



# Journey TO Self

**I WAS FEELING STUCK, STUCK, STUCK WHEN I SAW THE AD FOR THE THERAPEUTIC WRITING WORKSHOP. I WAS LEERY – BUT INTRIGUED. FOR SIX WEEKS, I WROTE. AND THINGS BEGAN TO SHIFT**

**AS TOLD TO C.B. LIEBER**

*“Write Your Way Home” is a life-changing series of workshops in which you will discover the transformative power of writing. Join us on a journey of healing, self-knowledge, and discovery. Write your way through relationship struggles, heal childhood wounds, explore your inner blocks, and get to know the hidden aspects of your personality through interesting and creative writing exercises.*

**I** turned the page in the neighborhood advertising rag quickly. I didn’t want to read about yet another life-changing program. I’d been through too many already. Not interested.

My parents had divorced when I was a teen, and I could divide my life into two parts. Not before and after the divorce. No, that would be too clean. It was before and after therapy.

Both my parents relied on me heavily as a support system, and by the time I went to seminary I was a world-weary adult, all of 18 years old. My seminary teachers persuaded me to go to therapy to work out the bruises from my childhood and learn healthier coping mechanisms. When I met my husband, who also came from a divorced home, I was determined that our home would look very different from anything I’d known.

So here I was, eight years later. I’d been in therapy for over ten years, and I’d built a beautiful home and marriage. But we’d been through a lot of stress recently, and I was feeling completely burned-out. Worse, I’d started snapping at my husband. A lot. I knew I was in danger of slipping into my parents’ behavior patterns, but I didn’t know how to stop myself. And therapy just wasn’t doing it anymore.

Even though I’d dismissed the Write Your Way Home ad as out of hand, I couldn’t bring myself to throw the ad out.

*Heal childhood wounds. Explore your inner blocks. Interesting and creative writing exercises.* The words danced across my eyes as I lay in bed at night after yet another exhausting day of children’s squabbles, a draining phone call from

my mother, and the resulting frustrating argument with my husband.

*What in the world is the matter with me?* I thought. *Why can't I get a handle on my life?*

Maybe it was time to try something new after all.

Hesitantly, I called Yocheved Rottenberg, the instructor, and signed myself up for the six-week course.

If it didn't pan out, I told myself, I could always just back out after the first week. What did I have to lose?

### Week 1

I take a seat at Yocheved's dining room table, trying not to feel self-conscious as I pull out my notebook and pen. There are five other women in the class. Smiling, Yocheved explains how the class works. No one has to share anything, but if we do choose to share, it will be completely confidential.

We go around the table introducing ourselves. I eye the other women. I don't know any of them, and they all come from completely different walks of life. We range in age from 30 (me) to 80. Will I feel comfortable sharing my life with these strangers? What am I doing here anyway? I can't remember why I thought this was a good idea.

"We'll start with a warm-up exercise," Yocheved says. "Answer three questions: *Who am I? Why am I here? What do I want?*"

We have five minutes to write, and we all get to it.

In five minutes or less, I define myself and my purpose in life. Afterward, I write:

*I guess that's why I'm here right now — to figure myself out and to figure out how to get past the things are holding me back, tripping me up. To feel better about myself.*

We talk about the exercise, what it

did for us, and then move on to exercise number two, a character sketch of ourselves. Here, we describe what our homes look like and what a stranger walking in would deduce about the woman of the house.

*From the outside, my life looks like it's under control. My house is neat and tidy, my kitchen functional, even the toys in the kids' room are in order. It's on the inside that there's a problem....*

Yocheved passes around out a box filled with random objects — a mixing spoon, a pen, a Playmobil man. We're supposed to take one object and describe how it defines a challenge that we're dealing with. I take a lock and key, and I write.

I'm off and running, my pen filling up an entire page before I realize how much time has passed.

*The challenge is all locked up inside me. Somewhere inside, I'm stuck, stuck, stuck, and I can't get past that place that holds me back....*

Before the end of the class, we write three words about how we're feeling now. I write:

*Calm. Centered. Hopeful.*

I'm not exactly sure how it happened, but I walk out the door in a completely different frame of mind. Burned-out? Frustrated? Miserable? Who, me? I'm just in a difficult place right now and I can get out of it, like I've gotten out of other difficult places before.

### Week 2

I enjoyed the first class, but will I feel the same way the second time? I drop my preschooler off at *gan* and my baby at the babysitter and rush off, hesitantly entering Yocheved's house again. But there's no denying that I felt better this week, more centered, at least for the first three days after the class. Since then...

*"Answer three questions:  
Who am I?  
Why am I here? What do I want?"*

## How Does Therapeutic Writing Work?

What's the basic premise of therapeutic writing?

A certified Journal to the Self instructor, Yocheved Rottenberg explains that she discovered the Therapeutic Writing Institute several years ago, after taking a two-year counseling course. Knowing that writing had helped her during difficult periods in her own life, she connected immediately with the exercises taught by Kathleen Adams, founder of the institute. Adams teaches these exercises in workshops and in a book, both titled *Journal to the Self*.

Therapeutic writing, or writing to heal, is a particularly powerful tool because as participants write, they access their subconscious. With the conscious mind preoccupied with the task at hand — for example, writing a list of 100 — the subconscious mind is able to "speak up."

Yocheved notes that the therapeutic writing techniques she teaches can be used by anyone, even people who don't consider themselves writers. In addition, while journaling shouldn't be used in place of psychotherapy, it does work together with it and speeds up the therapy process.

well, we won't go there.

Once again, we start with a warm-up exercise. This time Yocheved gives out colorful laminated cards with quotations from various seforim. We each pick a quote that speaks to us and write for five minutes.

My quote is "We love those for whom we do." Ironic, again, considering that I'd spent my childhood taking care of my parents, instead of the other way around. Do I really love my parents? Well, of course I do, but in therapy I've learned how to set up proper boundaries and not feel responsible for their happiness. Yet when they demand my attention, I often get sucked back into old patterns.

I write how trapped I felt when my mother called the night before, whining about something that had gone wrong in her day.

By the time I'm done, I feel cleansed, the tension of the previous night washed away. I know I handled the situation as

best I could, and it's time to move on.

The next exercise is called a "list of 100." Yocheved explains that we can write a list of anything, but it has to go to 100: Reasons to get up in the morning. Reasons I love my family. Things I hate. Things that make me cry. She gives us a list of 100 options to choose from.

I choose "100 things I like about myself."

It feels random, but somehow it fits. Even though on the outside I look happy and successful — beautiful family, good job, *ben Torah* husband — on the inside there's a lot about myself that I'm not happy about. It's time to focus my attention on the things I do right.

I write and write, filling page after page in my notebook. Long after the other women are finished, I'm still at it. Not because I like myself so much, but because I can't seem to stop. I pass 100 and keep going. Yocheved encourages me to keep writing until I feel like I'm finished.

I end up writing 200 things, but it's only at item 186 that I finally hit pay dirt.

*I'm a good wife.*

*I'm a good mother.*

*I'm a good daughter, even if it doesn't always feel that way.*

We discuss our lists. The other women have chosen different topics, but each one shares how she feels so much better now that she's written her list. It's not the actual list that does it; it's what it's opened up inside for all of us. We reread our lists and write a reflection about them.

*I'm so down on myself sometimes, it's scary.*

### Week 3

By now I'm fully committed to the class. I come in on a high, ready for the insights today's writing will bring.

We start with a warm-up exercise, again using a quote as a springboard, and I write about an argument I had with my sister-in-law two years ago that's been stewing inside me ever since. It's not something I can discuss with her without hurting her feelings, and I know she didn't mean to hurt mine. Now that it's all down on paper, I feel like I can finally let go and move on.

Time to start the real work of the morning. We do a cluster, putting our names in a circle in the middle of the page and adding lines to all the people in our immediate life. Then we look over our pages and notice who we included and who we didn't. We talk about our relationships with our parents, our siblings, our spouses, our children, our friends. When we're done, we write a reflection about it.

This one is particularly powerful for me because I know I'm in the middle of a complex web of relationships — husband, parents, children — and I never know

## Five Short Steps to Journaling

To taste the experience of therapeutic writing, Kathleen Adams, LPC, Director of the Center for Journal Therapy, offers the following tips:

### W

**What** do you want to write about? How do you feel? What are you thinking about? What do you want? Name it.

### R

**Review** or reflect on it. Close your eyes. Take three deep breaths. Focus. You can start with “I feel...” or “I want...” or “I think...” or “Right now...” or “In this moment...”

### I

**Investigate** your thoughts and feelings. Start writing and keep writing. If you get stuck or run out of juice, close your eyes and re-center yourself. Reread what you’ve written and continue writing.

### T

**Time** yourself. Write for 5-15 minutes. Write the start time and the projected end time at the top of the page. If you have an alarm or a timer on your cell phone, set it.

### E

**Exit** smoothly by rereading what you’ve written and reflecting on it in a sentence or two: “As I read this, I notice...” or “I’m aware of...” or “I feel...” Note any action steps to take.

It’s easy to W.R.I.T.E.!

which ball I’m going drop. Seeing it all down on paper somehow makes it more concrete.

*It’s not easy to be a child of divorce. But I can cope with it. I know I can.*

The next exercise is a lot harder. It’s a dialogue, where we have an imaginary conversation with someone we’re having a conflict with. Someone we probably couldn’t talk to in real life.

I choose my mother, of course. I write for three pages, telling her how hard it is when she dumps her issues on me. I want to be her daughter, not her mother. In my imaginary conversation, she listens and understands, though she doesn’t promise to change. I feel at peace when I’m done, if only because I can express my feelings and be heard — by myself?

We do a closing exercise, to take a break from all the heaviness, and then write three words that we’re feeling right now. Oddly, I write:

*Happy. Loving. Responsible.*

Responsible for who? I’m not sure, because I just told my mother, calmly and respectfully, I didn’t want to be responsible for her anymore. Maybe I’m being more responsible to myself? To my husband and children, who deserve my full attention?

### Week 4

I’ve been in therapy for years, but I feel like the issues I’ve been working on all this time are finally getting integrated into my life. When I talk to my therapist, I gain clarity and work out how I want to react in each situation. But I still get triggered the next time something happens.

Using the techniques in the writing class has been a whole different experience. When my mother called before Shabbos, wanting my sympathy as usual, I listened to her calmly, instead of rising to the bait and feeling agitated that she’s so needy. I felt less triggered by my children this week, and I’ve been exploding less frequently at my husband, too.

After today’s warm-up exercise, we do an exercise called “time capsule.” We’re supposed to write about a specific period of time, processing it, and moving on.

I write about a particularly harrowing trip to America two years ago, when we went back for Pesach. I had four kids under six, including a newborn, and got caught in a crossfire between my parents about where we should go for the Sedarim. I start writing and can’t stop. The other women are finished, and I’m still going, filling page after page in my notebook.

Finally, I decide to leave a few empty pages and finish at home. We do two more powerful exercises, both of which give me new insights into my struggles with my husband and my kids.

*I need to stop fighting the life I was given and accept it. Surrendering can give me the strength to focus on my husband and children, instead of constantly looking back at my family of origin.*

### Week 5

We take a short break for Shavuot, which gives me a chance to finish the time-capsule exercise and write a reflection on it. Two years ago, I promised myself that I’d never go back to America with my kids again. Now

I feel like it might be doable, if I learn from my mistakes back then.

The warm-up exercise gives me a chance to recover from an e-mail I got from my mother the night before. (Yes, even four weeks into this course, not to mention the ten years of therapy, I still need time to recover from these things.) Then we launch right into “unsent letters.” I write a letter to my father, a letter I could never send in real life, but it trails off somewhere in the middle. I can’t seem to finish it.

I write a reflection:

*I’m stuck again. Stuck, stuck, stuck. How can I get unstuck? I don’t know.*

But 20 minutes later, I have my answer, with the next exercise, which is called “perspectives.” We’re supposed to write about a challenge in our lives from a different perspective than we usually view it — either as someone on the outside looking in, or from the past or the future.

I think back to myself as a six-year-old, and write about waiting for my father to take me out for my birthday. Suddenly, I’m able to tap into a different side of myself, a side that’s able to come to terms with the parents I was given and the events that shaped my life as a teenager.

*It’s time to let go. Time to let go of your hopes for the future and embrace the present. Because if you do that, it’ll all be okay. I promise.*

And somehow, I’m convinced.

### Week 6

I walk into class eagerly and pull out my notebook, flipping through its pages as I muse about everything I’ve gained over the past few weeks. I’ve even

formed a bond with the other women in the course, as we shared the struggles we wrote about. Is there anything left to accomplish today?

Well, yes, there is. We bit the bullet; we're going to America for two weeks this summer, and my stomach is already in knots. I know I'll be better prepared this time around, but what will I do if things don't work out? I've talked it out with my therapist, of course, but that doesn't help the butterflies.

In the warm-up exercise, I write out my anxieties, then conclude—

*I guess the only thing to do now is daven.*

At this point, we go back to the beginning of our writing journal and

read through all the exercises we did over the past five weeks, highlighting all the lines that jump out at us. Afterward, we write a reflection, beginning with the words "Now I know."

*I know the past two months have made a vast difference in my life. I've processed so much in the pages of this journal. Events from my childhood, my relationship with both my parents. Different times in the past when I've gotten stuck. No wonder I feel so much better about myself now.*

We follow this with a poem about the process that we've gone through. Each line of the poem starts with a letter in the phrase *Journal to the Self*. So I write—

*Journey inside, to places I've left long ago.*

*Out of my comfort zone, stretching beyond where I think I can go.*

*Underneath it all, I'm so scared. Scared to see what's hiding within.*

*Really, there's nothing to be afraid of.*

*Not what I thought it would be, that's for sure.*

*All these things that I've unearthed, they're now aired out.*

*Long buried, they've come out and been processed.*

As I tell Yocheved, this is just the beginning of the journey, and I'm hooked. The tools I've learned in this class are coming with me for the rest of my life. ☺