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# *narratives at work*

writing as a transformative tool  
for career management

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## introduction

*'Every human is an artist. And this is the main art that we have: the creation of our story... You face life depending on who you believe the main character is, the way you learned to be. Your father tells you that you are this way. Your mother tells you that you are that way. And that's what you become.'*

Don Miguel Ruiz

*'The eye altering, alters all.'*

William Blake

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Henry Ford once said, *'Whether you think you can, or think you can't...you're right'*. This succinct quote aptly summarises why the stories we tell ourselves about our working lives are so important - and are at the heart of our success or failure at work. Of course what we ultimately consider 'success' or 'failure' is also subject to retelling. In this pamphlet we explore the idea of creating transformative narratives for work contexts. We do this by setting out a writing-through-transformation model - this is the theory. We also illustrate this with a courageous story of an employee coping with sudden redundancy - this is the practice.

The model we use comes from work we have done over the years in helping individuals go from their first - or 'stuck' - story, to a second - or 'life-giving' - narrative. We described this in detail in our article (2009) *Mystery to mastery: an exploration of what happens in the black box of writing and healing* which. This is a reworking of that article.

Although the focus of the original article was the learning processes involved when writing is used with *therapeutic* ends in mind, we propose here that developing a *career identity* and dealing with *career challenges* may also be explored through written narratives. The transformation-through-writing model is set out in figure one (following page). It applies to career-identity questions as well as to concrete job-related challenges and talk about approaches that may be used in this context.

We also propose that issues at work and of work-identity are intimately linked: when we understand ourselves better, we are more able to deal with actual situations and events at work, and when we are able to reframe and digest difficulties in our working lives we learn more about ourselves.

It is noteworthy that our model describes a similar process individuals may go through when they, for instance, use Law's storyboarding techniques. Like Law (2008), we are exploring aspects such as: *sequences, points-of-view, turning-points, and - eventually - change-of-mind*, though we use different terms and techniques. Regardless of the approach, trying-out and developing new perspectives in the face of change is the common denominator in both these narrative approaches.

The stages we use when we describe what happens in the transformational space - allowing us to develop new perspectives through writing - came directly from Law's earlier work (republished 2010). His four cognitive learning stages are: 'sensing', 'sifting', 'focusing', and 'understanding'. We include these in our model and describe them in detail below. They are illustrated by a story of job-loss.

This story was written by graduate student Edith Robb - a former journalist - who was enrolled in a course Reinekke Lengelle developed for Athabasca University, called 'Narrative Possibilities: The Transformative Power of Writing, Story, and Poetry for Personal and Professional Development' (Lengelle, 2008). As part of the final assignment, Edith and others were invited to choose their own writing topic and approach. She chose to write about her pain and struggle in response to suddenly being made redundant, after 38 years of service. She uses a variety of narrative techniques and reflections and her insightful, heartfelt, and entertaining piece (from which she has given us permission to quote) is entitled 'Redundancy to Resurrection'.

**figure one**  
**the transformation through writing model**



The model is briefly described below. Its structure and dynamics are set out in detail on pages 5-9.

## the model

At the heart of the model is the idea that it is the quality of the story we tell ourselves about a particular situation which determines how we are able to cope with and navigate our world. It is not what actually happens to us. In the same way, the story we tell ourselves and others, about who we are and what we are capable of, may help or hinder our career success - as our earlier quote from Henry Ford suggests.

The beginning of the learning process we describe usually starts with a boundary experience – or as Meijers once observed in a lecture, *'we often don't start learning until the chair is kicked from under us'*. Law would say that this is a possible 'turning point'. Metaphorically speaking, a boundary experience is when we *'hit the wall'* – it is a situation, event, or attitude *'... whereby an individual encounters the boundaries of his or her existing self-concept and cannot cope with a situation and its exigencies'* (Lengelle and Meijers, 2008 p. 58). This might include chronic unemployment - a situation, job-loss an event, or confusion and doubt - an attitude, about one's career-identity, aptitudes and capabilities.

The human or conditioned response to a boundary experience is, by default, what we call an SOS - 'stuck-on-suffering' - narrative. We refer to this in our model as a 'first story'. It is a description or perception of a person's circumstances in 'reaction' to the boundary experience. Because she-or-he has not had the time or space to reflect or to envision other perspectives, this first story is usually not a constructive one; it puts the person in fight-flight-or-freeze mode.

*'...in complex situations (such as boundary experiences) we simply jump to conclusions.'...  
'Tersky and Kahneman interpret this type of irrational behavior as a systematic error or shortcoming in the cognitive system; a form of irrationality, in which people use a number of heuristics to come to a decision or judgment that may not take into account the complexity of the current situation. In summary: in a situation that overwhelms, people base their decisions on preprogrammed ways of thinking – prejudices and unmoded coping strategies make the first story a default narrative.'*

Lengelle and Meijers, 2009 p.66

An example of this 'first story' can be tracked in figure one (previous page) where the stages of the model are laid out.

To move on from the 'first story' a person is invited to open, feel, imagine, and articulate other ways of viewing the situation using a variety of writing exercises (or other approaches or interventions) that move through what - in the model - we refer to as the 'transformational space'. In the cognitive perspective this is a stage-based learning process that includes, as mentioned before, four stages: 'sensing', 'sifting', 'focusing', and 'understanding'.

The fruit of our labour in the transformational space is what we call a 'second story' or 'felt theory' – we see and experience our circumstances differently. Our story becomes workable; a person acknowledges the situation, event, or attitude as it is, and no longer reacts to it, but develops ways to reframe and respond. A second story is a new, more life-giving perspective, that usually takes shape in one of these three ways:

- > a shift of perspective,
- > acceptance, or
- > the discovery or construction of meaning.

The *first* story, for instance, about job loss, may be that it is a shocking and shameful event that never should have happened. While the second may include admitting that a person is helpless to change the facts, but feels empowered when re-imagining it as an opportunity to reflect, invest in more suitable alternatives - or to see it as a chance to rest or develop compassion for others who have experienced similar crises. A creator of a writing-based inquiry method puts it this way...

*'Which is more empowering?  
I wish I hadn't lost my job or  
I lost my job, what can I do now?'*

Katie 2002

The writing approaches which a person might employ in the transformational space may be to help others reflect on that person's boundary experience or to use it for their own. It includes poetry, the writing of fictional or non-fictional narratives, and even working with different voices in dialogues and scripts. But there are also additional methods, like 'inquiry' (Katie, 2002) and a host of additional, creative, and therapeutic techniques and exercises (Bolton, Field and Thompson, 2006).

What is important when using any technique or exercise is that it allows people to do two important things...

> **engage with their thoughts and emotions;**

...while at the same time...

> **creating for them an opportunity to be a witness to their own drama – healthily detached.**

Interestingly, writing allows them to do both; they do the first thing by describing things in concrete detail stimulating the brain in a way that allows us to connect and reconnect with our feelings. They do the second because... *'the text becomes a physical object that can be reflected upon and talked about'* (Bolton and others, 2006) or *'viewed from a breatheable distance'* (Lengelle, 2008; Lengelle and Meijers, 2009 p. 59).

### **stages in Edith Robb's story**

the boundary experience

*'The work took 38 years. The woman remembers her first hesitant steps into the grey-walled newsroom, the endless clickety-clack rhythm of the old Olivettis, the sea of head and shoulders visible over the paper-strewn desks.... The lay-off took 38 seconds.'*

Robb p.1

the first story

*'In the three weeks that followed, I became physically sick and mentally distraught. Sleep eluded me, crying jags left me weak, and the practicalities of rebuilding a life in shambles seemed overwhelming... nothing eased the pain except nightly visits to the journal. Looking back, I became a master of the woe-is-me discourse.'*

pp.1-2

Even being a seasoned journalist didn't mean that Edith could use writing immediately to gain new perspectives. In fact rushing to gain new perspectives, without experiencing her feelings, would not have resulted in a 'felt-theory' or 'second story' that would hold, feel authentic, and be true balm for her any way. The emotional pain, like bodily pain, is a necessary signal that something is amiss - for which a quick solution may not be forthcoming.

*'There was a blur of practical, well-meaning advice, some from people, and some from books. Get a resume. File for unemployment insurance. Search Workopolis and Monster.com. Consider doing something different. Start networking with a vengeance. That all worked on the surface...'*

p.3

Feelings of struggle and confusion can, if people are willing, invite them into the transformational space. Edith sensed that there was no point in covering over, or trying to change, what had happened - not from the outside. She could not put her life back together in the way it had worked those past 38 years. She entered what Jungian's refer to as the 'the dark night of the soul' – which is a more poetical way of referring to the transformational space.

Because she was enrolled in the Integrated Studies programme she was in the habit of keeping a personal and work journal; and she had already noticed that writing helped 'alleviate angst'. On a further search, she enrolled in the programme's course *Narrative Possibilities* and was introduced to the idea that writing could be a healing art...

*'as I read provocative works by interesting authors...I looked at things I had never previously considered, embraced viewpoints I had once dismissed, and listened to voices that once only whispered in the background.'* p.4

## transformational space in four stages

### sensing

*'That night it happened to me, I tried to write in my journal something optimistic or hopeful, but the tear-stained pages just show a series of starts, starts, and scribbles. I abandoned prose for poetry to express my despair...'*

Robb p.3

Experiencing emotions and allowing a host of new possibilities to enter a person's thoughts, without drawing immediate conclusions, is the focus of the first cognitive stage in the transformational space and this is what Edith did intuitively.

In the words of our original article,

*'Sensing is the stage in which information is gathered (from various sources, in particular those that are emotionally compelling), but no explanation or perspective is yet developed. In this stage emotions are explored and described; gaining an awareness of one's feelings as they happen in the body is important.'*

Lengelle and Meijers p.1

*on being redundant*

*'Pin-striped and pressed,  
Ramrod straight and unblinking  
I firmly clutch the neatly-typed sheet marked  
Severance.  
The clock stops, the sun blinks off,  
My world closes pending renovations. Robb, p.3*

*'In this stage one may even discover a powerful or sustaining metaphor. But the main focus is on becoming aware of feelings, thoughts, and memories so that the writer might give them voice'*

Lengelle and Meijers p.61

Edith uses concrete images – which evoke emotion. She uses the powerful metaphor of the 'ramrod', as if she has literally been punched in the stomach. Her line, 'The clock stops, the sun blinks off', shows the depth of despair that this boundary experience brought about. In this way, she begins to 'name the often abstract or wordless pain we may be feeling and translate it into something we can observe and engage with' (Lengelle, 2008).

The final line of the poem, *'My world closes pending renovations'* could be seen as a sign that Edith somehow knew that the 'transformational space' would be a place where she would have to remain a bit longer - before a shift in perspective or sense of well-being would be possible. In this stage the caterpillar-cocooning is an often-used metaphor, but 'renovations' is fresh and more original. It also alludes to destruction – as we read it, we imagine kitchens being ripped out, walls being torn down, and clouds of dust needing time to settle before anything new can be constructed.

The reason why using concrete images and metaphors works better than talking about the event, or interpreting their meanings too soon, is that the brain receives and processes trauma in a non-verbal way.

It has been observed that 'trauma stores itself in our memories in the form of iconic images'...

*'it is these images that must be accessed if a story about the trauma is to be told. Trauma recovery indicates "that healing is more likely to occur when survivors can describe not just the events of the trauma but the images their memories have encoded... Remembering details, specific images, and writing them down helps us to heal" – even imagined images.'*

Lengelle and Meijers p.62.

It has been said that this stage is where we *'lean into the edge'* - moving towards the discomfort in our belly. Starting to put on paper what we are feeling externalises the emotion - it is respected and not skipped over.

It requires courage, or the kind of awareness that Edith has when she says...

*... 'I understood that the road stretched two ways, backwards and forwards, and going back was not an option... mine was to branch out into a series of byways that would change my life forever.'* p.4

### **sifting**

*'On cold winter nights that followed my lay-off, I wrote and wrote, for the first time not on a deadline, not determined to get from point A to point B, but to simply express my thoughts and penetrate those others I was exposed to in the course.'* p.10

In the sifting stage a person begins to move towards 'issues of causality' (Law, 2010 p.55).

*'One compares one's circumstances with those of others and starts to develop analogies - and from those analogies, constructs and concepts start to emerge.'*

Lengelle and Meijers p.63

Here a kind of sorting process takes place and the individual is no longer overwhelmed and bombarded by all the thoughts and feelings that are inherent to the boundary experience and the sensing phase. Note that the stages do overlap and that regressions are normal - as well as leaps that lift the veil on what the 'second story' may eventually look like.

Notice here too that the time Edith spent with her pen helped to calm her. We know from physiological research that when we panic we are 'locked' in the primitive part of our brain that triggers the flight-fight-or-freeze response - where our rational faculties becoming blocked - going into a trance. While calming down allows us to access the neo-cortex again. That is probably why someone who fuels their panic with more negative thinking can become trapped in a first story. Edith dares to take a peak around the corner and imagine other possibilities.

*Laid off*

*Born in the winter of my fifty-sixth year,  
I am delivered from my four-decade world of routine  
Into the no-visibility blizzard of uncertainty.  
I wail.  
I weep.  
Slowly the renewed of springtime arrives  
And I follow the sun-brightened road  
Seeking signposts for real truth to replace false ones  
I write.  
I read.  
Like the bird flying without knowing the sky's dimensions  
I dare to be creative without a contracted point of sale.*

In the quote and poem above, we see Edith sorting her thoughts – as if lining them up to understand what she is doing and where she might be going. We might say she is creating an outline or skeleton of elements she will need on which to grow a new embodied life and perspective. And although her poem is about her job loss, the reader senses an archetypal progression in the poem; it could just as equally been written about a serious diagnosis, the death of a loved one, or mid-life divorce.

When people move from sensing to sifting, they see themselves gathering and sorting through their initial angst, and the possibilities they uncovered upon entering the transformational space.

There are also hints of focusing and understanding stages in Edith's poem, particularly in the lines where she speaks of 'springtime' and 'sun-brightened road'. Here we catch a glimpse of what her second story might feel like - though she has still not constructed a new full understanding of her circumstances, which would include a shift in perspective, acceptance, or found meaning.

What is also noteworthy about this poem is her willingness to live with uncertainty – this is paradoxically a prerequisite to moving forward. Her reference to the bird that does not know *'the sky's dimensions'* almost sounds as if she is inviting herself to be courageous. *'If a bird can fly in the vast unknown, why can't I?'*, she seems to say.

It is also at this stage in her writing process that Edith turns to a powerful four-question inquiry method, referred to as 'The Work' (Katie, 2002). We also use this in the graduate course. The initial phase of this process is to write down all your woes in response to guided questions, which is a sensing-sifting exercise in and of itself. Then people are asked to inquire as to the validity – or truth – of each premise; which can move one to the focusing and understanding stages. Here is an example of Edith's experience with 'The Work'.

*writing exercise*

*'Is it in fact true, she asks? Yes it is, I answer. I have indeed lost my job. Next question: Can I absolutely know that it's true? Yes, I can. I have the documentation to prove it. How do I react when I think that thought, she [Katie] asks. With anger and with hurt, I answer and I am not sure which sentiment is dominant, since both wrestle for attention. Lastly, Katie asks the pivotal question: Who would you be without that thought? I answer: I would be someone with a lighter heart. I would be free of this darkness, this sadness, this burden.'*

p.6



The questions helped Edith to discover that changing our story or thoughts about an event can alleviate our suffering, even when outside circumstances haven't change. As the Blake quote (at the start of this article suggests): if we are to change our lives, we must change our perspective or story. We have to change the projector, not the projected (Katie, 2002).

### **focusing**

In focusing, actual viewpoints are formulated. These view-points are still fragmented, but they are an attempt to string together feelings and ideas that arise during the sensing and sifting stages (Lengelle and Meijers, 2009).

*snippets from Edith's work that show focusing:*

*'I willed myself to let go of one assumption a week and to do that for the duration of the course.'* p.8

*'I started to listen, really listen, to conversations and I heard things in new ways. I read new books and magazines, and discarded old ones, including the newspapers that had dominated my life for most of four decades. I dared to let my imagination go in directions it had never travelled. I began to understand that some stories needed to be told, even if they weren't saleable.'* p.8

*'At this point in my resurrection, I encountered the work of Charles M Anderson and Marion MacCurdy in their book Writing and Healing. When they described trauma survivors, I could immediately identify, "We feel powerless, taken over by alien experiences we could not anticipate and did not choose. Healing depends upon gaining control over that which has engulfed us. We cannot go back and change the past".'* p.8

*'I felt the relief of letting go of a living lie, and daring to explore the real worth of once impenetrable corporate institutions. I questioned persistently why I had let my life fill up with busy without seeing its emptiness.'* p.9

Here you see the Edith describing her own process, in which sensing and sifting starts to blossom into focusing. It brings her to the exciting brink where her new perspectives and ideas reach towards 'understanding'. Here we see she is re-storying her life in a way that brings new meaning and ultimately choice.

*'Each night my journal was full of questions about faith, and how I could have any, and how it can be betrayed. My quest became as spiritual as it was practical; I wasn't just looking for a replacement job now; I was looking for work that really mattered.'* p.9

It is as if she is collecting the puzzle pieces, to construct her new perceptions – the development she will ultimately sum up as, 'job loss' to 'life gain'. This leap, made only through the hard work of staying with the difficulty and feeling the emotions, becomes an almost delightfully concise way to capture both the first and second story.

### **understanding**

The second story in our model is when our understanding comes to fruition.

*'I began to heal. As they [Anderson and McCurdy] defined it, I changed from a singular self, frozen in time by a moment of unspeakable experience, to a more fluid, more narratively-able, more socially-integrated self.'* Robb p.9

In the final stage, the writer may describe feelings of wholeness and relief, but this is not merely a restitution narrative. The story that Edith tells herself is what is called a 'quest-narrative' – she is the hero of her own tale, which started off with being...

...*'ram-rodged and in need of 'renovations'* p.15

to - at times...

...*'suddenly awed'* p.15

describing her situation as a...

*'pilgrimage of reflection and renewal'* p.15

asking herself now... '

...*'how few of us get to rebuild our lives to our liking?'* p.18

Note that the second story may not be any truer than the first. Who can say whether we are right to think what has befallen is a hidden gift or a complete disaster? After all, what is really important is that people have each to create for themselves a story that helps them to be engaged and hopeful.

As we wrote in our original article,

*'The focusing stage segues into the understanding stage and the insights and fragments start to become a second story... Indeed, one formulates a kind of personal theory - whether this theory holds true under professional scrutiny is not as important as whether it is 'felt' and perceived as meaningful to the writer'*

2009 p.65

And as Law describes, it is an 'episodic learning' process - which means the writer puts the events into sequence and clarifies the 'who', 'what', 'when', 'where', 'how', and 'why' of what has happened (2008).

Edith is not only aware of her healing, but of the fact that it is a 'storying' and 're-storying' process. In her final paragraph she writes,

*'Being laid off is fodder for a story. A tale told twice still yields insight into both the teller and the listener. Writing the story, telling the story, creating poems about the story, are all means of bringing forth resurrection of the worker with a stronger self and a soul that guides them to new directions with fewer boundaries than before.'* p.18

It is rather poignant here that Edith ends with the idea of 'boundaries'. Our model also begins with a boundary experience, where a real limitation or stricture is felt. That a boundary experience, well digested, should lead to a sense of 'fewer boundaries' is a sign, one might say, that the transformational space has been successfully traversed.

## methods and approaches for the stages

For practical use, here is a table that may help in determining what kind of writing might best fit with each stage.

**table one**  
**learning stages and corresponding interventions**

<b>cognitive stage</b>	<b>therapeutic writing intervention</b>
<b>sensing</b>	images / metaphors writing in response to existing poems or stories cathartic forms of expression / free-writing
<b>sifting</b>	analogies / lists more narrative-style or list poems / dialogues mind maps
<b>focusing</b>	short narratives memoir vignettes or fictionalised life stories drafting-redrafting poems
<b>understanding</b>	narratives essays, poems that have undergone revision

These are flexible categories, and the choices made are often best made intuitively.

## dialogical aspects - the steam-engine that propels us

The metaphor is of a journey by rail. The four learning stages speak of 'stations' people stop at - but eventually pass through, as they process a boundary experience. The stages don't tell us what carries them forward. If the pain of being laid-off is the 'fuel' for the journey, and their writing is the 'vehicle' in which they create their own balm, we propose that a successful dialogue - with themselves and others - is the motivational 'engine' (Lengelle and Meijers 2009, p.66).

A second story only comes about if what we write feels alive and has true content. This content, we propose, is generated only by engaging in a double-dialogue - one they have with themselves, and one they have with others. Interestingly the latter can take place 'internally' with a real or imagined other, but usually it also includes outside influences (such as books, teachers, mentors, friends).

Both aspects of the dialogue people imagine, satisfy two fundamental human needs - what have been called...

- > a sense of autonomy and control; and
- > being part of a wider community.

Cited in our article, these needs help us to explain how both the need for autonomy and the need for belonging is hard-wired into our brain. Table two shows this spectrum; it's a list that can be revisited as people work with others. It helps keep the unity of opposites in mind.

**table two**  
**a continuum of useful elements and considerations**  
**facilitating a balanced approach to therapeutic writing**

image or metaphor	language or structure
need for autonomy	need to belong
active listening	critical feedback
witnessing or observation	analysis or engagement
new information	existing frameworks
experimentation	formulation
emotion	logic
creativity	control

As Edith is working through her distress, using writing to 'get out of herself', she sets down imagined and literal dialogues with others. Here is a poem she wrote from the point-of-view of a junior staff-person she helped to train. The poem is a kind of internal dialogue, but also shows a need to 'connect' outside oneself as well. It shows Edith's growing ability to allow the observer or witness to be present in the midst of the drama.

*The mentor*

*She cries for me, her make-up in rivers down her cheeks  
 As I am marched out in the impersonal grip of the executioner.  
 When she arrived, on shaky steps of self-doubt  
 I had seen her worth and welcomed her under my wing.  
 She read my survival manual  
 And thought she could last a storm.  
 Now the survivor is vanquished  
 And her world needs reconstructing,  
 Since the game has changed forever.  
 I cry now as I remember her tears;  
 She cries now too,  
 Remembering my lack of them.*

p.16

*'Taken together, the dialogue and the witness, allow the writer to be both engaged with and detached from his or her boundary experience'*

2009 p.67

During her 'resurrection' Edith also reaches out to five other long-term employees who have endured devastating layoffs. This is not only a sign of her progress in healing to get beyond or out of the 'self' - and the first story. It is also a way to motivate herself and create a richer and safer environment to continue her dialogue. The need for a safe and enriching environment is another element we identified in our writing-healing model – people need to know others care and that they will be heard.

*'A safe and enriching environment also means that the focus is not, in the first place, on understanding a boundary experience or explaining it, but on the relationship that allows individuals to find their own way of articulating experiences - by for instance finding the "right" metaphors'*

2009 p.69

Edith has the last word on this.

*'We decide to write our way well. Through personal essays and poems, we labour to remember sensory details of the day it all happened, and speak in amazement at how fast our healing mind has already started to shut it out.'*

Robb p.17

## conclusion

The transformation-through-writing model includes:

- > a first story;
- > a transformational space;
- > with cognitive learning stages;
- > a second story;
- > an observer;
- > a dialogical engine.

This is one way to view learning in response to a career or life crisis. As we like to remind our children, *'not always getting what we think we want builds character'* – it's what we do in the face of uncertainty and struggle that shapes our outlook and eventually our identity.

The story people tell themselves about *who they are* and *what is happening to them* can either keep them trapped in a cycle of lament (Lengelle, 2008) - or it can allow them to change the projector, instead of the 'projected' (Katie, 2002). We realise, from examining the dynamics of learning in the face of crisis, that people can empower themselves by writing and rewriting their own narratives - as Edith has done.

Perhaps, it is the only choice that any of us have when we cannot change our circumstances or change the minds of others who we believe would give us what we want.

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