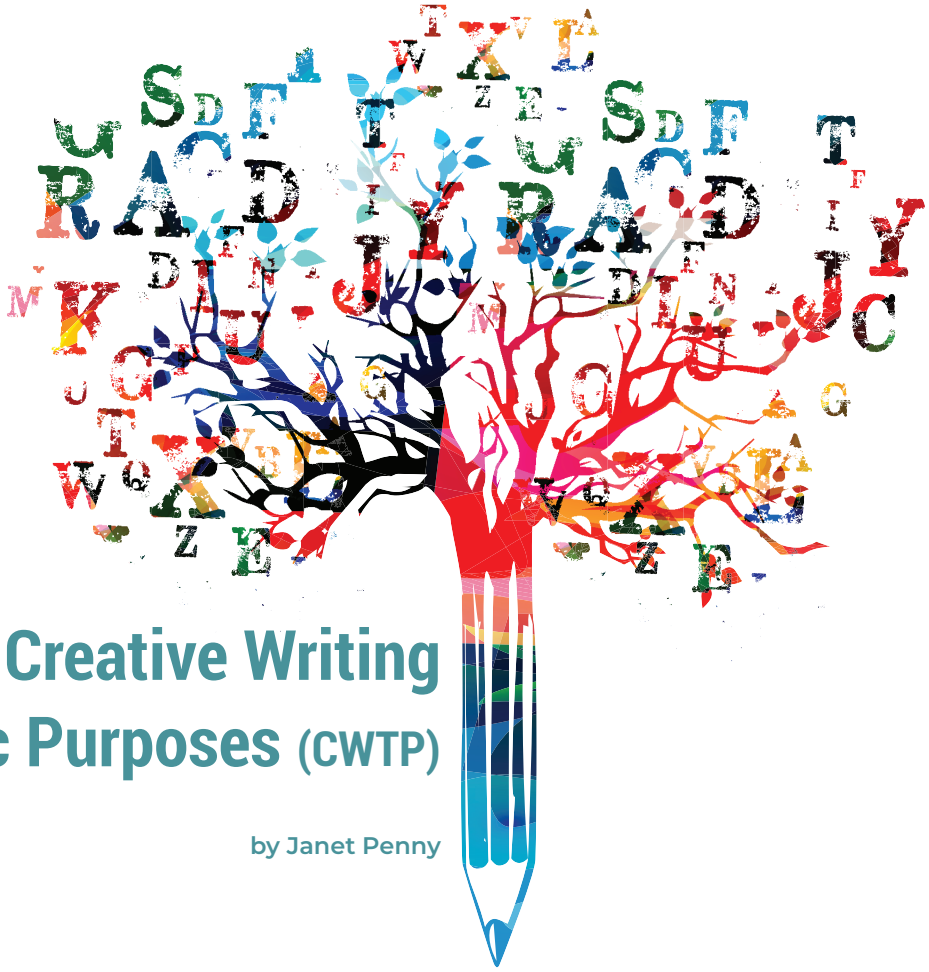


Reflections on Creative Writing for Therapeutic Purposes (CWTP)

by Janet Penny

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The thought of keeping of a journal can conjure up images of emotionally tortured teenagers pouring out their innermost angst in notebooks that are kept away from prying eyes. But what some journal keepers instinctively know, and indeed also those who practise writing in other forms also realise, is that expressive writing does in fact result in better health, both psychologically and physically. [1] Journalling is commonly practised and so it is highly likely you have worked with a client at some point who finds self-expression in writing helpful. How then can writing be harnessed for therapeutic ends, either within the counselling session or as part of what happens between sessions? These brief reflections on creative writing for therapeutic purposes (CWTP) explore some of my own experiences with CWTP and what it might have to offer the Christian counsellor. *I hope you will be encouraged about the CWTP you already include in your own clinical practice, but also inspired to develop creative writing interventions for clients who find it helpful.*

Writing for well-being has a long history with its genesis suggested in the link between poetry and medicine, embodied in the Greek god Apollo. Also, Williamson and Wright [2] point back to the Psalms as an early form of writing for therapeutic purposes. In more recent times, creative writing of some kind has been used to work with a range of issues, from working with trauma, to navigating the challenges of having cancer, working with young people and children, with issues of infertility, and dementia, to name a few, each drawing from different theoretical perspectives. Research supports its benefits, and the practice of **C**reative **W**riting for **T**herapeutic **P**urposes, or expressive writing for well-being, continues to develop.

DEFINING CREATIVE WRITING FOR THERAPEUTIC PURPOSES

What is Creative Writing for Therapeutic Purposes? Starting with what it is not, CWTP is not simply creative writing. Nor is it primarily concerned with the end product of the writing process, and certainly not about producing something that is 'good' writing by any standard. Instead, CWTP intentionally seeks to engender well-being, and works towards therapeutic ends through writing. Therapeutic change can occur through processes such as the expression of feelings and thoughts, reframing of problematic narratives, provision of a reflective space, exploring

an impasse, or creating an alternative perspective. One of the key characteristics of CWTP is the process of reflecting on what one has written. According to Thompson[3], this 'feedback loop' of writing and then reflecting is what separates CWTP from other modes of writing. This reflection can be carried out by simply re-reading a piece of writing and reflecting on it. Alternatively, reflection can take place through the process of writing a response or 'feedback statement' (*ibid*) to what has been written, or through sharing one's writing with another trusted person. Pausing to stay with what has been expressed deepens the therapeutic potential of the writing. Reading out one's work or hearing another read it can be very powerful, particularly if it is received with openness and empathy.

Creative Writing for Therapeutic Purposes can be integrated in many approaches to counselling. Although not bound by a humanistic perspective, CWTP's emphasis on the process of writing and reflecting rather than product, the need to establish a working alliance and create an environment of safety all cohere somewhat with person-centred values. There is often an emphasis on working collaboratively; it is not usually an invitation to a psychic archaeological dig, nor are counsellors privileged with insight into others' lives, but, as Hamilton writes,

> '...therapeutic writing does not so much invite 'interrogation of the unconscious' as offer reflective spaces where inner and outer landscapes of feeling, thought, experience and environment may be explored, ruminated on, shared, discovered, revisited and reconsidered, and acted in and out of .'[4]

Moreover, Carl Rogers asserts that creativity 'exists in every individual, and only awaits the proper conditions to be released and expressed'.[5] It echoes Naiburg and Dobson's point that 'When we write, we uncover what we know but did not know we knew and discover something new'.[6] This capacity for creativity reflects something of how humans are made in the image of the Divine Creator.

INTEGRATING CREATING WRITING FOR THERAPEUTIC PURPOSES IN PRACTICE

Practically, CWTP can be practised with groups or integrated into one-to-one counselling. Although writing can take place in the session, it is considerably easier to invite clients to write between sessions, and this has been my own experience in one-to-one work. In any case, the development of a good and safe working alliance is vital in CWTP whereby any writing intervention is not imposed but used collaboratively. Gibbons[7] discusses this aspect of CWTP in his article on 'safety first' in which he recounts a difficult experience where issues of the alliance and safety had not been addressed. As Rogers noted, it is only within an environment of psychological safety that there will be psychological freedom to explore and create (see Footnote 5). The more the counsellor can provide a therapeutic relationship of empathy, acceptance, openness, and sense of a 'secure base',[8] the more likely a client will take up the invitation to creatively explore their inner landscape.

Fears, anxieties, shame, worries about not being 'good enough', 'getting it right', or a felt sense of exposure are not uncommon in the beginning stages of CWTP, and so a counsellor needs to communicate the Rogerian conditions explicitly and implicitly that will facilitate the client's freedom to express themselves without fear of judgment. It is helpful to keep an eye out for the client's 'inner critic', which can appear as the client gives voice. Most approaches to CWTP aim to counter this by facilitating self-acceptance and self-compassion,[9] and the inner critic itself can be a focus of a CWTP intervention. Mary Oliver's brief poem, 'Praying', can be a helpful starting place for these kinds of issues. She writes, '...patch a few words together, and don't try and make them elaborate, this isn't a contest but a doorway...'[10]

In terms of the various exercises, prompts and forms that writing can take, there are almost endless possibilities, from free writing (writing in any form) to stories, fairy tales, poems structured and unstructured, lists, journalling, working with metaphors, archetypes, acrostics, writing stems, bibliotherapy, unsent letters, and images, for example, as well as the Scriptures, of course. The range of prompts and exercises can be thought of as lying along several dimensions, including on the spectrum from playfulness to serious, as well as the degree to which they are primarily concerned with affective or cognitive processes and are structured versus unstructured. [11]

Generally, the more the client is experiencing overwhelming emotion, the more appropriate it would be to use a structured approach to writing (see Footnote 3). For example, the client can be invited to write a structured poem (e.g., haiku, pantoum) about their feelings of loss. The imposition of structure can at first seem challenging, but it often enables what is most important to surface and can be emotionally containing and regulating. Structure can also be added in the form of a time limit for the writing. Alternatively, a simple writing stem, such as, 'I am..', in which the client completes the sentence stem repeatedly, can be used as prompt to explore self-narratives. A less structured form of writing can enable clients who are struggling to connect with emotions to stay with their feelings. For example, a client can be asked to read an emotionally evocative short poem or psalm and write a free-form response to the words or phrases that resonated with them.

After the writing has taken place, the client can be invited (but never obligated) to share all or part of their writing if they wish. They may read it aloud themselves or ask the counsellor to read it out. Being witnessed, being fully seen, and heard, can be a powerful therapeutic moment. There are then several potential therapeutic avenues to pursue; for example, an invitation to reflect on what the writing process was like, what it felt like to read it out, or how it felt to hear themselves in another's voice, what has impacted them, and what it has left them with. This reflection in the context of a helping relationship adds another therapeutic layer.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON CREATIVE WRITING FOR THERAPEUTIC PURPOSES

As an example of CWTP in practice, I share a little of my own experience. I have long been a journaller and dabbled in creative writing, hoping to connect with God (and with myself) through my 'prayer-writing'. But in recent years, I engaged with the CWTP course at the Metanoia Institute, and, in response to being invited to write a 'cento', that is, a poem made up of what other people say or write, it enabled me to express the following:

Don't 'At Least' Me

'At least you can adopt,'

'At least you'll have more time on your hands,',

'At least you've got each other,'

'At least you'll get plenty of sleep,'

'At least you won't need a babysitter,'

'At least you can do what you want,'

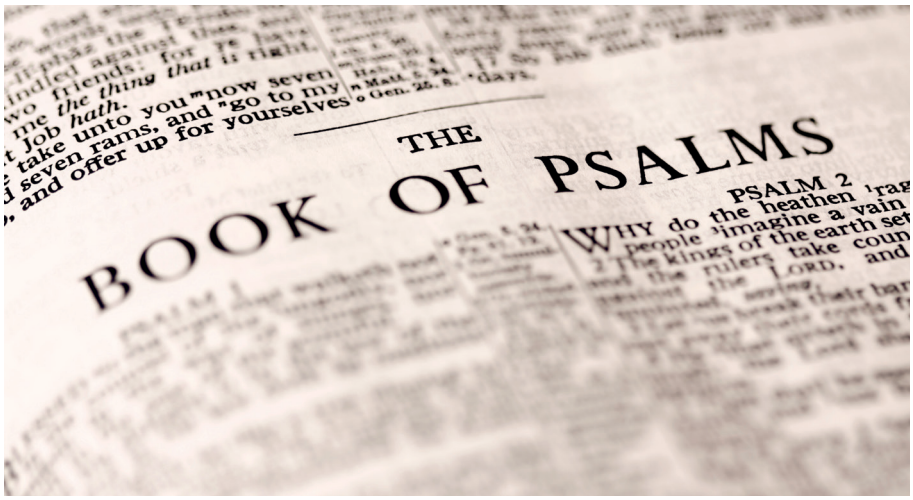
'At least you'll be free,'

And all the other stupid things people say..

As well as expressing what is difficult to voice, CWTP allows space for playfulness. A work colleague once said to me, the Shakespearian fool is the one that doesn't take things apparently too seriously but tends to puncture the pomposity of belief systems that are hurting people. Humour can be powerful. In this more playful vein, I enjoyed writing a free form poem about what used to be quite a difficult relational dynamic. It gave me the opportunity to finally stand back from the relationship, appreciate it for what it was and perhaps poke just a little fun at us both. There was a kind of letting go in that for me. In both these instances, I was able to silence the inner critic and creatively engage with what I needed to voice.

WRITING WITHIN A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Writers, such as Owens [12] and Chan [13] have explored how expressive writing from a Christian perspective can be therapeutic. Owens researched how the Psalms can be used as prompts for poetic writing in psychotherapy, and Chan looked at the healing potential of what she calls 'biblical letters' (p.13) as a means of support through a difficult time. Also, Cepero [14] and



Phillips [15] both discuss journalling as a 'spiritual practice', and McDowell similarly advocates for the reading and writing of poetry as a spiritual practice [16]. There is a small but growing pool of resources to draw upon.

There will be perhaps a range of views and theologies that come to bear here, but of import is the potential for Christian clients to engage with creative writing from a faith perspective, for therapeutic and, perhaps, also spiritual ends. Whether it be rephrasing a portion of the Psalms as a personal prayer to God about an issue, writing from the perspective of a character in a biblical narrative, or responding to a biblical metaphor through creative writing, there is much potential for healing and exploring spirituality in this way of working. As an example, because of their poetic, evocative potential, working with metaphors can be effective in bridging the 'head-heart gap'; , that is, bringing together compartmentalised emotions and thoughts. As Kopp says, metaphors combine the 'logical and [the] imaginal'. [17] Metaphors can get round the client's defences, [18] and the Bible is full of metaphors to draw from when working with CWTP. Also, in a continuing professional development workshop, I have used the framework of the lectio divina as a starting place for CWTP, adding 'relatio', the final step of sharing with another, to explore what God might be saying.

CONCLUSION

As with all interventions, we can take the time to learn and explore what this might look like in ethical practice, but I hope these brief reflections offer an encouragement to, at least, be open to the ways in which creative writing can be woven into Christian counselling or perhaps explore further training. Finding a safe way to, in Hemmingway's words, 'write hard and clear about what hurts' [19], can be the key for some of our clients, and, indeed, for ourselves.

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Janet Penny

About the author

Janet Penny is the Deputy Head of Counselling Faculty at Waverley Abbey College and Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society. She is also the Editor for the Waverley Abbey College Journal and research supervisor for doctoral candidates at the Metanoia Institute and London School of Theology.