The Power of Memoir is a groundbreaking book that presents an innovative step-by-step program using memoir writing on the journey of emotional and physical healing. By drawing on the eight steps outlined in The Power of Memoir, you'll learn how to choose the significant milestones in your life and weave together your personal story. You'll discover how writing your truths and shaping your narrative propel you toward a life-changing transformation. The Power of Memoir offers the tools you need to heal the pain of the past and create a better present and a brighter future.

PRAISE FOR The Power of Memoir

"With a gentle spirit and a clear voice, Linda Joy Myers creates a safe place for writers. With her eight-step program, Myers guides writers through the dark places of the heart, to ultimately arrive at a place of power and grace."

"Myers makes a compelling case for the power of words as a form of healing and growth."
—James W. Pennebaker, Ph.D., professor of psychology, University of Texas at Austin, and author, Opening Up and Writing To Heal

“A powerful and unique writing guide—one that will lead any writer straight to the heart of their richest material, help them heal, and then teach them how to shape it into literature. Destined to become a classic!”
—Jordan C. Rosenfeld, contributing editor, Writer's Digest magazine, and author, Make a Scene: Crafting a Powerful Story One Scene at a Time

“This material is found nowhere else.”
—Sharon Lippincott, M.A., author, The Heart and Craft of Story Writing

Linda Joy Myers, Ph.D., is president of the National Association of Memoir Writers and a practicing psychotherapist. She is the author of Don't Call Me Mother: Breaking the Chain of Mother-Daughter Abandonment, which won the Gold Medal Award from the Bay Area Independent Publishing Association in 2007.
More Praise for *The Power of Memoir*

“Linda Joy Myers folds in her experiences as a therapist and creative-writing instructor to sum up, in detail, the complex journey of memoir writing. Her steps are clear, practical, and accurate and will shed light on the road ahead as you put your story on paper.”

—Marina Nemat, author, *Prisoner of Tehran: One Woman’s Story of Survival Inside an Iranian Prison*

“This book transforms memoir writing into an adventure with a caring and knowledgeable guide. You can safely take Linda Joy Myers’s hand through the forests, swamps, cataracts, and meadows of memoir, learning a great deal on the way.”

—Gillie Bolton, author, *The Therapeutic Potential of Creative Writing and Reflective Practice Writing, Edition 3*

“In this brilliant new book, Linda Joy Myers shows readers how—by example and with examples—to write the truth about their lives in eight clear steps. She covers multiple aspects of the writing process, including overcoming writing blocks, keeping your motivation alive, and the power of writing to heal both the body and the soul. Dr. Myers serves as an extraordinary guide for anyone contemplating writing a memoir, fiction, or nonfiction. *The Power of Memoir* is a must-read.”

—Neil Fiore, Ph.D., author, *The Now Habit: A Strategic Program for Overcoming Procrastination and Enjoying Guilt-Free Play and Coping with the Emotional Impact of Cancer: Become an Active Patient and Take Charge*

“The *Power of Memoir* presents clear guidance through complex questions about writing the truth, conquering the inner critic, and putting emotional issues into perspective. And Myers offers the fictional tools necessary to write a professional memoir. I recommend it!”

—Sheri McConnell, CEO, National Association of Women Writers and the Global Institute of Associations

“Anyone who has a story they want to tell will benefit from reading this book. Therapists will find it useful for working with clients who want to create a narrative. Above all, Linda Joy Myers has written a book that will make the telling of painful and difficult things safe and manageable for the writer and the people in their lives.”

—Kate Thompson, vice-chair, Lapidus UK, faculty member of The Center for Journal Therapy

“The *Power of Memoir* stuns me with its depth of appreciation for the reader’s search for personal story. In an authoritative yet caring voice, Linda Joy generously offers a road map to everyone who wants to embark on this creative journey.”

—Jerry Waxler, M.S., memoir teacher and author of the blog Memory Writers Network, http://www.memorywritersnetwork.com/blog
“Drawing on her personal journey as a memoirist and her experience as a therapist, Linda Joy Myers has created a richly informative and user-friendly, highly readable, and comprehensive manual. If you are serious about finally telling your story, this book is a must. Let Linda Joy move you toward your goal of writing your life.”


“Building on her rich experience as a memoirist and therapist, Linda Joy Myers offers a path for writing oneself into wholeness, guiding us from memory to the kind of healing that comes from writing one’s truth. The Power of Memoir is an indispensable resource for anyone who is inspired to write from life’s ups and downs.”

—Sharon A. Bray, Ed.D., author, When Words Heal: Writing Through Cancer

“The Power of Memoir is unique among the many books available to help aspiring memoir writers. It ranks at the top of the list if only for the clear and easily understood instruction on the craft of writing, and for Linda Joy Myers’s compassionately professional guidance on tender topics like defining boundaries for the story and dealing with secrets and family objections. This material is found nowhere else.”

—Sharon Lippincott, M.A., author, The Heart and Craft of Story Writing

“Painful memories can weigh heavily on an individual and for too long a time. As Myers clearly demonstrates, memoir writing done well can have substantial therapeutic benefits. The Power of Memoir is a primer on how to lighten our pain—or even unburden ourselves entirely. An experienced psychologist and memoir professional, Myers is well prepared to guide the reader who seeks a way through and beyond the labyrinth of recurring oppressive memories. In these well-crafted pages, accessible to the accomplished writer and the neophyte alike, Myers presents both theory and practical writing and psychological exercises to work through difficulties of the past. A necessary addition to any memoir-writing bookshelf.”

—Denis LeDoux, director, Soleil Lifestory Network, and author, Turning Memories into Memoirs
The Power of Memoir
The POWER of Memoir

How to Write Your Healing Story

LINDA JOY MYERS, Ph.D.

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www.josseybass.com
To my children—for inspiring men to heal the generation, and to my sweet grandchildren, Miles, Zoe, and Seth, for showing me that my healing journey has made a difference.

To all the students whose work I’ve had the privilege to read—you are my teachers. I am deeply touched by your powerful stories and honor your courage and commitment to writing.

In memory of Etty
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FOREWORD

I

f, as some authors suggest, the plot of every memoir is the memoirist’s quest to make meaning out of life experiences, then it may follow that one theme of every memoir is the context of family and culture in which the experiences reside.

Our stories shape us, and our families shape our stories. Societies, said Ira Progoff, are “those parts of ourselves that were there before we were.” We are each product and process of our own bubbling stew of culture, class, ethnicity, neighborhood, nation, religion, ancestry, DNA. Our most particular and enduring influences are those we are born into.

How remarkable, then, to have a book from a family therapist whose work is to help us tell and write the stories that have shaped us. The Power of Memoir represents a sophisticated integration of Linda Joy Myers’s decades of clinical experience, merged with her lifetime of creative expression and her own story of triumph over the complexity of circumstance.

Core theories of developmental psychology and family dynamics are concisely reviewed and offered as a pathway into deeper understanding of the context of our lives. An excellent section on why people write memoirs includes reasons not normally addressed
in polite company, such as to settle emotional scores, or to expose injustice or abuse. Even potential retaliatory motives are offered dignity and respect, with the understanding that there well might be a shift toward healing along the way.

The eight-step process outlined—from understanding motives to understanding the labyrinthine publishing process—includes a stellar chapter on research, with many free Internet resources and dozens of practical tips on how to fill in historic or cultural gaps. There are also hundreds of story starters, arranged along both narrative and developmental arcs, as well as useful tips for therapists who facilitate individual or group therapeutic writing processes.

As she does in her previous book on memoir, Linda Joy turns over the last section of the book to her students, whose own stories not only provide modeling of the techniques offered, but also make riveting reading.

The cultural anthropologist Angeles Arrien tells of indigenous villages that sit together and share the stories of their days. After each story, whether of feast or famine, struggle or resolve, pride or shame, the villagers nod and say, “Now that’s a healing story.” May this book guide you to the power that comes from writing your own healing stories.

Kathleen Adams, LPC
Director, Center for Journal Therapy
Denver, Colorado
www.journaltherapy.com
Thank you to my smart and supportive friends in Bella Quattro, my writing group. Without you, and a nudge in the right direction at a writing conference, this book might not have been born. And thanks too for the great food, ambience, and laughter. I look forward to celebrating the joy of creativity many times in the future.

I’d like to thank my agent, Verna Dreisbach, and my editor, Alan Rinzler, for believing in this book and helping it come into being. Thanks to Ron Kane for showing me how to be brave during dark nights of the soul, and how to find the light. I’m so grateful to all the writers I’ve worked with. Your writing and struggles to tell your truths have been my inspiration.

So many people have shared with me their knowledge, expertise, and support. I can’t name you all, but I’m grateful to be part of a community that passionately believes in the power of words, art, and creativity to heal and transform lives. May all our work make a difference in shaping the world into a more compassionate and happy place.
INTRODUCTION

The goal of this book is to help you write the truth about your life, to create a memoir that helps you put unresolved conflicts behind you, heals past wounds, and helps you find meaning, value, and inspiration for your life.

You may ask, “What is my truth—and what will happen if I tell it?” Think about what memories are hidden in the folds of your mind. How do they appear in dreams, haunt you, and invite you to take them from their hiding place? What family secrets make you desperate to find out more, those secrets that whisper the things you need to be able to know to heal the past?

It’s important to begin with an understanding of the emotional motivation for writing your memoir. Do you want to set the record straight? Are you writing looking for love, forgiveness, or revenge? Perhaps you want to write the story of your spiritual quest or encounters with extraordinary events or people. This book will address these questions.

As a therapist for more than thirty years, I live in a world of words and stories. Every day I observe how language exposes and hides, breaks open and seals off the writer from her inner truth. Language can be a sword that penetrates stone, or it can build walls. I listen to the stories of my clients, seeking clues to openings and
possible change, and turning my ear toward echoes of forgiveness and deeper truths. I do my best to sprinkle the seeds of growth and wisdom that I hope will take root, as I try to protect the garden while praying for gentle rain.

Coming from a family where three generations of mothers abandoned their daughters, it was natural for me to deeply desire that all beings become healed. I was convinced that if words could be said that had never been uttered before, words like “I love you” or “I’m sorry,” lives would be changed. I had seen words used to sever the ties of my family, but as I learned to read and discovered books, I saw another way that words could be used.

As a child, I would hide the flashlight under the covers and read for hours, secretly savoring the magic of other worlds, finding that words created new universes where I could learn how to survive the darkness of the family conflicts. Many writers confess the same secrets to me—how literature, poetry, and story have saved them.

After working as a therapist for many years, I began to write my own story, first in journal entries and later in stories, which led to an MFA in creative writing at Mills College. Writing a memoir turned out to be the path to a greater and deeper healing than I would have thought possible. Writing my story and translating it from imagination and memory into words on the page allowed me passage from victim to healing, taking all the separate bits and pieces of my history—my thoughts, feelings, regrets, and hopes—to weave myself whole again.

This book is a culmination and integration of other books, articles, blog posts, and many years of work with clients and students. Along the way, I discovered the groundbreaking research of Dr. James Pennebaker and others who supported what I see in my clients and writing students: writing helps to heal mind and body. His work showed me how to integrate the world of therapy and writing, and to search for others on this same path.

Another important source of inspiration has been Kathleen Adams, director of the Center for Journal Therapy, who trains
facilitators and coaches in therapeutic writing. Her work, and my curiosity about the power of writing personal truths, served to launch me into my passion: teaching others how to use personal story and memoir writing to heal. I’ve also been inspired by Dr. Lucia Capacchione, Denis LeDoux, Tristine Rainer, Christine Baldwin, Deena Metzger, Michelle Weldon, John Fox, Louise de Salvo, Dan Wakefield, Hal Zia Bennett, Susan Albert, and so many others who dedicate their creativity to the art of writing and healing through poetry, writing, and reading literature. Every time I read a memoir or work with students, I’m thrilled all over again to be part of their path of creativity and courage.

When you write a memoir, you embark upon a journey from idea and memory to words on the page. To assist your imagination, you might want to draw from journals or family genealogy or unearth the family photo album. As you begin, you will likely wonder how much of your truth to tell, what’s essential to include and what isn’t. You might worry about anger or rejection when you grapple with the reality of dark emotions, pain, abuse, and unresolved conflicts. Your memoir may be focused on exploring family patterns or healing from emotional or physical illnesses. It might be a document you want to leave as a legacy to your descendants, or it may be focused on topics you’d like to share with the world. Your stories may be humorous or serious, inspiring or informative. The theme and tone of your memoir will evolve as you begin to write. The most important thing is to start right away!

Most memoir writers are challenged by the task of sorting through the overwhelming amount of detail in their lives. We’ll discuss how to organize your work, pick the key events to include, discover important turning points, create your narrative arc, and how to shape your arc of healing. You’ll learn about using the tools of fiction, and how to present your memoir to the world. This book will help you begin, develop, and plan your memoir from idea to finished manuscript.
Writing your memoir is an act of courage, an encounter with imagination and memory, and a way to build a bridge from the past to the future. Experience the power of writing your memoir now. Pick up the pen, and listen to that voice inside you as you read on.
The

POWER

of

Memoir
PART 1

Eight Steps to Writing a Healing Memoir
STEP 1

Understanding Your Reasons for Writing

Even before birth, we're a part of other people's stories. It's said that we enter the world in the middle of our family's story and become one of the main characters in its drama, immediately woven into the tapestry of family, friends, and community. On our path through life, as in a fairy tale, we encounter wizards, witches, dark forests, and good fairies; we experience joys and challenges, heartaches and hope. Through struggles, failures, and successes, we discover the unique story that is ours alone. We find out who we are and where we are going.

As you muse about writing your stories, you may feel some shyness about putting everything down in black and white, but it's enlightening to encounter the many layers of yourself and your memories, moments that have been captured in a snapshot in your mind, shifting images of perception and consciousness. Writing a memoir is like taking a journey without an exact itinerary. We launch ourselves away from all we know, stopping at stations along the way, only to hop on another train going somewhere we hadn't planned. As long as we're courageous and take note of our travels, we'll benefit and learn from all the new places we visit.

Writing a memoir is an adventure into the unknown and, at the same time, like visiting the comforting old movies of the past that
flicker in the parlor, where tea, a fire, and the smiles of our ancestors greet us. Tune in to the whispers of knowledge that are within you, and get ready to write.

Why Write a Memoir

A woman sits across the table from me, her eyes shining. “I have this great story about my mother . . .” she begins. We talk about her idea, and soon it becomes clear that she has a story she wants to tell, filled with the dramas of alcoholism, abuse, absent father, and siblings that need looking after.

“What are you wanting to write this story?” I ask her.

“Because it was such a hard life, and I overcame all these challenges. I think it will help others.” She blinks away tears.

“How much have you written?” I ask.

“I don’t know where to start. In fact, I know the family would be upset if I wrote it. My sister told me she’d never speak to me again, and I feel disloyal to my mother.” She leans in and whispers, “But isn’t it my story?” Her voice has the timbre of strength in it now.

“Yes, it’s your story, and you’re the only one who can tell it your way. Just begin with some memories in a list, or write down a few small stories you remember.”

Her face is pale now, and she turns away. “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe it’s just for me. I’m so confused about things that happened, and when I write I hear their critical voices, and I feel so ashamed. Maybe I should just forget it.” She’s looking more crumpled again, and I know that we have some more talking to do.

This scenario is a common one with memoir writers—the struggle between the desire to write and all the issues, conflicts, and worries that come up at the very beginning. When the energy of excitement collides with the sheer wall of fear, guilt, or shame, it’s nearly impossible to find the creative flow necessary to write. In future chapters we will examine these concerns carefully and suggest solutions.
The energy of wanting to write will drive you through all the barriers, so it’s important to hold on to the feeling in your belly that takes over when you think about writing your story, that sense of purpose and inspiration. It’s your best friend. And let’s look at some of the motivations that drive people to write their memoirs, and how the reasons to write might be part of a healing process. Healing might mean release of old grudges, letting go of hurt feelings, or a sense of freedom and restoration in the body.

**Understanding Your Motivation**

Here’s a list of some of the major reasons why people are motivated to write about their lives.

1. To gain a deeper understanding of yourself and your life
2. To heal the past and create hope for the future
3. To create a legacy for your family
4. To expose injustice or abuse
5. To settle emotional scores—from anger and revenge to acceptance and forgiveness
6. To present a point of view about a controversial issue
7. To share with the world your unique experiences with travel, education, illness and recovery, family, or a spiritual quest

You may identify with some or all of the reasons on this list, so let’s take a closer look at possible reasons to write your memoir, and see how they might apply to you.

**To Gain a Deeper Understanding of Yourself and Your Life**

Writing helps us sort through our memories and experiences, and brings structure to the chaos of our memories. Some memoir writers
feel the need to sort out conflicting family histories and put their memories in some kind of order. By telling your story, you deepen your understanding of your family and develop insight into the history and meaning of your life. If other family members wish to disagree, they are free to write their own version of the same events! Later in the book, we'll see how current brain research shows that writing changes the brain and creates new neural pathways that help us heal and find new ways to live our lives. Research has also shown that writing integrates different sides of the brain and helps to contain the chaotic and random nature of memory.

To Heal the Past and Create Hope for the Future

Research by Dr. James Pennebaker and other scientists has proved that writing helps to heal both body and mind, integrating different parts of the brain to heal the effects of trauma. In Step Eight, we will examine these studies in detail. Writing a narrative as a healing practice is now a part of training programs for writers and therapists at the master’s degree level, and many therapists recognize writing as a necessary tool in helping to create a new perspective about the past. Writing a story helps to expose the unconscious patterns that keep the client stuck, and offers new inroads into creating a different story for the client to embrace.

To Create a Legacy for Your Family

The story of your unique and special life can be a gift to family members, particularly those not yet born. Think about the many changes that have occurred during your lifetime, all the things you have learned, and the history that is a part of you. Each phase of your life contains a slice of the larger history of the world. You have been part of this vibrant history in some way, as an observer or a participant. Think about the kinds of things your children or