In the prelude to *Writing at the Edge: Narrative and Writing Process Theory*, literacy professor and author Jeff Park asks:

How can writing, and belonging to a writing group, transform someone who doesn't believe in anything except loss and injustice and pain and betrayal into a person who has pride in himself and his accomplishments?

He then wonders:

Maybe writing, by acting as a site of self-construction, is one of the dominant ways people in the modern world create a sense of who they are, and how they relate to others. Maybe it is time to reconsider the value of writing and what it means to write. (3)

### the invitation

I am a writer; a poet, and a journal writer. I have been writing in
hand-written notebooks for almost 20 years. For two decades I’ve been putting down on paper the details of my every day life. An invitation to re/consider the value of writing and what it means to write is an exciting proposition to me. Why? Because I have been struggling with the fact that even though I have been actively writing for a long time—I have about 120 journals lining two shelves in my bedroom closet—most of that writing has not been published. In half a life of writing, I only have a handful of credits for being published, and all of those, including a self-published book of poetry, are in unreviewed publications. For a long time I have been quite critical of myself for not having spent more time sending out my work nor seeking out an audience for my writing. Now, I do have to acknowledge that I am a performer and have shared many of my poems through the medium of live performance. So it’s not that I have completely ignored my desire (responsibility?) to share my words with others. Still I have been wondering of late, especially as I embark on graduate studies toward a Ph.D., and prepare to publish writing in peer-reviewed journals, what it is that has kept me from seriously pursuing the path of publication until now? **If I haven’t been writing so I could share my writing with others, why is it that I write? What other purpose(s) does my writing serve, if not that of communicating to others?**

**journal writing as a site of self-construction**

I was 20 years old when I wrote my first journal. Part travelogue and part personal diary, it chronicled a summer spent studying and travelling alone in Europe.

**Boykottiert Die Volszahlung**

This is a photo of my very first journal, begun on May 5, 1987 in Paris, France. The sticker on the cover was given to me by Maren Grimm, an 18 year old, politically astute, Dylan-loving hippie with whose family I was living while taking German language classes in Kassel, two hours north of Frankfurt. I attended a *Boycot the Census* rally with her at her high school.

I wrote my second journal throughout the following year, while living in Israel on a cultural exchange at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. My next one I wrote a year after that when I was back in Montreal, my hometown. I was living alone for the first time, in a bachelor apartment downtown on Tupper Street. It was in that third journal that I began to articulate why I was choosing to write:
November 20, 1989

This is my first entry in this book. I am beginning it for a number of reasons. Firstly because my head is a jumble of thoughts, both positive and negative on this relationship upon which I have embarked. I must write it all down in order to attempt to make some sense out of all these strange feelings which are incessantly flooding my heart and soul. I also have begun to work on my future, and I believe that path needs monitoring and constant scrutiny to keep clear on what it is that I want to do and am able to do. Finally since I've begun to read a lot, the literature feeds me with mind waves which I may want to think about and record. I intend to write as often as I feel the desire. I hope it can help me to understand all these ever so complicated emotions and trips which have become such a day to day part of my life.

I begin now as I've finally decided this may be the best way to sort things out. I wish not to be dramatic, nor literary, JUST AS REAL AS I AM.

In Writing at the Edge, Park quotes James Britton’s description of expressive writing as “writing using language close to the self” (134). My exclamation about wishing “not to be dramatic, nor literary, JUST AS REAL AS I AM” seems to reflect Britton’s definition. However, according to Park:

Britton did not fully explore the concept of the self, probably because he thought it was self-evident that the self was a person’s inner being, and language was an expression of self. (135)

By deciding to write about those things that were influencing me in my life at the time—including a new relationship, my plans for the future, and the literature I was reading—I believe I was acknowledging how my sense of self was in part being affected, and even constructed, by those influences.

journal writing as the place where self and culture meet...

Four months later, I wrote a page toward the back of that journal which I headlined: “Notes on rereading my Journal,” in which I admitted:
March 14, 1990

I wanted to make sense out of all the things I was feeling for Thierry and in this new & exciting relationship. I had all these ideas of what it was supposed to be like = EXPECTATIONS. However the more it went on, the less it became as I expected it to do. My expectations come from my upbringing, environment, Popular Culture, friends. As it continued, and it became disturbing as I encountered more disappointment, as my expectations weren’t being met, I got angry and bitter. The relationship suffered. Only when things went according to my plans was I happy. All the “complicated emotions” was my struggling with what I thought; had been programmed to believe it should be like and my intuition, what actually felt right.

In this writing I was recognizing that I “had been programmed to believe” certain ideas about relationships. I was thus becoming aware of how my writing wasn’t simply expressing my “inner being,” as Britton had assumed. It also included an emerging acknowledgement of the influence of “my expectations” which “come from my upbringing, environment, Popular Culture, friends.” In writing about “all the ‘complicated emotions’” and “my struggling with what I thought; had been programmed to believe,” I am demonstrating Park’s new understanding of expressive writing as: “the site of negotiation of meaning between the personal and the social.” (8)

Park uses the biological term riparian zone: “the forested land along rivers, streams, and lakes…the transition area between upland and aquatic ecosystems,” as a metaphor for expressive writing. He chooses this metaphor for a number of reasons:

The word riparian comes from the Latin word “ripa,” meaning riverbank, which can also be seen as an edge. Riparian zones are among the most diverse biological systems in the world….Riparian zones act as filtering systems for water, and provide shelter and travel routes for wildlife. Riparian zones are therefore sites of nourishment,
shelter and safety….In writing in the expressive function, writers are in the riparian zone, traveling and finding nourishment as well as refuge and safety. (146)

**journal writing as a riparian zone**

Like the riparian zones that line the world’s rivers, my journals have been sites of “nourishment, shelter and safety.” In my journals I haven’t had to worry about what others might think of me or my writing. As I wrote in my most recent journal: “This is a very forgiving place. There aren’t many rules.” Park shares a similar feeling from a member of the CMHA writer’s group he facilitates: “she could just be who she is, and feels that that is enough.”

My journals are sites of extreme diversity, both in outward appearance—as is visible from the photographs in this writing— as well as in the different forms of writing which fill their pages. Below is a recent journal entry: a poem I call *ambushed*.

October 7, 2006

*ambushed,* down on the ground
tea cup in hand, praying
silence, preying grace this
place is desert, dry, open,
wild wasps hover birds
drift lift out from short
bush next to path dense
thoughts walk beside me i
keep close watch walk
faster so they can’t keep up
how much upkeep to
still the mind hold the body
closer, loving, gentle a
breather in between tasks
this hand asks for itself
i wade into joy now the
sighs come deeper I have
to pause to let them through

After a walk along a favourite meadow path near my home, I sat down for a few minutes with my journal and wrote. That is exactly what came out. As I reread the poem now I hear how my feeling of ambush is coming from the
thoughts that “walk beside me” and “how much upkeep to still the mind.” I am curious about the connection between this poem and my earlier journal entry from March 14, 1990 in which I wrote how “all the ‘complicated emotions’ was my struggling with what I thought” and “my intuition, what actually felt right.” Here I appear to be struggling with “dense thoughts” and the desire to “hold the body closer, loving, gentle.” It is not clear from the poem what those thoughts are about. As the writer I can tell you that I was feeling overwhelmed by thoughts about work, school, and all the “tasks” that were waiting to get done as soon as I returned from my brief respite. By giving myself some time to write about the struggle in my journal, I was able to shift myself from feeling “ambushed…desert, dry” to “loving, gentle…joy.”

It is precisely this transformation that Park speaks of as one of the most significant impacts of writing in the riparian zone. Expressive writing, or what I refer to as journal writing, “creates a metaphoric space that allows an individual to explore two directions simultaneously, both inner and outer” (160). In both Park’s and my own views, it is this permission to “negotiate meaning between the personal and the social” which leads to a sense of confidence and well-being for the writer.

Writer and scholar bell hooks (in Park, 2005) articulates her personal experience with journal writing: It was “the space for critical reflection where I struggled to understand myself and the world around me, that crazy world of family and community, that painful world…” hooks acknowledges journaling as “a writing act that intimately connects the art of expressing one’s feelings on the written page with the construction of self and identity.” She also identifies how “writing was the healing place where I could collect bits and pieces, where I could put them together again” because “written words change us all and make us more than we could ever be without them” (147).

freewriting and the healing “flow” of words

When Park speaks about the process of writing in which he engages the writer’s group, he talks about the practice of freewriting, which enables them to:
write on a topic ‘off the top of their heads.’ They inevitably find this activity exciting…the writers keep coming back to this activity…are engrossed in what they do, suggesting a complete surrender to the activity of writing. (149-150)

I often experience a similar feeling of “surrender” when I write, as if I am both present and absent at the same time. Elbow (in Park, 2005) suggests:

When my writing goes well, it is usually because the plan itself—my sense of where I’m trying to get my material to go—came to me in a piece of uncontrolled writing. Freewriting doesn’t just give ‘content,’ it also gives ‘form’…freewriting is an invitation to stop writing and instead to ‘be written.’ (150)

Nachmanovitch (in Park, 2005) describes this as ‘part of the alchemy engendered by practice…a kind of cross-trading between conscious and unconscious.’ Park also compares freewriting to Csikszentmihalyi’s idea of flow, ‘an almost automatic, effortless, yet highly focused state of consciousness’ (150).

In a book called Shakti Woman (1991) artist and author Vicki Noble writes about the practice of healing through trance:

We should all take up the practice of opening ourselves to trance states, not so that we can have exotic experiences…because we need the contact the trance state provides with the unseen and the spirit realm. The practice of trance…could actually facilitate world peace by creating large numbers of people who are not explosive and reactive without thinking but peaceful, contemplative, and (therefore) more effective in response to the problems facing them. (153)

Noble also refers to “the trance state” as providing “an opportunity for the ego-personality to get out of the way,” so that people may “enter states of consciousness” in which there is “an acknowledgement of other forces coexisting with us here in the world” (150-1). When writing in my journal, I often experience myself as more deeply, wholly, soulfully connected to the world around me, both human and otherwise. As Abram (1996) attests:

Language as a bodily phenomenon accrues to all expressive bodies, not just to the human. Our own speaking [writing], then, does not set us outside of the animate landscape
but...inscribes us more fully in its chattering, whispering, soundful depths.” (80)

collecting bits and pieces: writing worth re/considering

My journal writing has been a practice which has allowed me to spend hours, days and weeks of my life happily entranced in a riparian flow of words. I have not sought to publish my journal writing because my reasons for writing lay outside the realm of publication. I wrote to know myself, to negotiate my sense of self in relation to the world, and, like hooks, to “collect bits and pieces, where I could put them together again,” finding a place of joy and peace and self-renewal inside the ongoing movement of the words.

Csikszentmihalyi (In Park, 2005) “maintains that ‘the secret to a happy life is to learn to get flow from as many of the things we have to do as possible...[then] everything is worth doing for its own sake.” Park affirms: “at the writers’ group, the participants engage in writing for writing’s sake, which is both pleasurable and self-empowering” (150).

post-script

July 9, 2006

I spread out all of my journals on my porch. Slowly I started to arrange them in groups according to colour, size, shape. Next I displayed them in various spaces around the courtyard.
Then I took photographs.
I had never done this
before. They had been
sitting idle on the top
shelf in my bedroom
closet for years. How
good it felt to take them
out and move them
around a bit, spend some
time with them again.
Some of them I hadn’t
held in nearly two
decades.

references


[1] Canadian Mental Health Association, a writer’s group he has been facilitating for over 10 years and some of whose members are the subjects of his book.

About the Author

**Ahava Shira**—alive, i am a poet & it’s my not-so-subtle, necessary fixation with language that calls me to be valued here, investigating the beautiful complexity of a half-life of writing. i am a performer, clown, *Respectful Relationships* educator, and the author of *Womb: Weaving*
of My Being (butterfly press, 1998). I wonder at/with words and the ecological connections that words open up.