

Fiction Writing as Therapy

As the saying goes “The pen is mightier than the sword”. When it comes to processing emotional experience, the pen is mighty indeed. I am constantly reminding my clients to journal. Journaling about current and past events and emotions can be a very powerful tool with which to process and thereby get past those events that have troubled us. This works very well even when events happened a long time ago. When it’s hard to remember, fiction is mightier than trying to dredge up memories that are glued to the bottom of our unconscious.. So I recommend that you write fiction about the things that happened to you that shaped you and that hinder you still. Start with the facts you know, i.e. what you remember and what you’ve been told. Go on from there and just make up the rest.

For years I have recommended to clients that they just make it up when they can’t remember something in detail. They usually look at me in astonishment and disbelief and sometimes, if I’m lucky, curiosity. So I ask them to tell me where imagination comes from and where memory comes from and I point to my head. They come from the same place, the mind. Making it up is an effective approach to bypassing the memory censors in our unconscious.

Forgetting is an active process. We tend to think of remembering as active and forgetting as passive. But they are really both active. The distinction is that one is conscious and the other is unconscious. We tend to say that we can’t remember. We do not say, “I am forgetting it right now because my unconscious sees where this is heading and is afraid to go there!” But that is exactly what is happening. That is what we are doing in that moment. I remember one particularly delightful elderly client. When she couldn’t remember something she would say, “My forgetter works overtime.” It was a joke. In her case it wasn’t even exactly accurate. Her “rememberer” was giving out. But her point was well taken. Forgetting is an active process.

Unfortunately, our unconscious mind holds most of the cards. There are however, a number of ways of getting around its decisions. For example have you ever said, “The moment that I stop trying to remember, it will come to me”? If you then deliberately move your mind on to something else and it comes to you, you have effectively tricked your unconscious into relaxing its active forgetting of that memory. Another way to trick it is to write fiction.

What I recommend is that you remember all you can about an event or series of events out of your past that you want to process. These are the formative events of your life, the ones that caused the problems that you still struggle with today. Then starting from the basic facts that you have about these events, you construct a fictionalized story. You can make it as detailed, elaborate and lengthy as you like. It is your story and you can do whatever you want. However, I recommend that you make it as plausible as possible. When I say “plausible”, I mean to you. I don’t really care if anyone else would find it credible. It’s not their story. It is your story, your history.

In the story you write, you will be the protagonist. As you write it you will be thinking the thoughts and feeling the feelings of the protagonist (your own thought and feelings). The experiencing of these thoughts and feelings will really be re-experiencing. Even if the facts of the story aren't exactly accurate, the thought and feelings of the protagonist will reprise those thoughts and feelings that you actually had at the time and the thoughts and feelings that you have had subsequently; about those events. This is processing. As you do this you will be processing those experiences again, sometimes referred to as "reprocessing".

The thing about reprocessing is that you are not the same person you were when you first experienced those events. You have changed. You have grown, learned, experienced more and evolved. With your increased knowledge, experience, sophistication, maturity and wisdom you will reach better conclusions. And the more you do this the more highly functional you will become.

So this is my proposal, that you write fictionalized stories about yourself. I hope you like my idea. I hope you do it. And I hope it has a profound impact on your evolution into a happier, healthier and more actualized person.