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## Therapeutic Writing

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## 1. Abstract

The concept about the “therapeutic writing” has its beginning from an autobiographic work, realized in 2003, whose title is Letters to a real interlocutor. My sense. That autobiographic writing turned out to be therapeutic because it has helped the writer to develop her sharpest sufferings, to overcome traumas and to win old guilt. The therapeutic writing, meant as inner reveal, is essential to be able to understand also the physical signals that our body often give us as a reply, aware or not, to a pain we had lived and we are still living. The individual writing becomes a shared experience working in groups, where everybody gives his own personal contribution. The epistolary approach of the “therapeutic writing” consists in a bunch of letters (written to one’s self, to one’s mother etc.) used as therapeutic tools, in order for the writer to easily recall the meaningful episodes of his own existence, from his childhood to his adult age. The epistolary way becomes then the most appropriate way to remember our own emotions, our sorrows, the sufferings and our deepest feelings. The benefits, got with the individual writing, will become wider while reading and sharing personal experiences with others. The negative moods lived again by the person who tells about himself, will lose, line after line, the characteristic of anxiety and ta boo, while the positive ones, even if shyly expressed, will find in the other people’s benevolence a further reason to go through again. All these constant efforts makes the “therapeutic writing” evolving into a performative character.

I learned in these years, through writing, to face myself. The writing saved me as a use to say during the Conventions in which I am invited to intervene as a witness and teacher of therapeutic writing courses. Why do I talk about therapeutic writing? What

motivations motivate me to do it? I speak of therapeutic writing because my beginning of new life starts from my autobiography Letters to a real interlocutor. My sense..., through which I learned many things in life. What did that autobiographical journey teach me? That writing is really a powerful means, a fundamental help for those in search of a better inner balance. I call it therapeutic because through the continuous work of a salvific writing, it is clear how much it can help us to elaborate even the most acute suffering, to overcome traumas of which many of us carry on our body evident stigmata, to untie knots, to resolve affective fragility. To win old feelings of guilt.

Thanks to the writing I learned to confront the multifaceted face of what each of us calls his “me”, I learned to recover my meaning; I learned to see in my emotions by giving them word. Without fear. Each of us is able to use our own strategies along a therapeutic path aimed at overcoming a difficult phase of fatigue and/or pain. Therapeutic writing, therefore, leads to individual research aimed at increasing the strength of the interior, in order to obtain a qualitatively better well-being. From this point of view, there are many strategies to draw on, because when we focus on the care of the individual, or a group of individuals, we cannot limit ourselves to the defence-care of the biological process alone, looking for answers in the science of medicine, mainly, but we must also, or necessarily, dedicate ourselves to further research that also takes into account the biography of the subject, the salient stages of his life. In this sense, particular attention to the work of interior excavation to be carried out or in act is essential to learn to interpret all the physical signals that the body often manifests as the conscious or not conscious response of the discomfort experienced. In fact, the signs imprinted on the body embody the history of every indi-

vidual: the reading and the narration around the experience of the body help to understand not only the pathology encountered but the difficulties of living, those discomforts that if not elaborated by the psyche, often result in overt illness. Thanks to the repeated action of writing, I understood more and more how I tried to give voice to a different myself from the first one, more and more eager to express itself authentically, with less censorship and repressive constraints, in a direct way, without ancient and useless formalisms. Traveling alone on the first steps of this journey, and often even long intermediates, was tiring and exhausting. Win the indifference with which too many times, and mistakenly, we treat our past, near or remote, if not even the present, it means starting to remove the heavy armor long worn to defend ourselves, and, in the end, to avoid impulses emotionally essential. Once the apathy and the false protection of indifference have been removed, the writing and reading of my history have begun the process of change, to the point of producing in me an innovative and revealing catharsis of new and unknown possibilities. A long feeling of rediscovered vitality has been faithful to me: the act of writing has accompanied me like a rope to which I clung to not lose the orientation: tightening it with force I let myself be led, jumping fears and hesitations, to discover that at the other end a renewed trust and a renewed love for myself awaited me. Because to truly be who we are presupposes an act of sincere love for ourselves. The cultural revolution, so much desired for us and for the fate of the world, cannot, in the end, ignore the desire to define our own truth and the determination to live with courage a new reality. Without these two priorities, private and public at the same time - one aimed at transparency and research, the other with the desire not to stop, not to give up - no change would be possible and lasting. The autobiographical story was essential: it gave me confidence and thanks to those liberating words, thrown almost randomly on occasional sheets, with progressive shots of awareness I recovered myself, the thoughts and feelings that have shaped my personality, which they helped to build my character. Writing was the weapon with which I have scratched myself and the lines, one after the other, have outlined me, like single tesserae of a mosaic where every worded scratch was flanked by the word, lenitive and suture. I lived in writing a "cathartic break" without knowing where he would lead me. The more I took the time to investigate and fathom my inner self the more became clear who I had been, the entity of the suffering that was wandering inside of me, the long introjected and hidden pain. And the more I sharpened the thought to find and remove the encrustations, the more unconsciously I became capable of new potentials and possibilities, of images and projects conceived.

This new horizon is destined to remain closed within us, if we do not seek the harmful waste, if we lack the courage of transparency and truth, of the sincerity necessary and offered to ourselves. It is not viable if you are afraid of going through the pain, if the fear of

going through the memory of stages or circumstances of suffering stops us breathing. This is why trust for what we are going to build must progress within us step by step, line by line. The commitment and the will to bring out the truths, however inconvenient and hidden within us, must represent indispensable prerequisites for arriving intact at the landing, in order not to lose the route along the way. Therapeutic writing must be firmly contested, just like the tiller, without ever losing sight of the purpose that animates us, the point of arrival to touch, the goal that makes us the experience of the indispensable journey: self-determination and benefits connected to it. With renewed confidence in ourselves, and the stubbornness that ensues, we will learn, then on the journey with autobiographical writing, to claim the belonging to ourselves, the autonomy of thought- and action- that we have lost over the years for lack of attention, negligence, for lack of self-love, deluding ourselves that unexpected and devastating events (such as illness, in my case), able to upset us, never would have affected us closely, would never have ruined the consolidated structure psychic, the usual order, natural and reassuring, built by us in the course of existence. Starting, then, from my autobiographical text, in which I enclosed fifteen years of meticulous work, I made available, gradually in the years following 1998 (mastectomy) my experience to establish groups of therapeutic writing, pointing gradually the modalities of development, in separate sections for each theme addressed. From that far back in 1998, there were a total of 13 publications. From therapeutic autobiographical writing to group work. The writing and its unfolding, first individual and then collective, strongly urges a greater understanding of the other, a more marked predisposition towards who is telling of himself, a more felt and natural attention for those who are listening, a willingness to welcome the new meaning of the life of others and of ours, in a climate characterized by an undisputed and pervasive trust. My autobiography becomes the first tool to get in touch with the group and organize the work on the interior immediately afterwards. By stripping a part of me, through personal and often painstaking written reflections, I induce those who listen to me to produce a similar narration, to dig into their own interiority, in order to reach a shared work, however subjectively elaborated. The result is almost always the production of writings characterized by a strong regenerative power. Thus, my initial, the opening effort becomes, in all group encounters, the first step towards a more conscious redefinition and reformulation of one or more crucial stages of our existence. During this common journey we find that together it is easier to process inconveniences and traumas experienced but not fully expressed. We learn to build a different inner image of ourselves, in a less hasty and more authentic way, identifying and pulling out what in our past seeks a comfort in listening to each other today. We learn to relive and detach ourselves from it gradually, accepting our inconsistencies of yesterday and the limitations of those we have had next. The sheet of paper serves us to illu-

minate our life. Writing helps to give new interpretations that we did not know before, to lighten the burden of suffering, even acute ones. Malaise that in some may have created and creates resistance, mass, demotivating volume, decline of immune defenses, as well explains my own private history.

Through group writing we help each other in a path aimed at trust and openness towards the future. Without feeling judged and without judging. Without prejudices. We come to mature, thanks to shared work, a greater personal and collective awareness. We realize that we are not used to going deep into relationships and, in many cases, that we have not opened up emotionally, as desired, either to affections or feelings. We often realize, comparing and mirroring each other, that for fear we have not expressed what really moved within us, our authenticity, our most vivid desires. We become more aware of our personality by realizing that we have adhered to a large part of our lives blindly defending a role or I'm age that we have unknowingly constructed. For years we have acted in the defence of certain mental constructions, repressing in us the openness, the availability towards others, which is often revealed as a great wealth to build new opportunities. When group work grows, it becomes more mature, we often point out that we have failed ourselves and that we have benevolently deceived ourselves, adhering to external models, embracing an empty source of disorientation, of mistrust in the future, of widespread malaise, open door to the state of depression. Having the courage to turn the page, reconstituting and lightening ourselves of that past, urges us in a new path, already an antechamber of change, already presupposed for the emergence of a new definition of the self. To accept to go towards this change, without fearing for our precarious balance, is already a sign of a predisposition for further knowledge. Even the body often speaks of a sick side to which we do not know how to pay attention. The sick body is a precise statement: now stop, watch, start looking at you with new eyes and try to know who you are and what you want. These drives to inner and mental change must be listened to and collected as a balm with immense beneficial effects, an added value to the medical care of the ill part. In this sense, taking care of our body means widening the horizons of our mental vision, predisposing ourselves to the harmony between spirit, psyche and body, understood as the uniqueness of being, reaffirming concepts of interpenetration and body-mind reciprocity elaborated by the most modern Neuroscience. Writing allows us to access this change more easily if we accept it without reserve. The writing of those who participate in group work, from rough, as it transpires at the beginning of the path, becomes more and more fluid and precise, as it increases the awareness of pain crossed and analysed. It is easy to notice, during the meetings, how much suffering becomes more substantial and hostile when we close it in our mind, preventing the word from reaching it to soothe it. Many testimonies, and not least that of Maura, confirm this truth. We can resize our pain, or even get out

of it, only if with courage, with an almost defiant gesture to ourselves, of resourcefulness, we enter our history. It should be noted that in the working group the courageous act of each of us is also transmissible, passes from the "I" to the "us", becomes common. The group thus learns to be in solidarity with the feelings of others, with the sincere expressions of the individual who, like an echo, spreads in the collective reading. This is why the answers that are condensed around the single request for help, are always wide and go far beyond expectations.

The group autobiographical writing, therefore, is particular, takes into account the grammar and syntax of everyone regardless of any subjective and subjective vocation or literary care. Here, writing is presented in a free form, highlighting the expression of the self through the use of forms of communication that contemplate a few sentences, an entire letter or a poem, or more genres together. It 'a writing on the skin, suitable to express the emotionality of the moment, the feeling lived for the theme dealt with on that day, without rigid settings or references to order. How long and confusing life is, mother! At least you can write it down to try to understand it, he replied. The group of therapeutic writing opens, generally, with the reading of a passage taken from my autobiography. After a succinct overview to know the essential data of each, the first letter is that "to myself" and the first call is to rewrite it by dedicating it to themselves: an initial step to enter into a relationship with your inner self, observing from external, transferring the natural curiosity towards others within, focusing attention on exclusively subjective points or circumstances. A first glance, in short, addressed to those signs of transcendence yet to be discovered. This is the most difficult letter, the one that causes a long pause for reflection before the writing. But once the initial confusion has been overcome, everyone becomes immersed in responsible writing and soon gains a clear benefit. In this way, the letter dedicated to oneself constitutes a starting point which, meeting after meeting, will allow the development of the cognitive mechanism, of observation and of inner exploration, methods marked by the drafting of other more in-depth letters and other individual and more convinced manifestations of self in the working group. From this point of view, the group produces, with increasing participation, writings that prove, and in the drafting phase and during the reading phase, an increasing sharing and solidarity. Especially when it comes time to deal with delicate issues or perceived as a source of distress by individual participants: letters dedicated to loved ones or to people who are still decisive, despite our inability to tell them about us; letters addressed to loved ones, of yesterday and today. Written letters thinking about the essential figures of our life: parents, grandparents, close relatives, charismatic figures that have profoundly marked our thoughts and actions. Today we talk a lot and with ever greater force of Narrative Medicine, therapeutic writing or even writing as self-care because we all need to find especially in the doctor-patient relationship the dialogic-cognitive dimension

lost in the massive use of hyper-diagnostic by technology. The reevaluation of the special relationship between the sick and the treating physician, the same comfort that derives from it, comes from many parts invoked and put into practice by those doctors who invoke, with energy and more often, the need for recourse to “narrative medicine”, Based precisely on the invitation to patients to write about themselves, to become spokesmen of their personal and medical history. I would like this need to humanize medicine to become a common need, that “narrative medicine” should be perceived as a formative and study material in the medical sciences, to offer neo-practitioners not only an instrument of analysis for patient care, but also the possibility of widening the field of patient-doctor sharing to the equally important doctor-doctor, in order to increase all the professional skills and competences.

## 2. Subjects and Methods

For years I have been involved in therapeutic writing courses through different cultural institutions, health structures collaborating also with foundations or associations such as LILT of which my last text evolved words. Experiences and techniques of therapeutic writing, enjoys the patronage and logo. I start the work, as explained above, through the epistolary form. Using the letter as a therapeutic approach (to myself, to my mother, etc.) facilitates the opening of the temporal sequence that from today allows the subject to retrace the salient stages of their existence, from infancy to adulthood. The epistolary form thus becomes the most adaptable to bring to memory, without too many complaints, the emotions that have been longed to us, the sorrows, the great sufferings, the most intense feelings. In front of the blank sheet and inside the bubble of solitude proper to those who are intent on thinking about writing, it becomes easier to acquire a particular centrality, to feel artisans of their own reflective space, in which to reach, with a tolerable emotional load, a further step of awareness. In following the thought that translates into horizontal lines, we delimit our worries, we give verbal body to the discomfort, we visualize our discomfort visually and, at the same time, we open a glimpse of the future. Before writing we are led to linger in our fears, to live with it without ever giving them a face and a name, to allow them to blur our deepest need for inner balance, an indispensable condition for any lasting change. Also, for this reason writing, especially at the beginning, is tiring, demanding, asking for concentration and energy that we are not used to. The effort required, however, is essential to transform the exercise into an expressive medium, to switch it into an introspective and communicative act, in turn generating a personal writing that will give strength, support and visibility to new inner expressions: not by chance groups of work, after the initial fatigue, after being able to move within latent energies, it is not uncommon to find yourself led to writing, aware of a narrative talent to be expressed. To the foreseeable difficulty of the first letter, then adds the ballast of negative feelings - anger, rancor, anxiety, fear, sense of powerlessness, frustration, etc. wait-

ing to be defined and contextualised before full control, of mature management, a fundamental prelude to the next step: their transformation into something positive. To be able to transform them, however, we need to look ahead, to fight against the spell of habit, to leave behind the fake or illusory well-being acquired: there is to cross the river, in short, there is to be crossed a sort of therapeutic ford, the test of courage that teaches us to transform the fear of pain, the anxieties and anxieties linked to states of suffering more or less conscious into something else. Just as happens in the unwritten life, in the real life, always ready at any moment to present the challenges to overcome, even here, in our work-writing path, we can choose between two precise options: renouncing the ford, stopping to deny the change - do not stimulate it either - wait, pull back, or shake off laziness, indifference, apathy and activate to continue, insisting and striving to touch, as soon as possible, the other side: only joints on the other side of the ford, with the departure shore now behind, it is possible to give the fatigue of the crossing the right and well deserved sense. Also in group work, then, as in life, the successes acquired are directly proportional to the energy invested, to the intensity of the battles conducted to reach them. It is well known that we avoid moving away from our certainties, from our certainties, concrete and mental, because we are afraid of falls, of the unexpected that baffles us, of the novelties we do not control: we prefer to remain in our state of dissatisfaction and unease, even at the cost of being unrelated to ourselves. We like to pretend not to know that the momentary loss of balance, the step into the unknown, the first meters of the ford, that “fall” to be addressed, constitute the trampoline that propels us towards salvation.

From my experience I can say that through what I wrote in my letters of 1998, I managed to formulate questions that for years I had hidden and kept silent: doubts, illusions and fragility that, over time, have made me more confident in the way of thinking and more determined acting. Being aware of it, having learned the right name from them, helped me in the most delicate choices. This work, through writing, proved to be extremely effective, fundamental: it highlighted, through a long interior excavation, recent and long-standing existential knots, relational fragility, ancient fears lurking in my mind. Only in time, without haste and with a new way of thinking and seeing me, I would have deduced its strategic importance for my new equilibrium. With writing, individually or in a group we have the possibility, therefore, to dissolve many resistances, even the densest ones, those that are refractory to every treatment. The benefits of the writing operation performed by the individual, find a happy correspondence, including an expansion, in sharing the reading. Nothing turns out to be so effective and supportive to the suffering person as to recognize on the faces of others the fears or emotions transmitted by their own voice. The negative moods relieved by the subject, which is told orally, begin to lose, row after row, a part of the anxiety that characterizes them,

while the positive ones, however timidly written and expressed, find their smile and natural welcome of the others one more reason to be experimented again. "There are glances that light up, accompanied by a vertiginous transcendence, and absolute transparency, even when the faces are devoured by melancholy and anguish, loss and despair. There are looks that plead for help, and that flare up, in apparently dry and icy faces, impassive and yet ardent. There are glances that harmonize with the mood of the faces from which they flow; and there are glances in radical dissonance with the faces. We need intuition, of uninterrupted logic of the heart, of the impalpable lightness of being, if we want to approach the mystery of looking". The drafting of my autobiography, in itself, caused large landslides, openings of old wounds, unexpected changes in the person who read me. The fact that it was a private event that became public amplified its resonance and its consequences at the time of publication. Although I understood how, as an editorial object, it was in fact finished, from the energy and from the private and public responses that it has unleashed, I realized that it was, after all, only a first step, a slight beginning of my life in as writer: only the first of a series of changes and only partly predictable. The disease, however, had given me new times and I could no longer miss myself. It was true, I had already lost the first train of change, not taking advantage of the pain of the marriage crisis, but I certainly could not allow myself to lose the change that somehow it was my body itself to demand from me. Of course, for any person close to me, it was easy to recognize in the relationships that my words radiographed, but I must also say, in all honesty, that from that autobiography on, the relationships have all improved, after the natural moment of the first and subsequent impact of the crisis. I then noted how it takes time for written words to act satisfactorily, as from the damage immediately passed to the benefit of post-crisis, transforming the initial defensive and negative impressions and reasonings in readiness to listen and in mutual solidarity. This does not mean, of course, that the operation of stripping and dealing with the conflictual discomfort that the sincere and emotionally overloaded word can generate has not been extremely painful for me. But if I had not urged this change today, I would not feel comfortable in the different roles I live, and the therapeutic virtues of writing would not be in harmony with my new identity as a woman. Learn to overcome feelings of guilt through writing. You do not really know what has happened to you, you feel a sense of shame, you feel dirty, you smell that person, the breath, you continue to wash your private parts hoping to wake up from that nightmare, but it is not so, indeed, you feel guilty because you think the blame for everything is yours.

To the writing that reveals us as we try to understand and understand each other, between lines projected to the overcoming of the

roles and faded images of our autobiographical album, we also entrust the task of exposing another delicate and complex aspect on the psychological weights that prevent us from to live the change completely and with enthusiasm: the sense of guilt. It is a complex that concerns everyone, lived with fear or with anguish; it is impalpable but it steals vital energy, it has no weight yet it manages to catalyze our thoughts and to chain them. It makes us feel guilty unjustly, puts us on responsibility for something bad that we believe we have committed; in the most serious cases it causes us to ask or to live exemplary punishment. More often, in our daily behavior, it presents a weak or severe feeling of remorse that forces us to continue but superfluous justifications. Very often we fail to understand the thickness and the destructive scope for our balance or for the changes that life requires us continuously. It is necessary to talk about it, therefore, precisely to avoid being overwhelmed by it, to prevent this feeling of destroying even the good that is in us, so laboriously accumulated. It presents itself as an elusive fragility, difficult to define, a quid that we recognize only when it begins to paralyze us in the actions we want to take if... an unpleasant feeling of inadequacy does not prevent it, if the suspicion of hurting someone, because of Our daring did not repress us to such an extent. For this reason, it becomes essential to talk about it, to tell it, to identify the aspect it has for us starting from the story that others make: to define it is essential to trace its boundaries, limit its consequences, resize it to better manage it. It is true, it is an elusive sense, which likes to confuse us, but it is enough to learn to recognize it publicly, to understand its origin, and its negative power slowly deflates, the thoughts are simplified and here is the conflictual reality of yesterday it becomes less harsh to bear. Writing, giving materiality to the non-existent, therefore, allows one to feel and see oneself as actors of another reality. Hence the psychological importance that writing plays in our way of prefiguring change, of giving us a new image of ourselves, of fore seeing for us an "authentic self", to be discovered and reconstructed. We can say that writing represents a form of emancipation, a serious contribution to building a future of more satisfied and aware people. Can Therapeutic Writing develop into performative Scripture? Why can this evolution take place which aspects should not be left out? For example, the excavation work in parental memories is of fundamental importance, the theme of the home of one's own identity, the bond with the children, with one's partner, digging into one's own dreams but also and above all one's own resistance, of hard work. that manifest themselves in repetitive styles, but also scriptures that allow us to develop a certain analysis of oneself through free associations identifying themselves in a natural element, in an object, or in a journey. All this means that therapeutic writing can be transformed into performative [1-20].

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