



Writing with a Beginner's Mind

One function of the imagination in autobiographical writing is to allow the writer to try out different versions of the self.

—Marilyn Chandler, *WRITING AS A HEALING ART*

In his book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, Shunryu Suzuki writes about freeing the mind through meditation, creating the possibility of a fresh and open mind especially when approaching new things. He says that we should look with curiosity and openness at everything, and be willing to be vulnerable enough and strong enough not to know, to withstand discomfort, to be humble.

When you write with a beginner's mind, you will see your family story through new eyes. When you write your story the way you see it, not the way it has always been told, you free yourself from the strictures of a "right" way to view the world. Perhaps you are the one in the family who doesn't agree with the point of view of other family members. You may feel lonely or even crazy under such circumstances. But still, this is what you know, this is your truth. Using a beginner's mind gives us permission to write what we don't know and to write what has never been written before. Use a beginner's mind for a healthy, open approach to writing. Write from your heart, and put the critical voices aside.

Writing and meditation have much in common: inner listening, quiet and isolation, openness. Sometimes we resist writing just as we resist being alone with ourselves. We stay busy and don't take time to escape from the demands of a noisy, outward-directed life. The Buddhists call a mind filled with these mental distractions a monkey mind. Like a monkey, it chatters away, distracting us from our true self, a deeper part of ourselves that might be called spiritual.

Meditation is about awareness without attachment to a particular idea or thought. When we meditate, our thoughts are allowed to pass across the mind like clouds. When we write, critical thoughts can get in the way as we judge and critique them, our writing, and ourselves. Part of our healing practice is to accept our inner creative voices, to hear the deeper truth of who we are. We need to write with openness.

Meditation to Relax

To encourage our inner listening process, we need to put aside the stresses of regular life and relax. We need to let go of our busy thoughts as we make room for other voices, feelings, and parts of ourselves. To help access our inner listening, we learn to relax and focus on our breath. Breathing well and deeply is the basis for all letting go of stress. When we focus on our breath and our relaxed muscles, we can feel ourselves getting pleasantly heavier and warmer. When we relax the tension in our muscles, a tense mind lets go as well, promoting the flow of creativity.

When you're ready to do this relaxation meditation, find a comfortable place to sit or lie down. Set a timer for twenty or thirty minutes. After you learn how to relax, you can obtain the same benefit in less time.

Settle in a comfortable place, and take some deep breaths. Feel yourself becoming present and being with yourself. This will enhance listening to your inner voice, the positive one, the one that nurtures you, the one that supports all your efforts to write and to speak.

Bring to mind an image of a living being that makes you happy. Some people think of a loved one, a mother, father, aunt, uncle, friend, or a favorite pet. Feel the feelings you have when you are being hugged or touched lovingly by this person or being. As you think of this, bring golden light down from the top of your head into your shoulders, and let it spill down your body, breathing deeply without forcing, just gentle breaths. Allow yourself to feel the warmth that this visualization brings, as you imagine warmth filling your body with well-being.

Feel the warmth in your wrists and hands, your fingers, your arms. Let your muscles relax, the muscles of your body and mind that sometimes keep you tight. Ask them to allow you write, to express yourself. Think of being encouraged by your pet or favorite person. Have fun with this; don't be too serious. Imagine being gently massaged or comforted. Breathe these feelings into your body. If you have a favorite, safe place, either in real life or in your imagination, bring it to mind now.

When you are relaxed, when the mind and body are in harmony and your thoughts are flowing freely like a stream, write for five minutes.

Meditation to Your Past Self

Now you will be guided into remembering earlier parts of your life. Follow the exercise as far as you like. If you become uncomfortable, stop, and return to the present.

See yourself at the age you are now. Picture how you look, what you are wearing, the shape of your life. See yourself in your mind's eye: your body, your clothes in your favorite colors, your hair, face, and skin. See the people you spend time with, the things you are most proud of. What do you need to heal or change?

Now imagine the calendar flying back to ten years ago. What did you look like then, what style of clothes were you wearing? Where were your favorite restaurants or clubs? What did you do in your leisure time? See if you can remember who you spent time with and what you did. What were your hopes and dreams?

Go back another ten years and ask yourself these same questions. Decade by decade revisit who you were, what you were doing, what you were feeling, wanting, and dreaming.

Notice—but don't dwell on—any issues and problems that you faced during these decades. What were you trying to heal or avoid? How did that work for you? Think about your hopes and dreams. What was the best part about your life? How did you feel about yourself during each period of your life? What was your favorite color? Food? Vacation? Who were your friends, pets? What books influenced your life?

See yourself all the way back into your adolescence and then into childhood. See your body, feel how it felt to be twenty, fifteen, ten, five. See yourself in your clothes, inside your room, in your house. Who are the people in your family back then? What did they look like, sound like? Notice the memories that have formed you and are a part of you.

Pick up your pen and write about one of the scenes you just pictured. Write a vignette; sketch out what you remember without anchoring it to a story. This memory exercise can help you bring the past into focus and help you picture important scenes in your life that may have receded into your unconscious mind.