

INTRODUCTION

FACE DOWN OR with the text showing, an open book is such an alluring image. If I happen to walk past one with the spine splayed, I'll invariably glance at the title to see if it might catch my interest. When I am enthralled by a novel, turning the page and seeing that a new chapter is about to start can elicit excitement or panic in response to the fate of a character. I relish the thrill of starting a new read.

But I have also come to cherish the opportunity of sitting before a blank page to write. In my journal, I've become an open book to myself. It's been a space for revelation and learning. Within the pages of a diary, you, too, can become an open book to yourself. Writing of the feelings and facts that have shaped your life, word by word, you can lay it all bare: The hopes you've been told are forbidden, relationships that are strife-ridden, the sadness with which you are heavily-laden, the memories that refuse to stay forgotten. All of these thoughts and emotions can be released through writing. What has been concealed can be made visible,

and therefore addressable.

This freedom of recollection and expression is worth exploring. Even when we aren't aware of it, we face so many restrictions on what we say, think or feel. The voices of teachers, parents, elders, spiritual leaders, colleagues, and friends can sometimes sound louder than our own. Fears, hurts, rejections, pains, disappointments and losses can silence the dreams we've been whispering.

Your Life Matters is an invitation and exhortation to give yourself the gift of clarity, of seeing who you are in written form. When engaged in this practice, we sit before an open book, sentence by sentence, becoming ourselves. We fill the pages with thoughts, emotions, and experiences that we might never have dared to utter or face.

In the past three decades, researchers across the globe have highlighted the physical and mental health benefits of writing. There is a growing body of scientific discovery on why expressive writing is helpful. This book joins an extensive canon. I came up with the idea, not because I had something new to offer to the studies, but because I wanted to explore why writing made me feel so good, and to share these findings with others. I mulled over the concept for the book for around a year. When I freed up some time to really begin delving into it, I searched for a lens through which I could approach such a broad topic.

Interrogating my experience and that of other journal-keepers, memoirists and autobiographers, a common reflection was that writing helped elucidate who and what was important.

As members of society, we tend to commit to the written word what we deem valuable. The items to be remembered at the grocery store, the wedding vows to be spoken to our lover, safety instructions to be followed by the house-sitter, questions we want to pose to a prospective employee, notes from a sermon, even the funny things our kids say. When we want to remember, cherish, or safeguard something, we write it down.

You should consider doing the same for the story of your life.

Your existence in the world is significant. What you have been through is material, your emotions are meaningful. Your life is noteworthy.

This book aims to show you why you should write and then provide some guidance on how to write. It is all underpinned by a belief that your life matters and because it's worth remembering, cherishing and safeguarding, you should write about it. This can be solely for your eyes in a journal, or you might want to craft a structured book in the form of a memoir or an autobiography. You might want to only share it with your family and friends or publish it for a wider audience.

In this book, you'll come across stories of people who wrote for a variety of reasons. Some authored autobiographies because they were well-known public figures, and others are now known because they wrote a memoir. A few had never dreamed that the words in their private diaries might reach a global audience, and continue to do so posthumously, for decades.

The sections and chapters in this book are suggestions of how to approach reading it, but they are not strictly sequential. Consider heading straight to the section on how to write a memoir if that's what catches your eye. Or perhaps, you're in a season where reviewing your life is more important than designing it. Maybe you've picked this book up or were gifted it because you're going through a tough time and are wondering if writing can really make a difference. If so, explore some of the science and case studies showing how writing can help save your life by restoring health, releasing feelings and engaging faith.

Though they can be as similar or divergent as an author pleases, I have made a distinction between three common forms of expressive writing – journaling, memoir and autobiography – in the second section of this book.

The first, refers to a writing practice that conventionally has no set structure or form. A journal or diary entry can be a list, a scribble describing events and their related emotions. It can be a

word or a paragraph. Often solely for the writer's eyes, journals don't need to adhere to any norms.

Memoirs, by contrast, tend to have a final audience in mind, and therefore, have expected codes and guides on form. They are generally shaped by theme rather than chronology and don't need to be constrained by biographical detail. Their intention is to offer a snapshot of moments and not a linear account of a life. In a memoir, you don't need to provide information such as where you were born, where you went to school, the jobs you've held or even the dates of significant events. This level of detail is often the domain of an autobiography.

In the format of autobiography, specificity is used to fill the reader in about the bigger picture. For example, fans and supporters will most likely know of an achievement or position that garnered public attention. The autobiographer can now offer insight and insider facts that haven't been publicly known. They can give context that often starts at the beginning of their lives and tracks chronologically towards their important accomplishment or life-changing event.

Typically, an autobiography is the chronological and fact-driven story of an individual's life, while a memoir is a collection of memories grouped around a theme or covering only select parts of a person's life. Of course, there have been autobiographies in the form of diary entries and memoirs that have a linear structure from birth onwards. Expressive writing has no rules. Consequently, you can write whatever you like, however you like.

But do write the truth. This might mean discarding or deleting what you never want to be read by anyone else. If you've been through severe trauma, you may need to first consult with a medical professional, because writing truthfully about your experiences may be detrimental to your mental health. There are instances where writing in a non-clinical setting is not advised. Some memories are too painful and should not be revisited without the assistance of a trained professional such as a psychologist. Individuals with

a history of clinical mood disorders or psychosis should also not engage in practices such as journaling or memoir-writing before they've received approval and guidance from their doctor. In such circumstances, going back in time can be more harmful than helpful.

Writing without inhibition can be salutary. Even if you have an audience in mind, you are the first and most important reader. So write for yourself, for your eyes only. You can always edit or erase whatever you don't want to be for public consumption.

The written word is a treasure in all its varying styles and forms. However long or unstructured your story may be, it's your story. It's a record that you lived, loved, longed, laughed, led, laboured, lapsed, launched, lost – it's a record that you mattered.

Every blank page you face holds a gift. It's a chance to reconcile the past, one memory at a time. It's a chance to design the life and self you hope for, one word at a time.