



# Savor the beauty and stare straight into the pain!

In her first interview to appear in Germany and Austria  
Journal Therapist Kathleen Adams invites us to greater  
well-being by joining a year-long experiment

**A**t the *writers' studio* in Vienna a growing number of people experience Kathleen Adams' *Journal to the Self*-concept in workshops with Birgit Schreiber, the first licensed German speaking instructor. Birgit had the opportunity to ask Kathleen the following questions.

**Birgit Schreiber:** Kathleen, thank you for sharing with us some of your rich experience and profound knowledge of writing as a healing tool. What motivated you to specialize in this field and to dedicate your life to spreading it?

**Kathleen Adams:** Thank you for inviting me to contribute to your premier issue. We share the passion for writing as a tool for healing and change, and I deeply respect the work you are doing.

I have always been a writer, from earliest childhood. I started my first diary when I was ten. I left a career in publishing to go to graduate school in counseling. At that time, some friends asked if I would teach them how to write a journal. I put together a little course and invited them over. And I knew immediately that the intersection between writing and healing was my life's work.

You consider life-based writing to offer people

a pathway to deeper self-understanding and you call this way *journal therapy*. What aspects of writing are the most healing ones according to your experience?

Writing down thoughts and feelings can help organize them into a cohesive, coherent story. This organization often leads to insight and awareness. The writer begins to perceive a situation freshly. New ideas and thoughts organically arise from the pages. Many people turn to the journal during times of stress, loneliness, even despair. The journal can become a true friend and companion through dark times. **Writing chronicles our journey to growth and change** capturing both our uniqueness and our common humanity. It keeps a faithful log of our progress through all of life's cycles, providing us with a personal history that we can look back on, remember and learn from.

For people who want "to use life-based writing to further desired outcomes" (another definition of *journal therapy*) you have put together a very successful tool kit – the *Journal to the Self* – which suggests creative methods for daily writing in all areas, challenges and situations in life. What turns a classic diary into a

### modern journal of your liking?

Both diaries and journals are chronicles of a life. The classic diary is perhaps more focused on external events, the observation of daily life, such as activities, news, plans. The classic journal often includes external events and also focuses on the interior life, the silent thoughts and feelings we can't or don't want to share. It also tends to be written in a stream-of-consciousness voice, a technique many call *free writing* because it is free from any particular form. The Journal to the Self method offers many different ways to write, which I call **journal techniques**, to add variety and results to the journal. *Free writing* is one of them, and it is supplemented with 17 more, everything from very short, focused writes to entire written conversations with someone or something.

Having an inventory of journal techniques allows the writer to pair a particular question or problem with a technique that is likely to accelerate insight and advance next steps.

When you first put together your journal writing concept – what other people, writers, psychologists, researchers were influential? What aspects of their work did you include?

Therapeutically, I am trained in humanistic (Rogerian) theory and practice, so I was deeply influenced by the person-centered concepts of positive regard, possibility thinking, creating a healthy relationship with the self. Abraham Maslow and Virginia Satir were primary influencers in that area, along with Carl Rogers. Dr. Ira Progoff, who I consider to be the founder of *Journal Therapy*, was a tremendous influence on my personal journal keeping practices. I teach his techniques of dialogue and stepping stones. I was also deeply influenced in the formative years, and I continue to be, by the experiences of my

students and clients. There were no better teachers than the people I was serving.

It was 1985 – the year that James Pennebaker[1] first published his research findings on the healing qualities of expressive writing – that you first introduced your journaling concept. Considering the demands of modern times – in what way will we need to adapt our concepts of journal writing in the 2020s (e.g. adjust writing to the need of people to speak up in the political, economical and ecological realm, to find balance between many demanding roles in life, to react to and make use of globalization and to use digitalization in a healthy way)?

I once heard Dr. Progoff say that the journal allows us to “savor the beauty and stare straight into the pain.” It seems to me that this is one answer to the enormous global stresses of environmental protection, human rights, social justice, and the ever-dominant role of technology in our culture.

Without doubt, technology is a primary way that journal writing has shifted in the last 35 years. In the 2020s, we have the choice of many digital devices to add to 20th century paper-and-pen. I did a study on digital journaling in 2015, and one of the findings was there is a 21 percent gap between the comfort men have writing on a keyboard and writing by hand. Thus, **digital journaling has made the tool accessible to men who might not write a journal at all if it were by hand.** This is a beauty to savor.

Another way technology has shifted the journal landscape is that it is now as easy to hold a multinational journal group on an internet video platform as it used to be to gather at a friend's house. It is powerful medicine to write and share in the presence of others who accept you and your journey exactly as you are. The solidarity of friend-

ship with respected peers around the globe is a beauty to savor.

The modern journal writer may be in a very public forum, writing a shared journal on a social media platform or on a blog or podcast. This can be a way of staring straight into the pain and taking stand on issues that affect us all. Until the US political leadership changed in 2016, I was careful to keep my personal political views out of my professional communications. Then it felt compelling to take a stand and share it. Some people have written to thank me for articulating a position they also felt.

This happens millions of times every day, in blogs and opinion pieces all over the world. We collectively share our strengths, vulnerabilities, thoughts, ideas and fears. **The 2020 journal writer has choices that didn't exist 35 years ago.** I hope we will continue to use them for good, to savor the beauty and stare straight into the pain.

Which method should beginners try to find an avenue into journaling?

Some people do just fine opening the journal and starting to write, but sometimes they get stuck and don't know what to do. That's why beginners might want to get

some structured assistance. There are several classic books that teach the basics. Journaling classes are another way to learn basic techniques in a community of peers.

If a beginner wanted to just start, I'd suggest compiling a list of 20 questions. These can be about anything that might be an interesting journal topic. Set your timer for five minutes. Then choose a question and write until time is up. Read back and write a reflection about what you noticed or anything that surprised you. Continue this process, replenishing questions as you go. An advance version is to complete the reflection with three more questions. Probably there will be an organic shift to more fluid writing.

One of your great contributions to writing as a healing tool is the concept of the *journal ladder* which measures relative structure, pacing and containment in a journal technique. Can you explain its idea in a few sentences? How can counselors, therapists and others make use of the journal ladder in their work?

I first developed the journal ladder when I was working with trauma patients. They reported very close relationships with their journals but also frequently "fell off





the edge” and into a place of traumatic reenactment in the pages of their journals. It was terrifying for them. It soon became clear that all of these patients had something in common: They were all using *free writing* (the place most people start), which has no structure, no pacing and no containment. I offered to teach them ways to write that would help them bring boundaries and structure to their writing, and they agreed to try. I arranged all of the journal techniques that I teach onto a continuum, with the most structured techniques at the bottom and free writing at the top. I called it the journal ladder and taught it to my clients. My clients learned the shortest and most structured techniques, then moved into the insight-oriented techniques and finally into the more abstract and open-ended techniques. By the time they reached freewriting, they had an entire toolkit of techniques and could **move themselves up and down the ladder depending on how much structure they felt they needed**. The journal ladder has become a primary tool for therapists to help clients self-regulate their journal experience and decrease the risk of traumatic reenactment.

With the journal ladder in mind what is your favorite journaling method for someone suffering from depression?

The journal ladder begins with sentence stems: “Right now I feel ...” or “The most important thing to do ...” or “I want ...” This is the simplest, most structured and easiest journal technique of all. I’m always interested in hearing the client’s experience in their own words. It’s also important that a new client has an early opportunity to try writing in a simple, non-threatening way. A sentence stem template has about seven sentence stems constructed on a narrative arc that moves from identification of the

problem to next small steps to advance the desired outcome. This is a worksheet that is easy for the client to complete and gives them open-ended ways to tell their story. I typically start with a definition of the problem: “Depression is ...” This often gives me an immediate insight into the client’s thinking and emotional processing styles: “Depression is a neurological event in my brain” or “Depression is a long, slow walk through Hades.” The template can then unfold into sentence stems such as “Depression stops me from ...” or “Even when I’m depressed, I can still ...” to elicit information about strengths, vulnerabilities, support systems, motivation and more. There is often journal material to harvest from these responses. Other techniques from the bottom rungs of the ladder, which are the short and structured techniques, are added as the client is ready.

In what way can journal writing help people overcome trauma? Is there a method in addition to the classic four-day-write by Pennebaker that seems especially beneficial to you? (In case you want to expand here: What changes in the brain and helps us integrate trauma while we write?)

The Pennebaker Paradigm, for all its benefits, was not developed as a long-term intervention; it is a contained experience that has consistently demonstrated the efficacy of structured writing about a trauma for physiological and emotional release. A *Journal Therapy* trauma protocol follows the therapeutic goals of trauma treatment in general: We want the client to acknowledge the embodied reality of the trauma, to accept they were not at fault, work through the complexity in search of meaning and integrate the experience as something that is now in the past and can be remembered without fresh pain.

We start with short, structured writes, telling the story in small pieces. At the same time we are learning and practicing mindfulness in the journal: placing intention on what to write about and how to approach it, putting attention on the story, its meaning and the intuitive guidance that may push through, and taking action by writing the story as honestly as possible, reflecting on it afterward and taking appropriate next steps in service of the desired outcome.

As the trauma work deepens, the journal becomes **a safe place to challenge assumptions, confront perpetrators and declare convictions**. This often organically shifts into the recognition of strengths and resources that were dormant until activated by the traumatic event. I often tell Progoff's story of archeologists who found a vial of seeds in an excavated sarcophagus. The archeologists planted and watered some of the seeds – and 3,000 years later, they sprouted.

Once meaning can be made, post-traumatic growth can take root. The stories and metaphors of resilience can be explored. It is not a swift path to a more fully integrated self, but when writing maps the way, it can be revisited and reinforced.

In recent years, you have stressed two new developments. First, you have sought to combine writing and the findings of neuroscientists (eg. together with Deborah Ross, 2016). To what extent can we all change our brain functioning through writing? Where are the limits? There's no way to know whether we can change our brain functioning through writing; that would require scientific exploration that so far hasn't been undertaken. We do know through functional MRIs that the brains of monks who spend their lives in the practices of service, gratitude, prayer and loving kindness light up much differently than brains of people with 21st century

stresses. Deborah Ross, creator of the Your Brain on Ink method, thinks that writing can be a form of self-directed neuroplasticity, as meditation is. There is ample anecdotal evidence to support this theory, but no formal studies exist or have been initiated, as far as I know.

The researcher Dr. Richard Davidson states that **well-being is a skill that can be learned**. Four qualities that are *neuroplasticity friendly* are resilience, outlook, attention and generosity. Dr. Davidson calls these the four keys to well-being. When attention is placed on the quality of our experience with these four principles, over time our brains can learn the skills of well-being.

I'm inviting my friends and colleagues into a one-year experiment in 2020: Once a week, on the same day, write about each key in rotation: Resilience (How do I fall down and get up?), Outlook (Am I at ease? What do I see when I look?), Attention (What am I doing/feeling right now? What is in front of me?) and Generosity (How am I generous in time, service, love, money—to others and to myself?) This gives us a body of data to discover what changes we make in our own lives when practicing four keys to well-being for a year. You are all welcome to join the experiment!

Which method would you suggest for skeptical people? I, for example, liked the one using scents to intensify good memory and to envision good outcomes for a project in the future (in *Brain on Ink*). Can you explain in a few sentences how scent can help us create new pathways?

Again referencing Deborah Ross, the olfactory nerve is the most primitive of all. Its associations go deep into memory. Each of us has scents that set us back into another time of positive emotion – security, love, freedom. When we pair those scents with writing about positive experiences, we send

that back into long-term memory as a resource that can be drawn upon. The writing doesn't have to be about the experience of the scent, although that's a good starting point.

For instance, **the aroma of the rice cooker immediately places me in a state of contentment.** Some of my best journaling is done while I'm waiting for rice, and I'll sometimes put on a pot of rice just because I'm writing about something hard.

Secondly, you stress the importance of the feedback write and you call the change between expression and reflection „a new paradigm“. Similarly, Kate Thompson, a fellow author and colleague of yours, holds that the feedback loop is the one thing that turns personal writing into therapeutic writing. Why is it so important to reflect on our writing? And how should we do it?

Kate Thompson and I were developing the same theory about reflection writes and feedback loops on two continents at the same time. When we put them together, we said „yes!“ **The reflection write is a synthesis of any writing,** often written immediately following. I'll have a client write for five minutes to a prompt, then I'll ask the client to read back and write a sentence or two of reflection: „As I read this, I notice ...“ or „I am curious about ...“ or „I am surprised by ...“ It is a process note to the self. Kate's *feedback loop* reminds us that it brings us back around to the starting point, integrating and synthesizing the experience.

Last but not least, you have just launched a new service called *journalversity*. It is an online school for personal journal writing and a safe peaceful place for people who want company on their journey to new frontiers in their personal life. How does it work and who can join?

Journalversity is my favorite project in a long while! It's so much fun to build a global community of those who love to write, and those who love to teach. We are just getting started, but the idea is a collaborative learning community where many teachers gather with many students to share the power of writing for healing, growth and change. It's going to grow larger in 2020 and I'm truly excited. Everyone is welcome!

You offer retreats and trainings in different places in the U.S. Will we be able to write with you closer to home, somewhere in Europe, sometime?

Thank you for the kind invitation! I think it is not possible in 2020, but I would love to talk about 2021!

Thank you very much for your time and your enlightening answers.



*Kathleen Adams is a pioneer in journal writing and founding mother of the Center for Journal Therapy, Denver, Colorado and the Therapeutic Writing Institute. She is a psychologist, clinical therapist, master supervisor, poetry therapist and best-selling author of the classic Journal to the Self and a number of other books on writing.*

Foto: Laura Carson

[1] Pennebaker was the first to show that expressive writing – i.e. writing about deep feelings after a crisis and finding new perspectives and a story-frame – can improve physiological and psychological functioning. His findings have since been tested, extended and confirmed in hundreds of studies world-wide.