

Acceptance with Joy

Writing as a Means of Embodying Compassion

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Abstract

This article reports on research using writing workshops conducted with three women who distanced themselves from problematic relationships with their bodies that were induced by eating disorders. The article focuses on the use of writing tasks based on appreciative inquiry and outsider witnessing processes, practised with a group of women in a manner that provided space for the participants to story compassion for their bodies. The article explores the writing tasks that the participants were invited to undertake, and discusses the subsequent interviewing and outsider witnessing process as forms of narrative therapy practice. The article also documents the process of capturing a participant's voice in a rescued speech poem.

Keywords: outsider witnessing, rescued speech poetry, writing, embodying compassion

Bridget's research project, which formed part of the requirement for her Master of Counselling degree, investigated how a woman's writing appreciatively about her own body can contribute to a compassionate relationship between the woman and her own body if she has experienced problematic relationships with her body in the past. Bridget wanted to explore how sharing such writing with an audience of other women might then extend a woman's new relationship with her body. Elmarie supervised Bridget's project as the teacher in the counselling programme. Bridget and Elmarie then collaborated in revisiting and reworking Bridget's research for this article.

In the course of her education toward becoming a counsellor, Bridget was introduced to the definitional ceremony of outsider witnessing practices (White, 2007) and experienced first-hand the shaping effect of this practice. She became curious about what the effect would be if a piece of writing was taken into an outsider

witness ceremony with women who had problematic relationships with their bodies, for example, as a result of the dominating effects of eating disorders.

White (2007) described outsider witnessing conversations as performances of identity, a series of tellings and retellings that thicken the storyline of participants' preferred ways of being and living. In her research project, Bridget explored the use of an outsider witnessing process as a space in which women could share some of their writing about their bodies (Scott, 2012). She was interested in how writing about their bodies and sharing their writing with an audience might strengthen and nourish compassion towards their bodies.

Shaping the research

The research took place in Christchurch, where Bridget invited women to join writing workshops that drew on the following five approaches: writing as a reflective practice (Bolton, Allan, & Drucquer, 2004); poetry therapy (Heller, 2009); appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005); outsider witnessing (White, 2007); and the use of rescued speech poetry in counselling (Crocket, 2010; Speedy, 2005). An advertisement was placed with a group that supports women experiencing problematic relationships with eating and their bodies. The advertisement invited women who enjoyed writing and who had experienced difficulties in their relationships with their bodies due to the effects of an eating disorder to join a writing workshop. The workshops were not advertised as therapeutic, but rather as an opportunity to use writing as a means of growing compassion for their bodies. Three women responded to the advertisement, but carrying out the workshops as initially planned proved to be problematic because the research began just before the first of two major earthquakes in Christchurch. People had to face many challenges, and the earthquakes affected the volunteers' willingness to be away from their families in the evenings. A number of other problems also caused delays, including the temporary closure of the library where the meetings were to be held and other disruptions to life in Christchurch; however, eventually Bridget was able to go ahead and run the first of three workshops. The workshops were held in the community room of the local library and ran for two hours on Monday evenings over a period of four weeks.

The intention of the workshops was to create a space where the women were exposed to a language of appreciation in relation to their bodies. They were given opportunities to immerse themselves in this language by being asked to write about moments—real or imagined—where they had had a positive experience of their bodies. On the first

evening, once the group had been set up, the writing process could begin. Each week the workshop involved carrying out three main phases. The first phase was writing in response to one of a selection of questions based on the principles of appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). After six minutes of free writing, the women wrote individually for 30 minutes using questions and writing starters. The second phase involved outsider witnessing (White, 2007) where one woman volunteered to share her writing in an interview that was recorded. Each workshop produced one interview. In the third phase of the research, Bridget created a rescued speech poem from the transcripts of the interviews. These poems were then sent in the post to the women before the next workshop. The steps the workshop followed are discussed below.

In establishing the group on the first evening, Bridget and the group members negotiated a number of group rules pertaining to safety and confidentiality. Once these rules had been established, each woman was invited to name her favourite place as a way of bringing all the participants' voices together into the group. Peggy Heller's (2009, p. 3) description below is about the opening of a group, about what can at times be the taken-for-granted rituals of introductions and openings:

Like opening words in a poem or a book, the open chair awaiting you in the group circle is an invitation into sacred space. Ordinary awareness becomes redirected, focused on the world you have just entered. It is a portal into another reality where personal and interpersonal communication may reveal insights, connections, meanings. In the beginning, each voice is welcomed. And as in Robert Frost's "Choose Something Like a Star," each person is invited to say something that is known by heart, something that all can do whether in cautious tremolo or blustery bravado. Say your name. Say something you see in this room or noticed on your way here. Say a word you heard today. The voice is out, taking its rightful place in the group circle, and providing a subtle clue about its speaker.

After the connection to a place and some discussion, Bridget read a piece of writing that she had prepared in order to provide what White and Epston (1990, p. 148) called a "receiving context" for the women as they began their own writing. Once sufficient time had been spent building trust and connection, the women were invited to engage in the writing process, as discussed in the next section.

From scribbling to writing

The women were asked to free-write or scribble about whatever came to mind for six minutes without stopping and without thinking about what they wrote. There was no

theme or subject for this stage: the aim was to capture those images that flash in and out of the mind with little or no attention paid to them. These six minutes of writing could include writing about the body. The women were free to write, uncensored, whatever came to mind. The purpose of this writing was to empty the mind and warm up in preparation for the next activity, in order to note down anything that needed to be pushed out of the mind and to capture important ideas and images that might otherwise be lost, as suggested by Bolton et al. (2004).

Next, Bridget offered the women some writing starters for a longer piece of writing. Questions were based on the principles of appreciative inquiry, which builds an inquiry around the crafting of an “unconditionally positive question.” This term was coined by Cooperrider and Whitney (2005, p. 8), who argued that appreciative inquiry

assumes that every organization and community has many untapped and rich accounts of the positive—what people talk about as past, present, and future capacities, or the positive core.

Bridget introduced themes for the women to consider in order for them to write compassionately about the conversations they had had with their bodies. They were asked to write about times—recent, in the past, or in the imagined future—when they had, have, or will have a strong connection with and trust in their body. Bridget suggested the following themes:

- Tell a story or write a poem about a time or moment when you listened to your body and this listening led to your doing something different that contributed to a new development in your life.
- Think of moments when you have shown kindness to your body. What did you do? What did you say to yourself? What did you experience?
- Think of a moment or moments with your body that are reliable, faithful, trustworthy, liberating, invigorating. How might you describe these moments in a story or poem? Is there a metaphor you might use to describe these moments? What is it that you notice in these moments? What do you tell yourself?

The women were given 30 minutes to write, then they were asked to read their writing individually, in silence (this included what they had written in both the six-minute scribbling time and the 30-minute writing on the themes). They were invited to revise the content if they wished, but were told they did not need to give any thought to grammar, construction, or spelling. They were invited to look out for useful connections between what they wrote in the initial six minutes of writing and the longer

piece of writing. Bridget then asked them to use their previous writings—the first and/or second piece—to formalise a particular literary genre or to produce a new piece of writing. This could be poetry or fiction, if they wished (Bolton et al., 2004). Again they were given 30 minutes.

At the end of the second 30 minutes of writing, the women were asked to come back together as a group and one woman was asked to share a piece of writing that spoke of a moment of compassion for her body. The sharing and witnessing of the written work was structured according to White's outsider witnessing practice, described below.

Outsider witnessing

The three-step process of outsider witnessing in narrative therapy was developed by Michael White (2007), who based it on Barbara Myerhof's "definitional ceremonies" (p. 181). Outsider witnessing has also been used as a research method (see Davis, 2009; Davis & Crocket, 2010; Kotzé, Van Duuren, Afrika, Rakiep, & Abdurahman, 2010). For research purposes, Bridget used the outsider witness approach with three participants and wove it into the writing process over the three workshops. Each of the three workshops featured a different woman sharing her writing at the centre of the outsider witnessing process.

In the first step of the outsider witnessing, a volunteer is asked to share a piece of writing while the other participants listen and witness the telling of the story. It may be asked why sharing the writing with a group seems to be meaningful. Bringing one's writing to others is a way of making our wisdom or identity claims more visible and available to ourselves and to others who witness our writing. When we read our words, we hear them, and then we hear them again in a new way when our audience receives and responds to the words. Sharing writing with an audience can be an important way of telling and retelling our stories, making new meaning, performing and constructing identities, and connecting with the experiences of others (Brown, 2007; Pentecost, 2006; White, 2007). Brown (2007, p. 279) explained that the "meaning that women attach to their stories can unfold only through a social process of interaction and meaning making...we cannot simply tell and retell stories. We must unpack them and rewrite more helpful stories."

The definitional ceremony of outsider witnessing described by White (2007) was not specifically designed for sharing writing, but the process lent itself very well to creating a forum for the women to share their words. Bridget devised six questions that she shaped from the four categories of responses White (2007) developed: expression,

image, personal resonance, and transport. She asked the woman who shared her writing the following:

- If you had to choose two to three paragraphs of your writing that speak of a close relationship with your body, which would you choose?
- When you read these words aloud to us, what stands out the most for you?
- What was it about this piece in particular that drew you to reading it aloud? Were there certain words or phrases that stood out for you?
- Does this speak of hope/movement/acceptance/trust/connection or of something else?
- If you were able to carry some part of this writing forward into your daily life, which words/phrases/plot/character development would you choose?
- What does it say about what you value that you were able to do this?

While Bridget and one participant spoke, the other women listened to the conversation. Following this, Bridget interviewed the women who were witnesses to the conversation with the woman who had shared her writing, and the outsider witnesses were then called on to retell the story they had witnessed. Bridget guided this retelling by means of carefully crafted questions. At that stage, the person who had shared her writing listened to the conversations between Bridget and the outsider witnesses.

The witnesses' responses were not about applause/positive reinforcement nor about judgement on the quality or meaning of the writing, nor were they about disclosure of their own experiences (see White, 2007), which may have been triggered by the piece of writing. Instead, they were about keeping the person's story at the centre. Bridget questioned the witnesses about particular words or expressions that stood out for them in the person's story or writing, and about any images or values that came to mind when they heard those particular words. How and why did they connect with those aspects of the writing? What was it in their own lives that connected them to that aspect of the writing? Where did that take them to, in thinking about their hopes for their own lives? What would they take back into their own lives from this writing?

In the third stage, the person whose story was witnessed was then invited to retell the story as witnessed and retold by the outsider witnesses. Once again, Bridget carefully scaffolded this conversation and asked the woman who was interviewed what she thought about what she had heard, and what interested her, and invited her to speak generally about the experience of listening to a conversation about her writing or her life. The woman was also asked how she predicted this experience might affect her future life.

The outsider witnessing practice of the workshop was videotaped with the permission of all participants so that the discussions could be transcribed. All participants received a copy of the transcript after each writing workshop.

Rescued speech poems

After every workshop, Bridget typed up the transcript of the interviews and then used the transcript to create rescued speech poems (Crocket, 2010; Speedy, 2005). These poems were mailed to the participants. A rescued speech poem is created by using the speaker's words; in this case, the words of the woman sharing her writing. Collecting these words, Bridget read the transcript and highlighted the words that stood out as speaking of compassion, or a movement towards compassion, in the woman's writing. Once she had identified these words, Bridget then arranged them in a way that was poetic to the eye or ear.

Speedy (2005) described how Bird's (2000) writing on "talk that sings" shaped her own listening and positioned her as if "at a poetry recital" (Speedy, 2005, p. 285) during therapeutic conversations. Cixous (as cited in Speedy 2005, p. 285) claimed that speaking of our lives outside of the confines of what is already known can only be done poetically.

Crocket (2010, p. 79) sees rescued speech poetry as a political act: "I suggest that rescued poems are a form of socio-cultural poetry, that bear witness to the political effects of socio-cultural stories that shape clients' lives." Thus rescued speech poems became a way for Bridget to listen for and hold gently the moments when the women spoke a different version of their relationship with their body, to hold these moments and return them to the women in the form of a poem. Bridget's intention in doing this was to give their words, their experiences of themselves, authority and new life—a thickening of their reality outside of "established assumptions and social constraints" (Speedy, 2005, p. 285).

Lily's dialogue with the waves

At the first workshop, Lily volunteered to share her writing.¹ Initially, she found it difficult to write appreciatively about her body. Her writing shifted between quite dark painful places ("*I am trapped in a dark confined tunnel of self-loathing*") and a more carefree place ("*The breakers foaming upon the sand like a great white horse riding towards me, calling, you are welcome here, just as you are, please come in and play*"). Lily spoke of the difficult relationship she had with her body—of how she hated it, or

loathed it, and how she felt trapped in it: *“I dwell very much on the negative aspects of my body and I do see it as ‘a body,’ almost as if I’m outside of myself. My body is separate from who I am.”* Lily talked about how painful it was to think about her body, how overweight she felt it was, loathing her body in her writing. However, during the interview with Bridget, she noted with surprise that she had been able to write appreciatively once she got started. Bridget was moved by this and was struck by the gentle, sensual, and poetic language that Lily used to describe an (imaginary) moment of accepting her body, being playful and carefree.

Lily’s writing was an imaginative description of her sitting on a beach watching others swim and longing to be in the sea. Her feelings of loathing towards her body were preventing her from being able to get up and walk towards the water. As she sat there, the sea began to talk to her, inviting her in, asking her to come and enjoy the water. Lily argued with the sea and the sea responded by telling her that she was “Much Afraid” but the sea would give her a new name, which would be “Acceptance with Joy.”

For the outsider witnessing conversation, Lily chose a piece of imaginative writing to depict a compassionate relationship with her body:

I begin to walk into those shallow bubbles and feel this excitement building inside. My toes feel the sand oozing through. I jump and I splash. I laugh as I remember jumping in the puddles as a young girl, carefree with no fears, no body tapes playing in my head. I have met the little girl inside today.

When Lily had finished reading this piece aloud to the group, Bridget asked her what in particular had stood out for her as she read it. Lily indicated that the imagined conversation with the waves that invited her to come into the water brought a carefreeness. She read her dialogue as the group listened and related her connectedness with the waves when, as the little girl, she carried memories of carefree puddle-jumping. She languaged herself an invitation to self-acceptance:

The breakers foaming upon the sand like a great white horse riding towards me, calling, “You are welcome here, just as you are, please come in and play.” And then I begin to argue, “But look at my huge body. I’m like a beached humpback whale, I can’t possibly walk towards you even with my sarong tightly wrapped around my thighs.” But the waves seem to whisper again, “We can have such fun together if you just let go. You are like Much Afraid but I want to make you Acceptance with Joy.”

During the interview, Lily introduced the idea of “Acceptance with Joy” as a new name for her. She selected the following piece of her writing as the sea spoke her preferred identity:

“You are like Much Afraid but I want to make you, it’s like a new name, ‘Acceptance with Joy’. Accept your body. At the moment you are much afraid of your body and what people think about your body.”

She reflected on the conversation with the waves and discovered a space for herself, in her writing, where she was able to speak compassion for her body:

I quite like [the piece I wrote where] the waves were calling, “You are welcome here just as you are please come in and play”... I’ve never really thought of it before but I love nature—I have real issues with my own body but here [in this writing] it’s like the nature and my body started out to be two separate things but they are coming together.

Bridget asked her what she thought this writing might speak of. Lily commented:

I think acceptance. I feel like the sea’s my friend and not judging me by my body and that I can have fun in the sea because there’s no judgement... that sounds like a funny thing to say, doesn’t it...

In thinking about the ocean and her body becoming one, Lily had found a way to begin to speak of an acceptance for her body that had previously been unavailable to her. As she spoke about her writing, Lily was able to reconnect with the carefree self-acceptance that had been available to her as a child, splashing in the puddles:

I laugh as I remember jumping in the puddles as a young girl, carefree with no fears, no body tapes playing in my head. I have met the little girl inside today. I’d never thought about having a conversation with waves before. It’s like they saw me unbiased; they weren’t looking at all my... my body, they were just saying, look can you forget it for one day and just come in and have some fun.

Toward the end of the interview, Bridget asked Lily whether there was anything in particular that she would like to carry forward from this piece of writing into her daily living. Lily replied:

Don’t forget the little girl inside... and maybe just sometimes I need to switch off the bad messages about my body and remember this little piece of writing about acceptance with joy.

At that stage in the interview, Bridget wondered aloud what the little girl might give value to. Lily's response was immediate:

Just that carefreeness of my personality, that's who I really am. I'm not really a person who worries all the time what people think of me. That's something I've taken on—I'd like to get back to being more childlike.

Re-telling the telling of the writing

Bridget drew the interview to a close and invited witnesses into the conversation to join her in reflecting on the interview. Bridget structured the re-telling (White, 2007) and asked Anne, who volunteered, what words or expressions stood out for her in Lily's writing. Anne was quite emotional in responding:

The whole thing. I still have a lump in my throat. I'm trying not to cry now. I could just really relate to it. The little girl scenario and how she was just so much freer as a kid. It's like the blissfully unaware of other people and what they are thinking of her. You know, just being you... When she talked about self-loathing. It's just stuff I'd been, just been writing about not just today... as well as last time. For me, it was really cool to hear because it just seems so universal... Women's opinions about themselves regarding...the little girl scenario...the little girl...

Bridget asked Anne if any particular images or metaphors came to mind when she heard Lily speaking of her own writing about her conversation with the waves. Anne replied:

I guess it was more the description she used in her writing... it was almost like you could just watch a wee movie of it happening seeing the beach and the waves, the wee girl in the puddle. You could see the wee girl just outrightly having fun and just being in the moment and just enjoying being herself. And then on the flipside the older person being more aware and cautious and sort of seeing the two different scenarios, I guess.

Bridget then asked Anne what from her own life enabled her to connect with this aspect of Lily's writing. Anne answered:

Having had a moment where you are in your body and you appreciate your body. And I think as a kid, it's like you are just you, like you don't actually think too hard about things. Because it's like my legs work, my arms work. I'm going to get up and have fun and do this and you just take it for granted that you're just doing what

you do. Having a play and enjoying your surroundings. I think I can relate to that—having moments like that having lots of moments like that as a kid and now having not so many.

In hearing Lily's writing, Anne was able to reconnect with the possibility of reoccupying her own body with acceptance and appreciation. It reminded her of those moments as a child when she was able to mindfully engage in what she was doing, as she was not preoccupied by negative or limiting body talk.

When Bridget then asked Anne where this took her in thinking about her own life, Anne responded: "*I think I need to have more moments where [I am like a] kid.*"

Remembering those moments when she had been able to love being in her body invited Anne to speak of the possibility of holding compassion for herself and her body. Anne had retold Lily's story and enriched the idea that self-acceptance can come from changing the way we talk to ourselves about ourselves:

Just being able to draw from somewhere, draw on some sort of love or something that fills you up rather than feasting on all that negativity, all that talk that does us more harm than good.

In the third phase of the outsider witnessing, Bridget re-interviewed Lily to ask her how she thought having been a witness to this conversation about her writing might affect her in her future life. Lily replied:

I think it's made me feel really valued and it's made me feel like I'm not alone in the journey, that there are other people walking with me and they understand and they have the same struggles. So I'm not alone because I hear that there is lots of identification and sometimes you can feel that you're on your own, but I'm not, because there's somebody else feeling the same way. That's big.

Lily also commented on the outsider witnessing process:

I found it more emotional listening to the conversation—I had time to think about what you were saying to each other and it kind of sunk in. Sort of like looking in the mirror and it's like the message coming back to you.

Rescued speech poems for Lily

After the second workshop, Bridget transcribed the interview with Lily and the interview with Anne. Bridget then used the transcripts to write rescued speech poems for the two women using only their own words. Once again, her intention in doing this

was to listen and look for traces of the new identity claims the women were producing in their writing and talking. In using rescued speech poetry (Speedy, 2005) to retell this production, Bridget hoped to further enrich the self-acceptance of both women. She sent the transcripts and poems to them before the workshop the following week.

Lily's poem

Bridget captured the following words:

Acceptance with Joy

Being carefree

The waves

Inviting me

Seeing me

Unbiased

Saying

Come in

Have fun

Acceptance with Joy

Much Afraid

Make

A new name:

Acceptance with Joy

You are welcome here

Just as you are

Come in

Play

Nature and my body

Two separate things

Coming together

Acceptance with Joy

Little girl inside

Remember this:

Acceptance with Joy

In sharing her piece of writing, and then speaking about it during the interview, Lily was able to construct these new possibilities for her relationship with her body. Her

ear (and heart) had been tuned to listen for a more compassionate way to speak herself “into existence” (Davies, 1991, p. 46): “*Come in, you are welcome here, just as you are.*” With these words, the waves welcomed and embraced her body.

Anne’s poem

It was Lily’s description of the little girl jumping in puddles that took Anne back into her own carefree childhood. Bridget crafted Anne’s rescued speech poem by rearranging words from her retelling of Lily’s interview:

*The little girl
So much freer
As a kid
blissfully unaware
Just being
Little girl
have fun
in the moment
Acceptance
have a moment
in your body
As a kid
You are just you
just doing
what you do.
More moments
like kids
Drawing on love
that fills you up
Hope
of a place
of acceptance*

Anne’s witnessing of Lily’s writing invited her into reconnecting with her own moments of freedom and acceptance in her body, as illustrated by her words above. Writing, then reading our writing to others and listening to where our words take the other person can make new identity claims possible. When another person hears

something in our words and it takes that person to a value in his or her own life, this can re-present other aspects of our identity that have previously been invisible to us (White, 2007).

The language available to us

Structuring the workshops in this way enabled the women to call on new language that was being made available to them. Bridget provided the women with an entry into language and words that helped them to construct other possibilities for their bodies. The questions and tasks that she provided during the workshops invited the women to reconnect with real or imaginative experiences and memories of their bodies that led them to speak of their bodies in a more compassionate way, in language and words that helped them to construct new possibilities for their bodies and for themselves by reconnecting with real or imaginative memories.

The words we choose reflect the discourses we are in, the discourses that we have the easiest access to. They constitute us as we write or speak them into the room. Shaping the workshops in this way, Bridget provided language and words that opened up possibilities for the women to access more compassionate discourses about their bodies. These discourses were not the ones the women usually travelled in when speaking or thinking about their bodies. Indeed, there were traces of estrangement from the body, a dislike, a distancing from their bodies as discursive practices of dissatisfaction, surveillance, and self-loathing (the voice of anorexia/bulimia) in all of the writing that the women shared, as exemplified by this excerpt from what Lily wrote: “... *but look at my huge body. I’m like a beached humpback whale, I can’t possibly walk towards you even with my sarong tightly wrapped around my thighs.*”

At the beginning of sharing the writing part of each workshop, Bridget specifically asked each woman for a piece of the writing that she had just produced and that spoke of compassion. This was an example of “textual staging” (Richardson & Adams St Pierre, 2005). The intention of this invitation was to make it possible for each woman to speak her story of compassion into the group. Bridget hoped that during the group time these positive, compassionate words about their bodies would provide an opportunity to grow in dominance.

Coda

In the workshops, Bridget asked for the participants’ compassionate writing, but was open to hearing some traces of the old, less preferred stories about the women’s

bodies. However, in the main, the writing that the women shared contained primarily language of appreciation, autonomy, and self-determination. The writing was descriptive, evocative, and beautiful to listen to. There was an energy and rhythm to all the women's writing. All three women lit up and their eyes sparkled when it was their turn to read aloud to the group. As the interviewer and audience to these words, Bridget was moved and inspired by the way each woman stepped into a compassionate relationship with her body (and that of her fellow participants) through small examples of writing and her witnessing of self and others.

Endnote

1 The names of the workshop participants have been changed for this article.

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