



Answering to Myself in Writing

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Abstract

What is the value, therapeutic or otherwise, of expressive self-writing? What happens when some of those private written thoughts and feelings become material for publication?

I was recently reminded of an article I wrote, published in 2009, about dialogical journal writing and compassion-focused therapy. Later, in clearing out cupboards, I found a paper copy of that article (!) and realised that I have a collection of my publications, dating back to 1999 and relevant to the field in which *LIRIC* has developed. Some of them I'd completely forgotten about writing; some were published in local or obscure journals; some were published in non open access journals and are, frustratingly, now behind a pay wall—even for their author. My intention in this article is to bring together those publications. For anyone who needs or wants a copy, I can supply paper copies but rarely digital ones.

Creative therapeutic writing has been a habit I've maintained almost since I was old enough to write. Re-reading the thoughts and feelings I catch on the back of flyers, on screens, and occasionally in notebooks helps anchor me, especially at times of transition; helps me to express feelings, make meaning, and clarify my thinking.

In a professional life, where talking therapy and then teaching counselling and psychotherapy paid the bills, publishing something became a 'requirement' as well as part of an evangelical drive to let other practitioners know about the therapeutic power of writing. This essay aims to capture the ways and various contexts in which the publications about 'writing for wellbeing'—or whatever we call it—developed.

Keywords: autoethnography, creative expressive writing, feminist self writing, therapy, writing for wellbeing

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Introduction

This article asks: What was and is the value of the expressive, self-writing/ life-writing I have carried with me over several migrations? Writing has been a place and a way of becoming for me (Williamson, 2015), a space to work towards critical and reflective practices. That writing has also anchored me. Some of it re-emerged in publications.

There is no traditional ‘literature review’ in this piece. I fantasise that the latest artificial intelligence tool has searched and reviewed systematically all of the published and grey literature, in all of the major world languages (more systematically than any human could of course). The keywords and search terms accumulate from that literature. The results of that review are then circulated across disciplines, arts and humanities, health and social sciences. ‘Write it out’—or whatever we call it—becomes widely recognised for its therapeutic potential and is practised in schools, libraries, hospitals, and community centres amongst other places—as well as online.

The focus of this article then is to review and reflect on some of the private ‘write it out’ writing I’ve carried around with me for years and to consider how some of it turned into published pieces. What was the context of that private writing, and how did the various ‘migrations’ impact on it?

In that private writing, to paraphrase Pennebaker and Evans (2014), I have ‘openly acknowledged emotions’, ‘worked to construct a coherent story’, ‘switched perspectives’, and ‘found my voice’ (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014, pp. 17–18). Sometimes the research voice has turned from private to public, and the value of that published writing is more difficult to speculate about, best for others to assess. The ethics of publishing ‘self-writing’ is not the focus here and could be a whole other article.

Meanwhile, very helpfully, in the related research and practice field of autoethnography, Andrew Sparkes has provided a rich and systematic review of the ethics of self-study and self-writing, using his own intelligence and decades of experience as an autoethnographer (Sparkes, 2024).

July 2011

After six years of working the dream, I'm moving back from Aotearoa NZ to the UK. Gary from the NZ removal company rings. He'll need an accurate list of what's in the boxes in order to give me an estimate. Several years of life writing, paper copies of articles and other publications translated into cubic feet. No furniture to go in the shipping container apart from one chair. The house contents and the garden furniture all stay behind, along with the friends, the house, the garden, the job.

What is most important to have with me in a new home, a new job, in a country that I've left too often? There are 6 cartons full by volume, as Gary says. (Notes, 2011.)

Six cartons of diaries, notebooks, journals, and some published articles. If I hadn't saved those paper copies of publications, this project could not have happened. Too many computers and storage systems have come and gone since 2011, never mind 1999. It would be impossible to find a digital copy of some of this material. Packing involves some reading, skimming and scanning—I note how clear my written observations are, how insightful compared to several experiences of personal therapy. What is it that makes this private life-writing so valuable? After six years, why ship it all back again? But I did, with paper copies of published articles added.

Eventually the shipping boxes arrived and there they were, back in the UK, those articles, notebooks, diaries and journals. Since I was paying for the shipping by square metre, it made sense to give away my pictures, books, the beds, my rocking chair, to give away all of the other furniture and SO many other books to the NZ Red Cross. But I kept those papers, diaries, and journals—boxes and bags full of them, plus some poems.

For that first year back in the English Midlands in 2011, we moved seven times, with all those boxes heaved in and out of cars, in and out of rented places.

A stranger in a new 'home'. The focus of the chosen extracts in *Italics* is the writing during 'migrations' and indicates (as do the publications in much more detail) how that writing helped me stay sane enough to go to work, make sure kids got to school, and keep a record of the experience.

If in doubt, leave the country. In turbulent times, I tend to look for a way out. A year on a Fulbright exchange to Virginia is the first time I find a way, followed by full-time work in Fiji, Aotearoa New Zealand, and most recently Malta. I'm not listing these destinations for

I used to have...

I used to have ...
A sofa – dark blue, soft and very comfortable,
The only one I've ever bought new,
Sent to the Red Cross when I left,
(rather than bought from it)
Along with a garage full of stuff.

I used to have...

A garage – with three tier extension ladder,
Aluminium with paint splotches,
Where my dad had spilt the Magnolia;
Aunt Anne's art deco cups, no saucers,
Christmas decorations and an artificial tree,
A round table and chairs, to sit with friends under the
smoke tree in the garden.

I used to have...

A garden – seed boxes, secateurs, redcurrant bushes a
pear tree,
Compost in two heaps, a Mexican hammock under the
mock orange,
Wisteria bursting through a wrought-iron balcony,
A brick shed with my children's chalked and faded
paintings on the walls,
and red curtains I'd run up on the Singer.

I used to have...

A Singer, a sewing machine – dark mahogany with a
heavy metal treadle
Another Aunt's who used all the different feet,
Overlocking, zig zag tacking
and the drawers still full of her needles,
cotton reels and crochet hooks.
What's it doing there now at the far end of the earth?

I used to have ...

Aunties: Anne, Celia, Imelda, Joan and May,
Agnes, Marjorie, Margaret
I like to say the names I can remember,
And I took some plants to the cemetery when I got back.
I used to have ...

Plants – a riotous spider plant left carelessly on a table.
It starred out like a firework with green jet trails.
And everybody said, 'wow it likes it here'.
As they sat on my blue sofa in the sun.

I used to have ...

some kind of nostalgic exoticism. I admit I don't like the climate in Britain, neither political nor meteorological. My diaries/journals are truly boring about how much I hate the cold in England, and not just in winter: '*Grey and wet again*' May, 2021. The 'making a better life' experiences were painful, sometimes frightening and often 'fractured' migrations—as are most—as well as warmer, joyful, and life-changing (Wright, Lang, & Cornforth, 2011).

In each section, I have included references to articles and chapters I wrote (and some influences) that deepen the sense of living and working in other places, being Other, using creative writing for therapeutic purposes (CWTP) as anchor.

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) has defined a migrant as 'a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons'. (<https://www.iom.int/about-migration>)

I contest that IOM definition, with irony. No migration has been bigger for me than the migration from one British social class to another, via education. This is the one where you aspire to move from cheese and onion crisps to olives, from salad cream to vinaigrette. You even move from one voice to another and never feel quite right in any of them.

So, here are extracts from several migrations from one country to another, and back again, with a common strand of working in English, in universities in the UK, Fiji, Malta, and Aotearoa New Zealand. There is also a clear colonial and post-colonial thread here, but that is a story for a different article. The published articles, chapters, and books accompanying each section also trace how the itineraries sent out new shoots with new collaborators, new ways of researching, and different theories about the practice of writing for wellbeing.

July 1997 Fiji

**Job: University of the South Pacific – USP (Student and staff counsellor plus teaching on Counsellor Education diploma for teachers).
Volunteer counsellor at the Women's Centre in Suva.**

I had typed the application for the job in Fiji in fingerless gloves in January in Northern England. Walking to work every day through the University of the South Pacific's Botanical Gardens, blue skies, frangipani

flowers, heat, and a breeze ruffling the palm trees. I have no regrets about accepting the job. I've got to know some of the gardeners well enough to greet them: 'Bula'.

'I think the root of my problem is...'

A mature student, Sia, is explaining how her husband's drunkenness and violence impact on her ability to concentrate on her studies. There are seven children at home in Samoa and because of financial problems, water bills have been ignored resulting in their water supply being cut off. Sia is in the final year of a B.Ed. and hopes to become a head teacher on her return. She is on academic probation because of poor exam results and wants a letter to support her application for suspension of studies.

We meet three times. In between, following a suggestion that she writes an unsent letter to her husband, in her first language and then writes a reply from him, an unsent letter becomes a wave of writing which then informs our remaining sessions. We look at options. Sia asks if we can continue working by email. Her husband has been told about her coming into the Counselling Service. 'There is little he doesn't find out about,' she says, 'he might kill me.' (Notes, 1998)

I knew this fear was not just a manner of speaking. The statistics about domestic violence and 'femicide' at that time in Fiji were horrifying. Also, the technological equipment and systems available to me at USP were, ironically, far superior to those I'd left in the UK. USP benefited from Japanese IT aid, amongst other forms of assistance. Working on computers and using email was commonplace at the University. Sia and I agreed to work online. I worried about ethics and talked about this shift with my supervisor in the UK—by email.

The Interview

In retrospect, agreeing to an interview by a Fijian post-graduate journalism student, Raj, was unwise. I was unprepared.

R: At the Counselling Service at the University of the South Pacific, you've mentioned that domestic violence features. Also at the Women's Centre in Suva where you volunteer.

JW: Yes, the situation was familiar from working in Women's Centres in the UK. Misogynistic violence happens worldwide. Also, it seems, across classes, religions...

The University is multilingual, multi-ethnic, 'Unique in its diversity' as the logo says, and yes domestic violence seems to be universal. English as the official language of the University is, of course, a colonial leftover. White privilege and colonial history is Raj's story here. He could be the son of the gardener I met walking to work, he could be the son of the Vice Chancellor. His shift from smiles to rage; his disgusted, angry expression should not have surprised me. He stops recording the interview.

'What do you know about life here?' he asks.

One of the things I learned in the two years in Fiji was cultural humility. I admit to not knowing in the first article accepted for publication in an academic journal, 'Uses of Writing to Counter the Silence of Oppression: Counselling Women at USP' (Wright, 1999). *Pacific Health Dialog* may or may not be available online now, but in that article, written in the last century, I was urging practitioners to use writing as an adjunct to helping women—and men—tell their hitherto untold stories, to find a voice. I quoted from the African American poet, Lucille Clifton, from feminist researchers such as Carol Gilligan, and from psychologist James Pennebaker who had published on writing about trauma and health (in very respectable 'scientific' journals.)

In the next move back to the UK following a military coup in Fiji, I started a PhD by publication and moved jobs again in order to finish it.

March 1999, Sheffield

Staff Counsellor, part-time (and PhD candidate) at the University of Sheffield.

The staff counselling post was new. Soon all appointment slots were full, and each client was limited to six sessions, unlike some students using the same service. Most clients were women, in jobs ranging from part-time cleaner to professor and research manager. The model imposed, although time-limited, lent itself to using CWTP as an adjunct to face-to-face sessions. Evaluative surveys quickly demonstrated the worth of CWTP within the counselling contract and provided the interview participants for 'Five Women Talk About Work-Related Brief Therapy and Therapeutic Writing' (Wright, 2003a). The 'Happy women do not write' opening quotation for that article came from a late nineteenth-century calendar. It made me smile, and I decided to shape the 'findings'—Happy women do not get angry, Happy women care for others...etc. The phenomenological 'thematic analysis', supported by long extracts from the five women's

written responses in the interviews, then led to a more collaborative, narrative inquiry, 'Writing Therapy in Brief Workplace Counselling' (Wright, 2005). Most influential in that shift of research approach was Kim Etherington's ground-breaking collaboration with two brothers, adult male survivors, who had approached her for therapeutic help. They had found her published research on sexual abuse in a then very sparse literature (Etherington, 2000).

The confidence to submit a literature review for publication came from my then research adviser, who suggested that 'Mystery or Mastery: Therapeutic Writing: A Review of the Literature' would be useful to other practitioner researchers (Wright & Chung, 2001).

Those three years in Sheffield were also where serendipity played a part. Gillie Bolton, based in Sheffield, had just written and published her foundational work on creative writing and therapy (Bolton, 1999). The Counselling Service organised a conference in May 2001, with Gillie as keynote, which became the edited book, *Writing Cures* with contributions from now well-known CWTP pioneer practitioners such as Claire Williamson, Celia Hunt, and Kate Thompson (Bolton, Howlett, Lago, & Wright, 2004).

The sent and unsent letter writing as part of the therapeutic process was rapidly developing into email counselling.

From a broadly humanistic foundation, creative and expressive writing combined well with my pluralistic counselling approach (Cooper & McLeod, 2010; Rogers, 1993/2000). It was a wrench to move to working with a different theoretical tribe, but the pragmatic reasons to change jobs and reduce commuting tipped the decision.

January 2002

Job: Lecturer, Counselling, practice and research: A University in the English Midlands. A counselling programme dominated by CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy).

Haiku:

*What makes CBT
Populist? Industrial?
Spot the fault. Fix it.*

The courses at this University are run in various places, including Portakabins in the car park overlooking the playing fields. We share the toilet block with visiting sports teams. Dodging clods of mud and grass on the toilet floors is necessary in wet weather. There is also a clinic offering low-cost therapy to the local community and in workplace contracts. Some students do placement hours in the clinic. In many ways this programme is ahead of its time.

At the job interview I see a group of women huddled outside on the steps, smoking. The CBT students are in, mostly women, but some men on secondment from working as psychiatric nurses. The toilet is wet and muddy underfoot – a visiting hockey team was in earlier. One of the women I'd seen on the steps, older than me and, as I later learn is a nurse in West Yorkshire, says:

'I wouldn't use those hand dryers if I was you – all they do is spread faecal matter.'

She's got a smoker's laugh.

(Notes, 2002)

For the first time, on the 'integrative' programme, I'm working alongside therapists from the National Health Services. CBT 'scientist practitioners.' This colleague, I'll call him Rob, (rare still to find young, male lecturers/therapists in a female and overall middle-class dominated occupation) trained first as a psychiatric nurse. He has no interest in the person-centred approach I teach and its anti-psychiatry views on 'labelling' and diagnosis. He teaches CBT, with a particular specialism in mental health, from a 'medicalised' point of view. What this colleague, Rob, does ask me about is the therapeutic relationship, reflective practice, and writing. The CBT students have to keep a reflective journal, and he's not sure how they can learn about that. Writing, expressive and reflective, is the topic for the PhD I'm working on at this time (Wright, 2018).

'It's not right, why have we got to keep a journal and why do we have to write about empathy?' says the woman whose comment about electric hand dryers has stayed with me. 'We don't have a lot of time for empathy on the wards.'

It's Wednesday afternoon, and this class goes on until 7 pm. The shaved-head man who used to work in a car factory in Coventry (closed) joins in: 'It's this congruence bit gets me.' I have seen and heard him walking a 'patient'

from the 'psychotherapy clinic' to the toilet block with immense care and genuineness.

I ask them to write for 10 minutes about a time when they couldn't shake off some patient (their word) who'd got right under their skin. Then I ask them to write the response from that patient. (Notes, 2003)

I'm back by the rivers Derwent and Trent. These colleagues, students, are people I could have gone to school with—but, as in school, I'm wary here. All that I've learned in other cities in the UK, the USA, and in Fiji counts for nowt here. Narrative approaches? Arts-based representations of research findings? They laugh. Cultural humility is useful.

The publications continue with one focus on how writing therapy informs online counselling (Wright, 2002, 2003b) and how the future might be text-based or not (Wright, 2003c). Happily, I had the sense to mention voice-activated systems:

The future of technological applications in counselling and psychotherapy is hard to predict. Given the pace of change in the 'information revolution'. Could txt-messaging become a new way to offer therapeutic help to adolescents? Maybe this is already happening. Once voice-activated online communication is more widely available, perhaps the text-based premise of the work described here will no longer hold. (p. 31)

In what I now see as an exposing and ethically risky decision, I include some poetry I wrote at the time of my father's death in an article about reflective practice as a counsellor. Some of my work at the University of Sheffield and the experience of writing for personal and professional growth is here, under the heading 'writing for protection' (Wright, 2003c). Perhaps I fantasised that publishing in an American journal, and one with the word *poetry* in the title, would guarantee a lack of readership? Naïve. Andrew Sparkes might smile and suggest I think about it, providing, 20 years later, his six thinking points (Sparkes, 2024).

More traditionally conceptualised, ethically for certain, there were also collaborations about personal journal writing in professional development for CBT practitioners which used a very different, and more 'scientific' research approach (Sutton, Townend, & Wright, 2007).

I had finished the PhD and moved universities in order to save myself (and my kids) the stresses of a commuting parent. But within a short time, the temptation to return to the Pacific was strong.

July 2006

Job: Associate Professor, Department of Counselling, University, North Island, Aotearoa, New Zealand. Volunteer counsellor at the Women's Centre.

Questions about biculturalism come up at the online job interview. The video conference room on a dark November evening in the UK turns full of sun on the other end of the link. The New Zealanders I see are all white; the technician wears shorts. Then the connection breaks and we're limited to sound only. I'm relieved. I could not answer their questions about biculturalism and could only talk earnestly about reading the Treaty of Waitangi and being willing to learn. I talk about the two years in Fiji and of having some idea of how painful, growthful, wonderful, and frustrating that learning might be. (Notes, 2006)

The article written about that particular shift, from Aotearoa New Zealand begins in the airport in Hong Kong when I think, briefly, that I've lost my laptop. The pre-digital age was now over. This is the first publication to claim autoethnography in the title and quotes from bell hooks, Cixous, with citations including Bochner, Ellis, Etherington and of course Pennebaker and Cavarero (Wright, 2009a). As before, writing out that experience on paper gave me some sense of agency when I was in a particular state of powerlessness, rootlessness, and stress. I knew nobody in the town (or country) I was moving to.

Meeting another UK migrant academic, 'Jane' at a party, who had used her personal writing to manage that transition and other life challenges, resulted in another publication aimed at the counselling and psychotherapy field (Wright, 2009b). Jane compared her journal writing with other ways of maintaining wellbeing, such as meditation, but came back to her journals as 'an absolute must':

I feel, I feel quite unhappy. I would have to say at a deep level if I don't do it. I actually feel I'm back to that kind of – um – where I don't really matter. I'm there to make other people OK inside. (p. 5)

Profound new learning developed over the six years working in Aotearoa New Zealand. Most importantly, I was challenged to think about colonialism, about the ethics of any research including (or excluding?) indigenous people and the Maori experience of mental health. For Maori, the indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand, greetings when meeting a group of new people are always about place and ancestors, naming the mountain, the river, the ocean, and

ultimately the tribe and family born into. I am the river; the river is me. This is the country where the River Whanganui has human rights, a personhood. Its status as a living being was written into law in 2017.

It's not until I've got to introduce myself, formally, in the new job in Aotearoa New Zealand, to a bicultural group of students and staff, that the River Trent, and other natural landmarks near where I was born come back into focus. Again, I'm working in the English language, with all the privilege that confers. I study Maori language and culture at evening classes. But the massive barriers to overcoming my white settler identity and the ethical complexities of research my entitlement to include, or not exclude, Maori and Pasifika people, have only just begun to dawn on me. Like 'colour blindness' it was too easy to assume I could work across cultures.

Linda Tuiwai Smith was a crucial influence (Smith, 2012).

At the Women's Centre where I volunteer, literature on where to get help, the posters on the walls are similar to those in Nottingham or in Fiji. Gender-based violence has been, eventually, recognised by the United Nations, with changing terminology, such as from 'homicide' to 'femicide' (UNODC, 2022).

Collaboration in several articles proved to be the way out of this feeling of cultural and ethical stuckness. In "Composing Myself on Paper": Personal Journal Writing and Feminist Influences' I learned from my co-author how journal writing was clearly an act of resistance rather than self-improvement (Wright & Ranby, 2009). By learning about third-wave feminism, I made connections with social constructionism and narrative therapy—all together a different way of looking at the world than through humanistic and cognitive behavioural lenses.

Migrations and sojourns outside of the UK have helped me learn some critical acuity, aided by writers and activists from other disciplines. I have also learned some cultural humility. Writing during those periods of transition helped anchor me. The page doesn't judge, what's more it can be re-read.

January 2015 – January 2017 Resident in Malta

2017 – present, Visiting Professor, Dept of Counselling, University of Malta

[T]he breakdown of communities is one factor that exacerbates our sensitivity to social evaluative threat. Finding ourselves surrounded by strangers, with no links to our childhood and family histories, we become overly concerned about how people see us. (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2018)

This is as true of living here in Sheffield (since 2018) as in any of the other migrations. It was, perhaps, especially true in Malta, where I was older, more anxious about new environment, colleagues, starting a new job, finding a new place to live, new roads – new construction sites. The life writing notes are still fresh; some have been distilled into poems.

Elderly serial migrant, Gzira , Malta 2017

It occurs to her that this is a dangerous place
This new 'home'.
Every indoor tile a potential slip, a shiny fall.
Every marble pavement, uneven, meant to trip and slide.
Outside in the building boom
No pavement left at all,
She has never been so up close to cranes
Wobbling on propped up feet
at 17 stories high,
She has never been so close to the giant, yellowing teeth of monster
diggers.
How did they get them down into that vast limestone pit?
She has never seen a place with no trees
Never lived amongst this kind of destruction.

There are no rivers in Malta. There is the same incidence of gender-based violence as elsewhere in the migrations outlined here.

Once again I'm teaching in the former colonial language, English. Maltese feels too difficult, and I give up on evening classes. Some of the experiences seem familiar.

International Women's Day, March 8th 2016, Valletta, Malta

Each pair of red shoes, count them,
A woman killed this year in Malta
by a partner, or someone known to her.

Does it matter that I don't speak Maltese?
The poems, the words, the feelings
are known to me:
Violenza domestica
Oppressione
Femicide.

Feminism and feminist pedagogy have informed some publications not included here. The collective activism has counterbalanced what for me is a very private way of writing:

I want to suggest that feminist pedagogy can be taught in terms of the affective opening up of the world ... not as a private act, but as an opening up of what is possible through working together. (Ahmed, 2004, p. 181).

Shame has been said to be the most silencing of emotions. The article about shame and sexual abuse, using poetic inquiry, was finished in Malta, but had begun in a community agency in Warwickshire, as the only funded research project I'd ever managed (Wright & Thiara, 2019). Ironically, I thought the University of Warwick would be my last job and wrote about retirement with glee (J. K. Wright, 2018). In fact continuing to work with students continues to bring joyful and often inspiring connection with current thinking, writing, and research.

The impulse for this project was being reminded of a publication I'd forgotten about by one of those students. Writing it out has also given me some perspective on the personal and private writing those articles and chapters are based on. One thread of continuity has been membership of Lapidus International, its conferences, and research community. Lapidus international has debated new names for itself as an organisation and for this kind of writing for decades: from *writing for wellbeing* to *words for wellbeing* and a lot in between. It would be very useful for some energetic collaborators to capture the history of Lapidus International and what it does.

Have we got an agreed name for the kind of 'writing cures' we do? If you can't name it, you can't sell it, as the more business and marketing minded say. Creative writing for therapeutic purposes is one label, self or life writing another, expressive writing or 'write it out' is another. A dialogue with Claire Williamson on the practice and research of writing to recover and survive raised new questions (Williamson & Wright, 2018).

I continue to write—notebooks and now digital files of personal, private writing accumulate. The ‘notes’ for this article have been dug out from paper notebooks, journals, letters to myself, poems, and notes written on the back of any paper I can find *at the time*. Some of these bags and boxes of paper have travelled with me for decades. In another article I hope to write about what to do with all that paper—Bonfires? Drowning? Recycling?

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