to express sympathy, compassion? Simply write a short piece. When doing so, you may also feel a sense of peace. An example is provided below:

“I am thinking of you. I know how difficult this time has been for you, perhaps for all of us. We are dealing with such uncertainty, with changes occurring almost hour-by-hour. Like you, I am concerned in knowing that two of our closest friends are ill. While they may not have exposed to the coronavirus, I still grieve. I know that they are afraid and worried. All I can do is reach out to them at a distance. As far as what is going on in this world, I know that it is essential to maintain hope and connections, to stand together in this war. Angie, stay safe and well.”

Diana Spore



SUGGESTED WRITING EXERCISE: Think about the following quotes. Write about the one or ones that mean the most to you, especially during this pandemic.

“The past cannot be changed. The future is yet in your power”

Mary Pickford

“Do something today that your future self will thank you for”

Anonymous

“The future starts today, not tomorrow”

Pope John Paul II

“You cannot escape the responsibility of tomorrow by evading it today”

Abraham Lincoln

“An obstacle is often a stepping stone”

William Prescott

“Light tomorrow with today”

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

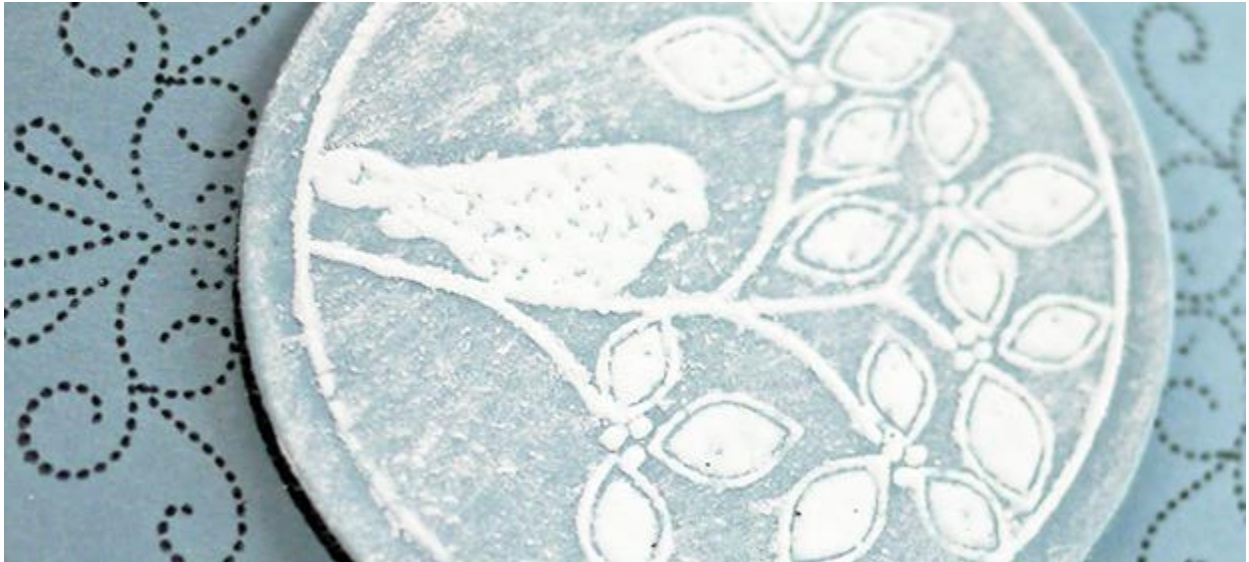
“Make each day your masterpiece”

John Wooden

“What we fear of doing most is usually what we most need to do”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Diana Spore



Suggested Writing Exercise: Write a message of hope to an individual or a group who you want to connect with during this pandemic. Frame it as a poem or a letter. An example is provided below.

WISHING YOU WELL

May you find a sense of peace as we travel this journey in a new “coronavirus” world.

May you always remember that you are not alone.

May you realize that hope embraces us tight during this fight.

May you feel free to reach out – at a distance – for support when you are afraid and lonely.

May you realize that you are needed, make a difference, and are important.

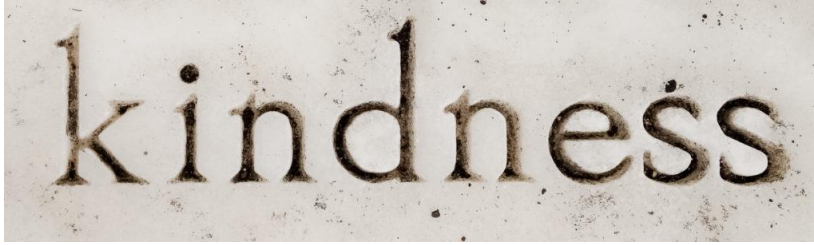
May you find comfort in knowing that we will make it through this crisis – together.

May you continue to find a reason to smile.

May you know how much you are loved.

Wishing you well.

Diana Spore



Suggested Writing Exercise: Create a poem made up of questions, other than for the last line or two. Write the questions that are on your mind now, as we live thorough the pandemic. An example is provided.

AFTER THE DUST SETTLES

*During this pandemic that transformed our lives –
Was I kind?*

Did I try to connect with someone who was afraid, hurting, and alone? And, if so, did I make every effort to be positive, to help him or her to maintain a sense of hope and empowerment?

Was I kind?

Did I say I was “too busy,” or imply that I that I saw myself as more “important” than those who were reaching out?

Was I kind?

Did I understand that those living near to me might be ill, dying, resting, or working at home, that some were crying out for silence?

Was I kind?

Was I aware that ethical issues were arising, some of which necessitated that advocacy efforts move forward with urgency? That some people were working feverishly at their computers, trying to use the power of the pen?

Was I kind, respectful, and aware?

Was I concerned about what our legacies would be, what ethicists and historians would say in the future?

Did I realize that little things matter even in times of crisis?

Was I kind?

Hope, love, kindness, support, and integrity were the strongest ammunition in our arsenal in this invisible war.

Was I kind?

Diana Spore

PART 2

PANDEMIC-FOCUSED LEGACY WRITING EXERCISES

CHALLENGES

Think about challenges faced in the past, ones that you have overcome.

- What did you find to be helpful to remain well?
- What will you remember always?
- What memories do you want to share with others?

- When you reflect on the COVID-19 crisis facing us now, where does this potentially traumatizing experience “fit” in the overall scheme of what has been most difficult for you in comparison to handling other personal crises?

- When you think about what you have learned when facing other challenges, did this knowledge and awareness provide you with strength, hope and/or determination? If yes, write about in what ways. What made the biggest difference?

- How did you react when you learned about COVID-19, its potential ramifications for the immediate, short-term, and long-term future? Write a poem or short essay about what you discovered about yourself.

- When you think about historical events in the past, in what ways did this make a difference in your attitude and beliefs? How did you view what was happening in our Nation and World in our responses to the COVID-19 public health emergency?



Write down your reflections about the following issues that emerged during this pandemic. What did you learn most about yourself?

Impact of forced or self-imposed isolation



Impact of knowing that certain subpopulations were at greatest risk of becoming ill after exposure to the coronavirus, and of dying?



Impact of safety guidelines and restrictions in your life



togetherness

Need to use innovative or different
approaches for remaining connected

Mental health concerns



Quality of life



Thoughts about what advocacy efforts
needed to be addressed and prioritized.



Write about what you lost during this pandemic, what you grieved about.

Write about what you “gained” or found to be a “gift” during this pandemic, if anything.



Write a list of what you found you needed most to be able to remain connected with others.

When you look at the all that you have learned, what do you most want to remember always, and to share with future generations?

Write down your thoughts (poem or short essay) using this sentence fragment in the first line or as the title to your work:

LOOK TOWARD THE FUTURE AND BELIEVE



What might you want to write about now, and to share your memories by creating lasting mementoes? What types of mementoes, ones that can be created solo and/or with others, would you like to create? What would you want to “make happen?” Keep in mind that working collaboratively can be done even when physical distancing is needed or required.

PART 3

“NEW NORMAL” EXERCISES

As Ohio starts to “open up” during this stage of the pandemic, reflect on what you imagine the “new normal” to be. Refer to the following diagram noting aspects of what is included in the big picture for the “new normal.” Write about (1) each of them, (2) three or so aspects that are most important from your perspective, or (3) the one(s) that is/are most relevant in your life. Use poetry, list-making, a paragraph or two, or bullet points. Then compose an essay of what the overall or part of the big picture will look like in this “new world” for seniors and/or individuals with disabilities, or for you and your peers. Decide what time-frame you would like to write about (e.g., what will it be like one year from now?).



Conclusion

During this pandemic and after the dust settles, it will remain increasingly important to maintain connections in multiple ways. It makes a difference to make and leave your mark, for yourself and for those who you leave behind, for future generations.

This manual has provided exercises to guide you through the process of creative as well as legacy writing. The focus has been on what can be done and considered in response to a transformative experience, using COVID-19 as a specific example.

The accompanying issue paper provides information about what legacy writing – some of which can be grounded in conversations – can entail. Likewise, it provides information about what types of legacy projects can be done solo and/or with others, going beyond what can be addressed in writing.

Steve Stone, Executive Director of the Mental Health and Recovery Board of Ashland County, Ohio, made a comment that has stuck with me in terms of what truly matters. During the pandemic and other transformative experiences, challenges are faced and overcome. It makes a difference how we react and if we focus on what we can control. Mr. Stone indicated that at the end of the day, what truly matters is maintaining connections and relationships, and retaining a focus on what needs to be done to retain a sense of purpose and meaning. Creative/legacy writing is a valuable option, as are using multiple options to engage in legacy work and to leave your mark.

Biographical Sketches

Diana Spore is an advocate for individuals facing mental health challenges as well as for older adults and those living with dementia, a writer/editor, and a mental health consumer in recovery. Spore received her Master's degree in Gerontological Studies from Miami University (Ohio), and earned a PhD in Human Development and Family Studies, with a concentration in aging, from Penn State. She completed postdoctoral training at Brown University. Spore's areas of expertise include mental health and aging, mental health recovery and trauma-informed care, medication optimization, long-term care, caregiving, and psychotropic drug use and inappropriate drug use among older adults. She is a former Board member of the Mental Health and Recovery Board of Ashland County (MHRB; Ohio). She was Editor-of-Chief of TAPESTRY OF OUR LIVES, an anthology of works created by individuals in recovery, a project that was done under the auspices of the MHRB. Spore served as Project Lead for a "Writing for Recovery" initiative, MHRB, and engaged in all aspects of the project, which has resulted in sustained spin-off efforts. Currently, she is a consultant at the MHRB, writes blogs and issue/white papers under the auspices of the Adult Advocacy Centers in Columbus, and serves as a facilitator of a "writing for recovery" writing group, which is under the auspices of Catholic Charities Services Pathways Peer Support, Ashland. Diana Spore has expertise in creative writing, writing for recovery, journaling for caregivers, legacy writing, and advocacy writing.

Diane Switzer has worked for the Mental Health and Recovery Board of Ashland County for 11 years. She is the Special Projects Coordinator where she assists with: coordination of project collaboratives, coordinating trainings/meetings, community outreach, maintaining MHRB's website and grant funded projects. She is involved in the Older Adult Behavioral Health Coalition, Ashland County Suicide Prevention Coalition and Youth-Led Prevention. Diane served as editor and design layout in the TAPESTRY OF OUR LIVES, an anthology of works created by individuals in recovery. Diane graduated from Leadership Ashland in 2017 and earned an Associate of Arts Degree in 2018. Switzer has lived in Ashland County for 24 years, has been married for 39 years to her husband, Dave, has three children and two Grandchildren. They have discovered that being Grandparents is such a special blessing and a joy! In her spare time, Diane enjoys spending time with family, attending concerts/events, traveling, exploring antique/thrift shops and gardening.