

My story

A therapeutic writing journey

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Abstract

This article uses my personal journey to demonstrate how therapeutic writing can be an adjunct to therapy. I am Chinese, I was born in New Zealand, where I trained as a counsellor and, more recently, as a facilitator of therapeutic writing groups. Therefore, a particular focus of this article is on the possible benefits of therapeutic writing for the Chinese community. Research has shown that Chinese people underutilise mental health services and that cultural issues may be a factor in this. In this article, I suggest that therapeutic writing could benefit this population, predominantly as a support for talking therapy and, in some instances, as an alternative. I conclude by describing some of the parallels between talking therapy and therapeutic writing.

Keywords: therapeutic writing, Chinese culture, therapy, rereading, creative writing for therapeutic purposes (CWTP)

Therapeutic writing has been a part of my life for nearly twenty years. It has meant that I have created an historical record of my personal growth and development over this period. In times of stress, and when I do not understand the behaviour of those in my social environment, I turn to my journal or notebook and write about my deepest thoughts and feelings. Nine times out of ten I discover something about myself or others and I start to make more sense of my world. Also, I occasionally “look back in time” and read about the “me” that is captured in the pages of my journal. I recognise that this person is very different from the “me” that I am today, and smile as I recognise that I am becoming the person I want to be. Someone who is more congruent. Therapeutic writing, I believe, has been the one constant activity in my life, and it has shaped me into the person I am today.

Chinese culture tends to value the family and the group over the individual (Au, 2002). In comparison, among certain sectors of New Zealand, and in Western society generally, the individual is often valued over the group (Hofstede, 2011).

This creates a problem for the Chinese population when it comes to many approaches to therapy, given that they are often built upon Western views that give primacy to the individual and their personal development. Due to this clash in cultural beliefs, many Chinese will not seek out therapy as a viable means of coping with stress and trauma (Vong, 2002). However, therapeutic writing, which includes keeping a journal and a range of other techniques, offers a possible solution to addressing issues of wellbeing. Certainly for me, speaking as a Chinese person, therapeutic writing has helped me to deal with stress and trauma, and to discover my individuality within the context of Chinese and other social groups. I conclude this article by suggesting that therapeutic writing could be useful for Chinese people and other ethnic minorities in Western societies who, in my experience and attested to in the literature, find it difficult to engage with talking therapies.

Keeping a journal

I started therapeutic writing (Rhodes, 2017) in 2001, when I began journal writing as part of my enrolment in an experiential counselling training programme in New Zealand. One of the requirements of the programme was to undergo counselling, and journaling became an extension of these therapy sessions. At the time, I had no awareness of how my Chinese culture had influenced my life or the way in which I viewed it. However, beginning therapy I felt listened to and heard for the first time, which enabled me to start to develop a sense of self and a connection to my self. At one point, my therapist mentioned that my “emotional vocabulary” (Joseph & Strain, 2003, p. 21) was very limited. It amazed me to learn that I did not have the words to express my feelings, but I understood what my therapist meant. Between therapy sessions, when I had more “to say,” I wrote in my journal and this became a safe place to express my emotions. It also helped me to stay connected with my therapist as I imagined I was talking to him as I was writing. This was a way for me to remain engaged with the therapeutic process in his absence. I would explain aspects of my life to him that I could not say directly, whether due to shame or because I felt he might not understand. After all, I was Chinese and he was European. I was a woman and he was a man. I questioned myself: “How could he understand what it was like being a Chinese woman?”

My experience of the therapeutic benefits of keeping a journal while undergoing therapy has been supported in research by Phillips and Rolfe (2016):

Participants used writing as a means of catharsis and to enable expression and exploration of parts of the self that were not immediately accessible. Writing was also a safe and private place to hold or contain unmanageable material, the true or hidden self and the process of counselling itself. Finally, writing functioned as a bridge, enabling participants to hold onto, internalise and extend their counselling. When shared in counselling, writing could also help the client to communicate, re-own projections deposited in the writing and work towards self-acceptance. (p. 193)

Unbeknownst to me, during the period of my therapy sessions I was using writing for all of the reasons set out by Phillips and Rolfe. Although I had no conscious awareness of how I was making use of therapeutic writing, and despite this lack of theoretical understanding, I must have intuited the benefits of writing in my journal. I even gave my journal a woman's name and I wrote to "her." I felt it was easier to write to someone else who was a female rather than to myself. I wasn't surprised when I later read that Adams (1990) suggests that people who keep a journal should give it a name, reinforcing the sense in which their journals are "the friend at the end of the pen" (p. 13).

Therapeutic writing programme

In 2015, having moved to London, I was no longer working as a counsellor, but I wanted to continue in the field in some way. I stumbled across an experiential therapeutic and creative writing programme, teaching a form of writing that is a "halfway house" between creativity and therapy, and my writing flourished. This two-year programme trained therapists to work with writing, and in their writing to follow a therapeutic methodology. We learned exercises and techniques that could be used by individuals, one-to-one (as in a therapy session), or in groups.

As part of this programme I participated in writing exercises, built up a creative portfolio, and then undertook research. The methodology I used was autoethnography (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011), which is an exploration of the researcher's own personal narrative. This focuses on researching one's own life, rather than researching the lives of others, and uses a range of reflexive methods (Etherington, 2004) to develop self-awareness. Adopting this method, I was both the researched and the researcher, effectively standing in the shoes of both. Accordingly, in the process of my research, I reread all of the writing that I had

done during the writing programme: from my exercises, my creative portfolio, and my journal. I then focused and reflected on those particular pieces of writing that related to my Chinese culture and heritage. I discovered not only a deeper sense of myself, but also how different I was due to my ethnic background. In this regard, my Chinese ethnicity and upbringing in a Western environment meant I viewed life differently from both “Easterners” and “Westerners.” There were times in the past when I had wondered why I felt I did not quite belong to the East or the West, so this programme proved highly beneficial in its impact on me and in its development of such significant awareness. This article is, therefore, a summary of some of my key research findings from my autoethnographic study.

Poetry therapy

One of the first exercises we did involved working with poetry. In class, we were presented with a poem by Gladys Wellington (cited in Chavis, 2011, p. 35) entitled “I wanted to be a cauliflower.” The poem is a favourite of poetry therapist Geri Chavis who uses it to invoke discussions around identity and family relationships. This poem can also be used with clients in therapy. We were first given Wellington’s poem to read, then we were given a copy of the poem with key words deleted and invited to fill in the blanks, as follows:

I wanted to be a . . .

when . . .

so . . .

Years have passed . . .

I was surprised by the personal impact of working with this poem. I was able to access a part of myself, my sense of not belonging to New Zealand, which I had always known about but never verbalised. I had grown up wanting to be Māori, the indigenous people of New Zealand, so in the poem I compared myself to a kumara, a sweet potato commonly eaten by Māori. I contrasted it to a banana, a term sometimes used pejoratively in Asia to describe Chinese people who have grown up in the West—a term that insinuates they are yellow on the outside but white on the inside. In addition, my poem allowed me to describe people identifying as

English as potatoes. My version of Wellington's poem reads as follows:

*I wanted to be a kumara
when I was young
so I wouldn't be a banana.
I too, wanted to belong
like all the potatoes
who had been accepted
in the vegetable patch.
But I am yellow
on the outside
and even though I am white on the inside,
I am a fruit and not a vegetable.
Years have passed
the vegetables are bland
and I am still white on the inside
but. . .ohhh
so sweet and wanted
around the world,
I have found the fruit bowl*

Writing this poem helped me to become aware of how much I had disliked being Chinese when I was young. I would rather have been Māori because that would have meant I could feel I belonged to New Zealand and, as I perceived, how English people also felt. I, by contrast, felt like an outsider. In my poem, I found that the metaphor *fruit bowl* represented the world. I felt that this suited my viewpoint and my sense of self more accurately and that I eventually understood that I am international; a Chinese person from New Zealand who, at that time, was living in London.

Life-story therapy

I was able to deepen my self-understanding further through autobiographical writing, also known as life-story writing (McAdams, 1997). Clients in therapy could be encouraged to write about life events as a homework exercise when they feel a need to express themselves further. A chapter in the work of McAdams (1997, pp. 256-264) provides exercises related to writing "life chapters," or about "key events," "significant people," and more. Using life story at home between

writing classes, I wrote a piece that I titled “Malia,” my childhood name. As a child my name was changed from Maria to Malia because many first-generation Chinese, my parents included, were unable to pronounce the “r” in Maria. In this story, I wrote about my first day at school:

My father held my hand and led me barefoot to school. . .It was my first day. I was five and I was so happy and so excited to be walking with him. . .

That morning and every morning before, as far as I could remember. . .I quickly jumped out of bed and scurried to sit by the bathroom door. I could hear my father in the bathroom, and that woke me from my slumber. . .When he was ready to let me in, he opened the door and the smile that he gave me with such warmth would show me his love. He would talk to me, and say, Malia. . .Malia. . .Malia with such affection.

My father said I was a big girl now so it was time for me to go to school. . .it will be a lot of fun to have other children to play with and I will learn a lot. I will become very clever like my big sister and I will learn to speak English. Clever children can speak English. . .

The teacher said, “We have a new student. This is Malia. She has come to join us.” The teacher motioned me to come to the front. I stood there and looked at all the faces staring at me. I did not know what was expected or what to do. The teacher said something to me. I opened my mouth and spoke Cantonese, the only language I knew. The class burst out laughing. I looked at the teacher and she was smiling too. I stood frozen on the spot. They were laughing at me! One boy pointed at me, and said “Ching-Chong Chinamen” and, pulling his eyes up into the skies, tried to imitate my language. I looked at them and said nothing, frozen to the ground like a piece of solid rock. I stared at them, stunned by the taunts, the way possums are hypnotised by the bright light of headlights shining into their eyes. I cried with no tears. Standing there, I felt nothing. I was somewhere else. I had gone to a place where I cannot feel. To feel would only bring hurt, pain and anguish. To feel would acknowledge that I had been abandoned by everyone who I thought loved me. . .

The next morning and every morning after, I did not sit and wait by the bathroom door. . .

Through writing and reflecting on this story, I learned that my first day at school had been a highly traumatic experience and that I had had no-one to talk to when this happened. I couldn't speak to my older sister and brother, who were seven and six and living in their own worlds. My parents would have been working and would not have been home until after dark, by which time I would have been asleep. I was scared and confused, but had to cope by myself. I learned from my school environment, mainly in the playground, that the Cantonese language was "bad" and that the Chinese did not belong in New Zealand. Over time I stopped speaking Cantonese and spoke only English. In this way I lost an important part of my ethnic culture and, most significantly, I lost the ability to communicate with my mother since she only spoke Cantonese. I realised recently that it was understandable that my mother and I only had a superficial relationship because we did not share a common language with which to communicate our thoughts and emotions. My father was fluent in English so I could communicate with him, and he would interpret between me and my mother. When my father died in 1993 I not only lost my father, I lost the means of communicating with my mother. Sadly, my development of the Cantonese language was stunted because, through my childhood experiences of shame, I chose not to acknowledge or respect my Chinese heritage.

The process of writing "Malia" helped me to understand my behaviour towards my mother. I realised that I avoided her due to our inability to communicate and the misunderstandings that would inevitably arise between us. I also started to recognise that I had been a "good enough daughter" and that if I had continued speaking Cantonese I may have had a deeper relationship with her, not just because of the words, but because a shared language reflects a shared culture and identity.

Rereading: Book therapy

As part of the writing programme we were required to create a mini research project. I set myself a task to reread a book that had had a significant impact on me, and to write about the experience of rereading. Therapists and counsellors can set similar exercises for clients. I chose to reread *The Good Earth* by Pearl Buck (1931/2016), which I had first read in adolescence. It was about a farmer, and set in China. Before rereading the book I wrote down what I remembered about it, which was very little. What I could recall, however, was how reading it had left me feeling *validated* and that I *existed*. Furthermore, that *existing was enough*.

When I reread *The Good Earth* I was surprised by how familiar it felt. I remembered, as a teenager, the excitement of simply having time to read, which was a luxury given that after school I was usually working with my mother sewing moccasins. Rereading the book took me back to the rare times as a child when I was happy and free to do as I pleased.

Alongside rereading the book, I wrote in my journal. The book triggered a lot of memories. I came to see that my adolescence was a period of anxiety, confusion, and limitation, where I had had very little guidance. But I was also able to recall times of joy, excitement, and love, and the closeness of my family. The more I wrote the more I remembered, and I came to realise that my adolescence hadn't been all bad. In fact, there had been much good. I realised that, as a child, I had allowed the negatives to cloud the positives.

Here are some extracts from the journal that I wrote as I took part in this rereading exercise:

As I grew older, I borrowed books from the library. When I was 11 years old I discovered The Good Earth, about a farmer in China and his wife who was a slave, that he had bought. This was of major importance for me because all I knew about myself as an adolescent was reflected from my parents and the society in which I grew up. In the 1960s, Chinese were not looked upon with much favour by some in New Zealand. History in school was New Zealand, Māori or British. There was no education about Chinese history. China was closed to the world. In those days, that was the norm.

After rereading The Good Earth and writing about my adolescence, I realised that my isolation as a child and my life up to then was two-dimensional. The first dimension was my family of origin and the second the society in which I grew up. This book gave my life a third dimension. I had this label, Chinese, and I did not know what to do with it. All of a sudden, I had something tangible to hang on to. Chinese and China were not only labels, but a whole society and culture, of which I was a part, and about which I knew very little. My parents referred to China as Jong Kok (Middle Kingdom) and it had no meaning to me. I started to understand that I was different due to my Chinese culture, and not because there was something wrong with me.

As a child, I wanted to be a boy. The Good Earth helped me understand that boys were more highly valued than girls. Boys were celebrated and girls could be sold to be slaves, “We shall have to buy a good basketful of eggs and dye them all red for the village. Thus will everyone know I have a son!” (p. 38). There was substance to my feelings of wanting to be a boy. Through my writing, I was able to discover the discrepancy in the way my mother treated my older sister compared to my older brother, and the way she and my father worked. . .

I do not know why I thought it was better to be a boy than a girl. I just knew it. I do not remember being hugged or kissed by my mother. In Chinese families, there is generally no show of affection. Or maybe in my family, my mother always had someone younger to attend to. The work seemed endless for her. My father had time to sit and relax and spend time with us, but not my mother. My father would laugh and play with us, but not my mother. She was just constantly cooking or cleaning or working. Maybe that is why I did not want to be a girl. My mother was a girl and she had no fun at all!

I have come to realise that as I am writing about how I was feeling during certain times in adolescence, I am counselling myself. I am standing back and looking at what I would say if a client of 10, 11 or 12 years old came into my room and talked to me. I am starting to understand myself a lot better. My feelings of isolation. The messages from family and from society.

As can be seen, this rereading/writing project opened up many themes and provided many insights. Principally, it allowed me to develop empathy for myself and my siblings. In fact, the exercise inspired me to talk to my siblings about our childhood, and this further helped me to understand myself. I became aware that their perspectives and experiences were different from mine and, after reflecting on our memories, we were able to draw closer emotionally.

Clearly, working with fiction can be a powerful therapeutic tool. According to Oatley (2011): “The process of entering imagined worlds of fiction builds empathy and improves your ability to take another person’s point of view. It can even change your personality” (p. 63). He goes on: “The properties of fictional narrative invite identification with characters in ways that nonfiction usually does not” (p. 67). Certainly, all this was true in my case. On rereading *The Good Earth*, for example, I realised that when I was an adolescent I had cast my father as the farmer and my mother as the farmer’s wife who was the farmer’s slave. I could see the

similarities between the characters and my parents. I could also see how the farmer and his wife treated their sons and daughters differently. Sons were prized, and in times of scarcity daughters would be smothered and killed at birth. In childhood, I was aware of how my mother treated my sister less favourably than my brother, so it is little wonder I had grown up wanting to be a boy. It is also little wonder I felt validated in that desire when I originally read the book. At the same time, writing about this book helped me to develop empathy for my mother. I realised that she could not pass on to me what she had not had herself—a sense of self-worth and individuality. In fact, my mother had no concept of these ideas and had behaved as if she had “not existed”.

Chinese clients and therapeutic writing as an adjunct to therapy

I was able to further explore my life experiences using the Minority Identity Development Model (Atkinson, 2004). This model was developed to shed light on the attitudes held by those from minority communities towards self-identity and other groups. The model postulates five stages of self-identity development. They are summarised as follows:

Stage 1: Conformity—attitudes of majority group internalised, including prejudices against minority groups;

Stage 2: Dissonance—feelings and attitudes emerge that reflect racial-cultural confusion;

Stage 3: Resistance and immersion—majority group’s values rejected and minority group’s values embraced;

Stage 4: Introspection—reflection on the different cultural groups’ differing values;

Stage 5: Synergistic articulation and awareness—resolving the confusion and conflict leads to self-appreciation and selective appreciation of other groups.

This model, which was developed for therapists to help them understand their minority clients, is based on the assumption that clients from minority groups are likely to have experienced discrimination. I used this model to reflect on my own experience, and drew from my poems, journal writings from the therapeutic writing programme, as well as further reflection, to write the following, which illustrates how the interweaving of a range of therapeutic writings can achieve further understanding:

1. *Conformity:* My poem “I wanted to be a kumara” [see above] showed I wanted to be Māori and had no interest in being Chinese. I spoke English and I lost my Cantonese. I wanted to fit in so I would not stand out and be targeted.

2. *Dissonance:* At 11, reading *The Good Earth* was the catalyst and the beginning of my interest in my Chinese heritage. When I was older in college, my social studies teacher took an interest in me. She taught me about places around the world like Egypt and Japan, and it sparked my desire to travel to these new countries. In her class, I felt being different was a positive thing. My social environment was now giving me mixed messages.

3. *Resistance and immersion:* It wasn't until I started university that I made Chinese friends who were born in New Zealand. I began to feel that I belonged to this community. When I was 25 years old, I lived in Hong Kong for a year with my relatives who could not speak English. I had to speak to them in Cantonese, which improved my fluency. I immersed myself in the Chinese culture. I developed a sense of being Chinese and I started to appreciate my parents in a way I had not before. I felt grateful that they had left China to build a better life for the family. Even though I was Chinese, I knew that I did not belong in Asia. My view of the world and experiences were different from my relatives who lived in Asia.

4. *Introspection:* I started to become more comfortable with my own identity. I integrated the positives I liked about Chinese, Western and Māori cultures. New Zealand was my home and I recognised that 10 per cent of society will not feel positively towards me because of my Chinese exterior, and 10 per cent of society will. However, 80 per cent will take me for who I am without letting my Chinese exterior be a negative factor.

5. *Synergistic articulation and awareness:* My husband is South African from English and Scottish descent. I have travelled the world and have been to over 40 countries. My life has led me to experience the cultures of Hong Kong, Dubai, and London, and I have friends from many ethnic backgrounds. These friendships have broadened my view of the world and I am far richer for having them.

My therapeutic writings about myself, together with using the Minority Identity Development Model, have helped me to create a solid foundation in my identity, a way of understanding myself and the negative experiences I had. Through this model I could see how my attitudes about myself and others have changed as I have matured, and have broadened through my international experiences. It helped me to better understand the reason why, while growing up in New Zealand, I had not wanted anything to do with my Chinese culture, only immersing myself in my Chinese culture during my late teens and twenties. Today, I identify as a Chinese New Zealander, recognising both parts of my heritage.

The Minority Identity Development Model (Atkinson, 2004) may be a useful tool for therapists working with minority groups that may not be accustomed to therapy. In the United Kingdom, research has shown that Chinese people underutilise mental health services, and many who do access services find the experience unsatisfactory (Jim & Pistrang, 2007). In New Zealand, research by Vong (2002) has highlighted that Chinese immigrant students have a low rate of self-referral to counselling services due to a range of cultural factors including: the perception that disclosing personal problems may be shameful for the family; stigma attached to mental health issues; a lack of Chinese counsellors, and low expectations of the benefits of counselling. For Chinese people who do pursue counselling, the Minority Identity Development Model could be a useful tool for encouraging self-awareness. In a similar vein, the counsellor could develop a questionnaire or writing exercise to be done during a session by the client. Or, clients could be invited to write about their lives between sessions and then bring their work to counselling for exploration if they choose to.

Webber, McKinley and Hattie (2013) researched the experience of teenagers from ethnic groups in New Zealand, including Chinese, Pākehā, Māori and Samoan. Reading this study, I was amazed that the Chinese teenagers' reports of experiences of racism having affected their identity and sense of belonging mirrored my own. According to Webber et al. (2013), 54 per cent of Chinese teenagers linked the experience of discrimination to their negative feelings towards being Chinese, although these teenagers also reported positive feelings towards Chinese culture, food, and history. It can be seen how the Minority Identity Development Model could be used to help Chinese teenagers understand their feelings and behaviours and come to the realisation that it is normal for them to have internal conflicts around cultural identity.

For client groups who are reluctant to use face-to-face counselling, or who find this difficult, Phillips and Rolfe (2016) suggest journal writing may be an effective alternative or adjunct. Certainly, journal writing and therapeutic writing have been highly beneficial in my own life, allowing me to write about issues I did not want to share with anyone, make personal discoveries, and find a greater sense of self-understanding.

A phenomenological approach to therapeutic writing

The following explains my process of therapeutic writing and highlights some parallels between my therapeutic writing process and the process involved in talking therapies.

Beginning

When I write, it begins with a blank page. . .and then a dot. . .that becomes a line. . .and creates a letter. . .then words appear on the page. . .and words and sentences are ideas from my subconscious and unconscious. Using language, I organise my words, becoming consciously aware of and connected to my authentic self. Through language, I also communicate my ideas so the reader can experience in some ways what I experience.

Creative and unique

With regard to creativity, I return to my previous example of my crafting and writing of the poem “I wanted to be a kumara.” At the start of my process, I first read Wellington’s poem in Chavis (2011, p. 35), which begins:

*I wanted to be a cauliflower
when I was a child
so my mother would love me
I too, was bland. . .*

As I began, I focused on the first and second lines because those were the lines that made the most impact on me. I noticed the poem used food as a metaphor. The tutor gave us five minutes to write the poem, which is a very short timeframe and encouraged us to think quickly and find what Goldberg (1986) describes as “first thoughts [which] have tremendous energy. It is the way the mind first flashes on something. . .First thoughts are also unencumbered by ego” (p. 9). Our first thoughts bypass the ego and provide insights which have the ability to transform.

This is particularly so when working with metaphor, as Chavis (2011) explains: “[Metaphor] forges unusual links, often catapulting us into new awareness and bypassing the logical, walled-up self” (p. 29). In this way the poetry exercise parallels talking therapy, and demonstrates how it could be incorporated into a counselling setting.

When I reflect on the idea of “first thoughts,” I am reminded of when I worked as a counsellor. I would pay particular attention to the first and second sentences of a new client because these sentences would provide clues to the core issues. Similarly, the first and second lines of Wellington’s poem were a trigger that took me back to my childhood and, in the five minutes it took to write my poem, I was able to access my own core issues. When I had completed this first draft, I felt delighted and satisfied: I had accessed the strong emotions of not feeling I belonged, and in so doing I felt acknowledged. The poem felt complete, and it helped me to feel complete. I had become aware of my sense of not belonging and I could let those feelings of not belonging go.

Hedges (2013) writes that “a poet completes the cycle of awareness by the writing of the poem” (p. 8). This resonates with the gestalt approach to therapy (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951) where the awareness of a need to express a feeling is not complete until it is verbalised in some form. This gestalt process can be seen in the writing of my poem, which was both creative and unique to me. Furthermore, I hope that my poem might also prove therapeutic for any New Zealand-born Chinese people who read it and identify with the emotions I express, helping them not to feel so isolated.

My poem was written in a group setting, with Wellington’s poem “I wanted to be a cauliflower” being the catalyst for a release of creativity. In the words of Carl Rogers (1961), the creative potential “awaits only the proper conditions to be released and expressed” (p. 351). These “proper conditions” were provided by the tutor, just as they can be provided by the therapist in the counselling room. Rogers further defines the creative process as “the emergence in action of a novel relational product, growing out of the uniqueness of the individual on the one hand, and the materials, events, people, or circumstances of his life on the other” (p. 350). Eight of us on the writing programme were exposed to the same material, yet we each produced something unique and rich with personal meaning. Creations that are not unique are copies, so the act of creating, that is taking any form of writing

and creating something new, means to make something unique. This can lead to satisfaction as we come closer to our true and unique selves, and demonstrates how creative writing can be therapeutic writing and have therapeutic benefits.

Writers and poets have been around since long before the invention of therapy, using language creatively to express their thoughts and emotions. As Rogers, and the gestalt therapists, believed, “creativity is an inbuilt part of being human: therapy could often act to unblock the creative energy that is in each one of us” (Hedges, 2013, p. 11). Hence, we can see that creativity can lead to therapeutic benefits and therapy can lead to creativity. The two concepts are interlinked.

Autobiographical fiction

By writing and reflecting on my own story in “Malia,” my view of myself became more positive and I noticed that my sense of self became stronger. I wondered how this had happened. I discovered an answer in the Life Story Model of Identity, which was developed by McAdams (1997). This model is based on ideas in narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990) and suggests that writing our life story can help us to integrate the different roles and characters that we play in our lives. In this regard, my identity is comprised of numerous roles which develop and change as I age, such as wife, “good enough” daughter, counsellor, etc. McAdams (1997) calls these roles “imagoes” and suggests that through the process of storytelling we structure and organise our identity by pulling together these roles to form “integrative imagoes” (p. 122). For me, being a Chinese person born in New Zealand means my integrative imagoes will be very different from a Chinese person born in mainland China. I am caught between East and West, and my identity is tinged with influences from the Māori and the Western cultures of New Zealand. However, writing stories has allowed me to make connections and make meaning of my experiences. Hunt and Sampson (2006) offer this explanation for how storytelling can help with the development of a sense of self:

Language enables us to move beyond the awareness of feelings and emotions, which is the realm of core consciousness, to make our memories more explicit and to hold them over time; it enables us to have an extended sense of self in which we observe what we are doing and feeling, so that we can reflect on past experiences and plan how we are going to deal with things in the future. (p. 21)

Language and writing make the implicit explicit because they draw “information

from your subconscious and unconscious minds and bring it to the surface, where you can work at the conscious level” (Adams, 1990, p. 20). The writing process encourages the conscious to emerge, such that the stories we write connect our past (who we were) with our present (who we are) and our future (who we might be, or hope to be). In other words, the stories we create to make sense of our lives are essentially attempts to reconcile our past, present, and perceived future with the social contexts of our family and the communities we belong to.

Expressive writing

While I was writing “Malia,” I aimed to access and release my deepest thoughts and feelings. I did not consider grammar or spelling or the craft of writing, as I was in a process of catharsis. In this way, writing “Malia” was similar to the process I went through while in personal therapy and reminiscent of what I observed as a counsellor in those clients who underwent a deep process. While writing, I was able to go into this deeper processing space then bring myself out, much like the therapy hour. My journal became a container for thoughts and emotions, and this helped me to organise and make sense of my experience as a child.

When researching my experience, I came across the concept of “expressive writing,” a term coined by Pennebaker (1990) to describe a process of writing that explores traumatic, stressful, or emotional experiences in a way that provides access to deep and often unconscious thoughts and feelings. Pennebaker’s research shows a link between expressive writing and physical health, with physical health regarded as a substitute for emotional health. Due to the subject matter being written about, expressive writing can initially lead to emotional turmoil but, if followed through in a prescribed manner, then physical and emotional health will eventually be the result. Pennebaker writes, “when people write about major upheavals, they begin to organise and understand them” (p. 185). When I experienced expressive writing I understood the therapeutic process and risks, but most laypeople will not be aware of the dangers so ethical care is required. For example, expressive writing may not be suitable for those recovering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Reflective writing

An essential part of the therapeutic writing process involves spending time reflecting on what has been written, then writing about those reflections. According to Etherington (2004), reflective writing can promote self-understanding. She

explains: “These reflections usually stay at a conscious level, using what we already know about ourselves, while at the same time opening up the possibility of knowing ourselves better as we create new meanings and gain new understanding” (p. 28). The purpose of reflection is to gain insights which may help us to deal with issues in a new and creative way. Writing and reflecting in this way has a parallel with talking therapy, in that the counsellor reflects on the client’s words then shares those reflections with the client. When I read and reread the pages of my journal, the page becomes a mirror that reflects back my deeper self.

Rereading: Book therapy

As described above, rereading fiction can be a powerful therapeutic tool that takes the reader back to the period when the book was first read. Spacks (2011) describes rereading as “a way to evoke memories (not only of the text but of one’s life and of past selves), a reminder of half-forgotten truths, an inlet to new insights” (p. 2). She adds, “characters remain the same, and the words never change, but the reader always does” (p. 3). When we reread a book that was first read a long time ago we take something new from something old, and will recognise that we have changed. We will gain a sense of our growth and development because we are not the same person we were five, ten or thirty years ago.

Last words for therapists

In this article, I have attempted to demonstrate the process of therapeutic writing by sharing from my personal experiences and by highlighting some of the foundational literature and research in this field. In summary, it can be seen that there are many parallels between therapeutic writing and talking therapies. In theoretical terms, therapeutic writing in its different forms can be integrated into different counselling modalities such as person-centred, gestalt, and narrative modalities of therapy. The philosophy underpinning therapeutic writing, and the therapeutic writing programme I have been describing, is all about the individual and personal growth.

While there are a number of different techniques for therapeutic writing, one of the simplest could be to journal. In this way the client can continue their therapeutic process between sessions. This could be particularly useful for clients from minority groups who may find counselling threatening.

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