



Write for Health

A Model for Using the Spiritual Literacy DVDs with a Creativity Group

Group Makeup: Three “Write for Health” groups meet at the facilitator’s home every week. Each group has 10 - 12 members. Members range in age from 23 to 89 years. Most are college educated; some are low-income; a number of them have serious health conditions. Members come from a variety of faith traditions or no tradition at all.


Goal of Group: The purpose of the groups is to use writing as a spiritual practice, a tool for fostering a deeper sense of connection with one’s self, with others, with the Earth, and with whatever is called “Holy.”

Preparation: The facilitator spends an hour or two each week preparing for the weekly groups. This involves watching the DVD and/or gathering materials from the Spirituality & Practice website and other sources. A one- or two-page handout is prepared that includes the day’s readings, quotes, and writing exercises. In 2008 these handouts also include “A Suggested Practice for the Week.”

A centerpiece for the writing table is also created each week. This may be as simple as a lit candle or a scattering of ginkgo leaves or a plate of onions. Often, these table arrangements are sparked by an image from the Spiritual Literacy DVD series.

Group Process: The groups are held for 10 consecutive weeks at a time, three times a year. Each season now has a theme drawn from the Spiritual Literacy Project (e.g., in 2008 these themes are “Winter: Beauty & Gratitude,” “Spring: Love & Forgiveness,” and “Fall: Kindness & Compassion.” In earlier years, each month of the writing group had a Spiritual Literacy related theme (e.g., Openness, Enthusiasm, Attention, etc.). The groups meet for 90 minutes once a week. Each week has a specific topic related to the Spiritual Literacy theme (e.g., “Surprise & Gratitude,” “Ginkgos,” “Thich Nhat Hanh’s Birthday,” “Doors,” “List of Dreams,” etc.).

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On the days the DVDs are seen, the group first does a writing exercise related to that episode's theme. As much as possible, the exercise draws from something concrete or tangible. For example, the group on Attention began with this instruction: "Let your attention focus on the fork or spoon in front of you. Then write something in response." Similarly, the group on Openness began with a qigong exercise called "Parting the Curtains" in which members moved their arms and hands in an opening and closing motion several times and then wrote in response to this experience.

After the group views the Spiritual Literacy episode, they are invited to write of an image, feeling, or memory that it evoked. Always, they are reminded that we will be returning to the theme and the teachings of the episode in subsequent sessions.

The format is similar on the days the DVD is not shown. Sometimes a teaching story, poem, or quote from the DVD may be used for the writing prompts. Often, the facilitator will draw on other resources related to the theme. For example, in a session on "Gratitude" members wrote new endings to proverbs based on an exercise done by first graders described on the Gratefulness.org website. An "Openness" session included a day of writing as if members were Mexicans crossing the border or people (e.g., border patrol agents) trying to prevent them from doing so. This session was based on *The Devil's Highway*, a powerful book by Luis Alberto Urrea which was the local university's "book of the year" in 2007.

Writing exercises usually take from 10 to 20 minutes. Afterwards, members are invited – but never required – to share their reading aloud. If they do so, the group simply listens with appreciation. It is an expectation that groups will keep what is shared in the group within the group.

A Sample Group Experience:

One session called "On Beauty" introduced the theme of beauty for the writing groups. As members entered the writing room, they saw tea cups and piles of tea leaves on the table. The group began with a reading from a novel called *The Elegant Gathering of White Snows* (2002) by Kris Radish. In the reading, a woman contemplating ending her life stumbles into a tea store: "The tea store is a world unlike any Janice has ever seen, smelled or touched. . . ." The owner's kindness and the beauty she encounters in the store changes her life.

After the reading, group members were asked to "Look at the tea leaves before you. Sip your cup of tea, if you wish. Remember your own encounters with beauty. Then write something in response." Members then shared aloud times when they were touched by beauty; a few were about drinking tea but most were not. Then members watched the Spiritual Literacy episode on "Beauty." They were invited to write an acrostic poem or cinquain on beauty. Examples of each were given by the facilitator based on images from the episode. Here is a poem by the group facilitator, Rev. Chris Fry, about her first impression of the "Beauty" episode.

Before rhinoceroses or
Elephants I learned to love
A face, my mother's face
Until she smiled
There was only
Yearning.

Benefits of Participating:

The current “Write for Health” groups have been going on for four years. Some members have been writing with the facilitator for more than eight years. What is clear from group members’ experiences, comments, and research is that such writing promotes health and healing, deepens people’s sense of spirituality and connection, fosters community, and offers support to those experiencing loss, depression, and/or pain.

What the Spiritual Literacy DVDs and resources have offered is a new way of organizing the weekly themes and an opportunity for deeper reflection and experience. Group members are enthusiastic about them. Through their writings they share how they are putting the Spiritual Literacy themes into practice in their lives, what they struggle with or question, and how watching the DVDs and listening to one another is changing long-held assumptions or ways of being.