



Empowerment through Writing (A.K.A. "Virtual therapy")

a Crisis Hostel Resource by Judi Kilman

Dear Crisis Hostel staff, guests, potential users, and volunteers,

Here is my proposal for a new resource at the Crisis Hostel.

An old idea and habit...

No doubt to many of you the idea of working with writing to facilitate meaning and empowerment is not new at all. Some of you may have integrated this tool into your life long ago. If you already keep a journal or write poetry (or what have you) chances are you are enjoying the spiritual sustenance, historical perspective, or practical benefits of writing. The nice, potentially liberating thing about writing is that it builds its own structures (or collapses them) in the very doing of it. It is one way—among countless others—to discover or create possibly empowering forms of knowledge. Sometimes setting aside a regular time each day to do some sort of writing (a paragraph? anecdote? list of strange experiences on a given day? drawing? idle gossip? sketch for a novel or 3-act play? recipe?) provides the structure, security, or promise of larger meaning we would otherwise miss in the rough and tumble of everyday life.

As a resource writing has appealed more to some groups (usually white privileged males) than to others; more to some cultures (Western) than to others. But for better or worse, we live in a world which holds written communication in high esteem. Thus no matter how one feels about the medium (and no matter what injustices have been enabled by the pen) , it helps to know how to use it effectively. This proposal for a writing project as a resource for Crisis Hostel guests begins with the understanding that writing can be an important tool for self-empowerment but only if it is made as accessible as possible.

Now more "user-friendly?"

In computers we have many creative options for playing with or manipulating this medium, forcing writing to incorporate other, potentially less intimidating media like graphics, sounds, music, anonymous electronic communication...you name it! Still, and depending on a person's access to privilege, education, etc. for many too many people (those who self-define as being in crisis in particular!) the

newer multi-media seem anything but "user-friendly." It's one of the nastiest ironies of our times, true, but we can work around it.

With (not one but...) two computers, some time on our hands, and our own and others' experiences we have the resources to make this medium more accessible than pen and paper. The only catch is that the person must either know word processing or wish to learn (another resource we could be providing on the side).

We (the Crisis Hostel community) have the resources (and often calm, conducive environment) to use writing as a tool for empowerment.

Virtual Therapy: the background

Why am I making such a big deal out of something as simple as writing? In my own experience working through trauma and depression, I came to rely on writing as a means toward recovery and self-empowerment. At the time I started (while in graduate school) I could not afford conventional psychotherapy. During these years it would have been ideal to be visiting a therapist at least once a week, but this was impossible. Instead I "invented" a therapist of sorts and provided her with a "clinic" inside my computer. To lend this admittedly strange practice an aura of ritual and mystery I gave her a name which I am still not at liberty to reveal.

What this purposely self-alienating arrangement helped me to do is worth noting. First, I decided that our sessions would keep idle, self-indulgent chatter to a minimum and that it would be the responsibility of the therapist (or "other's" voice) to speak up when we've reached this limit. She would speak from the part of me that "knew better" how to reach resolution on important issues and empowerment in general. She gave voice to my inner strength. The best thing about this unusual set up was that she (my therapist/other) had a photographic memory for everything I ever said; each session has its own dated file on my hard drive. Taking the irony (fueled in turn by rage) which orchestrated this arrangement to its most crass extreme, I *even paid* my virtual therapist by either paying off a lingering debt or depositing money into my savings account.

I'll say it one more time: what I am calling "virtual therapy" is absolutely no substitute for real psychotherapy with an actual person. Like "virtual sex", its parallel in the erotic sphere, it is a sorry substitute indeed for what it seeks to resemble. From my experience I taught myself to approximate the best that psychotherapy has to offer by re-imagining it in writing.

Guided Writing: a sample framework

The following question categories are intended to guide reflection from practical matters of lifestyle and physical existence to the broader and 'squishier' areas of feelings, politics, and spirit. For the person who would like to write but feels overwhelmed by all s/he could be writing about, who does not know where to begin, the questions will suggest some structure. They are anything but exhaustive: in fact, they are deliberately worded to give rise to further and more penetrating, and personalized questioning. Moving from the most concrete and tangible level of the body toward larger questions of one's place in the community (or cosmos), each topic tries to cover areas which would seem to be implicated or complicated by crisis. A quick list of these areas (with subtopics arranged accordingly) might read as follows:

1. **Body:** health, diet, exercise, sleep, relaxation, hygiene, substance use and abuse.
2. **Mental Health:** meds, therapy, institution, diagnosis, crisis hostel, suicide
3. **Support networking:** family/friends, dependents, family history, dysfunction, abuse, and rape.
4. **Loveline/sex:** commitment/non-commitment, trust, divorce, sexuality, safer sex/HIV status, birth control, battering
5. **Work/Finances:** career, education, skills, resources, finances, social services, hobbies
6. **Home life:** homelessness, household, resources, feeling "at home", pets, carpeting
7. **Community:** legal matters, social action/activism, civic-mindedness, appropriate" behavior, cultural differences
8. **Prejudice:** racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, ableism (physical and mental), ageism, etc.
9. **Spirituality:** religion, life/death and the beyond, the godhead, cultural dissonance
10. **Life history:** trauma and recovery
11. **My place in the future of this world**

Under each area we could include specific questions like those listed below. Again, these are simply my own suggestions which are drawn from personal experience and my own conversations with guests and staff and hit-or-miss reading through the literature around the Crisis Hostel.

Sample Questions

1. Body issues

Do I feel comfortable in my own body?

If yes, what does this mean?

If not, what might it mean for me to feel comfortable in my body?

What do people (experts? friends? fanatics?) say it is necessary to do in order to feel "at home" in my body?

Do I have a body image problem?

a) food and appetite
How's my diet?

Am I striking a healthy enough balance of:
- carbohydrates, proteins, and fats?
- vitamins and minerals?

Drinking enough water?

What if I kept a journal on what I ate over a day or several days?

"They" say it's important to eat such and such...How do I feel about this?

I would like to eat better but it's difficult for me. Here's why:

I could care less what I eat and here's why:

2. Mental Health: meds, therapy, institution, diagnosis, crisis hostel, suicide

Is my medication actually working?

Am I taking too much or too little?

How do I feel about being on meds?

Would I like to have therapy/counselling?

Am I getting enough therapy?

What were/are my experiences as a recipient of mental health services?

If these experiences were bad, destructive, or disempowering:

3. Support networking: family/friends, dependents, family history, dysfunction and abuse

4. Lovelife/sex: commitment/non-commitment, divorce, sexuality, safer sex/HIV status, birth control, battering

5. Work/Finances: career, education, skills, resources, finances, social services, hobbies

If I have a job, do I like it?

If I am unemployed...

what would I like to be doing (and getting paid for it)?

Is it possible to earn money doing exactly what I enjoy or what is important to me?

Is there some job I could be doing that would have enough worthwhile moments to keep my hopes up and keep me going until I find my dream job? (this is what is called a leading question)

6. **Home life:** homelessness, household, resources, feeling "at home", pets, carpeting

7. **Community:** legal matters, social action/activism, civic-mindedness, appropriate" behavior, cultural differences

8. **Prejudice:** racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, ableism, ageism, etc.

9. **Spirituality:** religion, life/death and the beyond, the godhead, cultural dissonance

10. **Life history:** trauma and recovery

11. **My place in the future of this world**

For suicidal individuals

(question writer lacks the experience and perspective to generate enough meaningful questions. Can you help us??)

What has caused me to become suicidal?

I have made a contract with a staff person at the hostel or friend: what does this mean to me right now?

What has kept me alive for this long?

For me to decide to go on living, this needs to happen:

Try to recall a time or moment in your life when you were truly and simply happy and fulfilled.

What were you doing with your time?

What sort of friends did you have?

Books and related resources

Fredda Bruckner-Gordon, Barbara Kuerer Gangi and Gerladine Urbach Wallman, *Making Therapy Work: your guide to choosing, using, and Ending Therapy*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

This section in need of development. But check out the Crisis Hostel Library and accompanying database!