



# The Narrative Project

“This Program helped me not only organize my writing but other parts of my life, too. Best of all, I’ve met my goal to write the book I’ve had in my heart to write for years.”

–Jennifer Wilke, TNP Get-Your-Book-Done graduate

THE NARRATIVE PROJECT

## Write That Book

Most writers we work with in The Narrative Project arrive in our community with a fire burning to complete a book. Some of them have been working or dabbling at their project for many years while others experience a more recent imperative. Some have worn the identity of “writer” for the better part of a lifetime, whereas others know they likely have just one story they have to get out of their bodies into the world before they leave their time on earth.

As the founder and director of The Narrative Project, where we give writers EVERYTHING they need to get their books done, I have observed that the reason a person wants to write a book matters a great deal. When someone knows their deep personal “why,” they know what they are taking a stand for. I’ll talk about this more a little later but let me introduce myself by telling you my writerly story.

## You Call Yourself a Writer?

I’d always been the kind of kid who sat at the window when it rained and let the seeming sadness of the sky enter my body. When it drizzled, I believed God was crying. Even before I started kindergarten, I understood that there might be a myriad of reasons for God to be sad.

My parents had been in high school when they conceived me (in the back seat of a car?) and they were ill-suited to each other and to parenthood. By the time I was five, I had two brothers (one more was to come when my mom divorced my dad and married again), a drunk father, a deeply troubled mother, and a little body that absorbed everyone’s grief. So, when it rained, I turned my epic compassion toward God.



I remember on dark Northwest winter days the year I went to kindergarten sitting on the sofa, leaning over the back of it with my nose pressed against the window, weeping. How could all of this sadness be borne?

Three years later, only months before my parents split, I learned how God was able to tolerate all the sadness in the world. With words. That's how.

Our family went to the ocean to go camping, and although I lived in the environs of the Puget Sound, and salty air and seagulls were an everyday part of my life, I'd never seen the actual ocean. I'd never been to Washington's outer coast. The saltwater I usually encountered was flanked by the Olympic Peninsula with its majestic mountains. With mountains to the east and mountains to the west, I'd never seen the curve of the earth.

But on this camping trip, my parents drove us around the peninsula to Washington's true western coast. They set up our tent under the trees in the campground, pulled out the cooler, fed us pre-made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on Wonderbread, and then let us go exploring.

A free-range childhood is a fixture of some underorganized families. And because we were often left to our own devices, on this trip my brothers and I roamed the campground without compunction, abandoned our parents to their bickering, and spent hours on our own. The boys, six and almost four, set about to explore the campground and, eventually, to find tide pools and draw pictures in the smooth, firm sand on the beach. They would spend the day collecting sand dollars and digging for clams with their bare hands. I was probably supposed to be in charge of keeping an eye on them, but we lost track of each other inside of a half an hour, and I never gave them another thought once they were out of sight.

As for me, dreamy child that I was, I was glad for the liberty to wander beyond the campsite out to the beach as well—to let my thoughts have their own free range. There was a hill between the campground and the shore that shielded campers from the wind and the sound of the ocean—a sound that was about to change my life forever.

When I first crested that hill, a whoosh of wind and an unending roar—a pride of a thousand lions with continuous anger—knocked all the thoughts right out of my head. I may have uttered, “Wow!” but I could not have heard my own voice, could not have even noticed my little self on that hill. No one had told me the ocean rumbled, growled, snarled—and with such volume. And then there She was, the Ocean Herself. You. Could. Not. See. The. End. Of. Her. Gaping, expansive. A behemoth of grey meets periwinkle meets violet meets ash.

I was not expecting this. Not prepared to look beyond what the eye could see. Dumbstruck and overawed, I closed my eyes and stood at the top of that hill, first enveloped in the roar, the utter, crushing, bombastic, cacophony of bazillions on katrillions of gallons of water filling, holding, moving, waving, crashing. And then I was filled with understanding—a sudden knowing. All my stories about God's sadness were tsunamied away with the sound of that

ocean dominating the planet.

Then I opened my eyes.

To behold the infinitude.

Any childhood narcissism I harbored, any sense that I was anything more than an infinitesimal jot on a massive canvas, was cured in me in that moment. This... this... this ocean was a container. This beauty. I could feel in my little body that this giant basin one could not see across could hold all the stories of the human race and the animal kingdom across all of history. It could hold my parents' impending divorce and my own future divorces. It could hold the pain of every rejection I would ever face and the horrific pain of the losses everyone I loved would ever endure. This grandiose gesture of creation was where every burden ever needing to be borne would go to be cleansed and metabolized.

I shall never forget that moment. Never. Because inside that moment is who I would become. Who I am to this day.

I stood on that knoll until I could move again. Then I very tentatively approached—like a peasant approaches royalty—God's Container. Throughout that day, I edged myself on that vast beach closer and closer to the break of the tide until, finally, before sunset, I was brave enough to come to its very edge. My toes butted up against that final moment when the wave is a thin sheen absorbed by the sand. There I stood for as long as I could take the intensity, watching the purples and reds of the sunset make the Ocean, impossibly, even more resplendent.

Whereas the rain often drizzled sadness into me, this Ocean called the sadness OUT of me. This Ocean, and all that might live in its depths, was God's Essence. And one large wave could take me into that Essence. I knew that. But I both wanted to remain there until I was overtaken and to run away from what I discovered that day as a tiny girl standing with my toes touching God—my own depth. My own capacity to encounter boundlessness and to BE boundless.

Even at eight, I knew I could never, never, never go back to who I had been before cresting that hill between the campground and This. THIS. I cried standing there, but this time out of sheer relief to meet That which seemed to know That which lived inside of me. And then, when the sun finally bid the earth farewell, I knew this meeting needed acknowledgement and articulation. I knew without question that words were both required and insufficient for what had just happened to me.

When it was time, I wended my way back to the campground, leaving that roar, for the time being. I dove into the tent and unburied a coloring book from my little duffel of clothes. A blue crayon would serve as the instrument for writing my first poem. I sat—alone—and closed my eyes. The words came—what words I knew how to spell and a few I sounded out. A poem in an ABAB rhyme scheme was set to paper. And only once that two-stanza poem was on the page did I feel my adrenaline return to normal.

This is how God could bear whatever needed to be borne—sadness, beauty, overwhelm, majesty: God created words!

And now I would do the same. For the rest of my life.

## Your Writerly Origin Story

Pull out your journal and write the story of when you first knew you needed to write. It may be that, like me, you found your way into the identity of “writer” at a young age. But, perhaps, instead, you have not thought of yourself as a writer but as a person with a burning story inside. Maya Angelou famously said, “There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside of you.”

I have found that some people come have a sense of the “self as writer,” while others simply carry a story they need to get out of their bodies and onto the page. Whatever brings you to the idea of writing a book, flesh out your origin story as a writer. Describe the moment you knew you needed to write. Where were you? How old were you? What was going on around you? Who else was present? What were the colors and smells and sounds and flavors and feelings of that moment? Write your writerly origin story.

## Unlock Your Story

*Do you feel you're not quite ready to dive into writing a book manuscript, but you believe you have a story in you that needs to find its way to the page?*

*Do you want support developing a writing practice? Would you like feedback and reflection on the **CONTENT** of your writing but are not ready for feedback on the **QUALITY** of your writing? Do you have tender material you need to process and would love support as you do so?*

*If this sounds like you, our Unlock Your Story Program is perfect for you! This is a six-month journey to finding your way into your message and your writing practice. It is a gentle, virtual, guided, prompt-oriented program that will serve you, the writer. Learn more at [thenarrativeproject.net/unlock-your-story/](https://thenarrativeproject.net/unlock-your-story/)*

## The Discouragement

Of course, you know what happened after my declaration that I would become a writer. You know because it likely happened to you too. For me what happened is that I told my parents and grandparents I wanted to be a writer, and there was a resounding, collective, “You can’t make money doing that.”

I didn’t even know what money really was. I only knew something had happened inside of me. I had a dream.

No doubt, you had a similar experience—a warning from someone that writing wasn’t meaningful/worth your time/good/right/lucrative.

But you? In spite of what people told you, you have felt the words trying to seep out of you and do their work in you at the same time. You know something about yourself. You know yourself, on some level, to be a Creator. You sense the power of a singular articulation, of taking what is uniquely inside of you—but also universally inside all of us—and putting it on paper.

And then after you felt the power of this, maybe you announced to everyone that you would become a writer—that you would put words on pages—for all of your life. That you would add your self-expression to the cannon of meaningful images and stories and characters and plotlines.

And then, after your announcement, of course, some of the people in your life said this was a stupid idea. Because it would never make you money. Or because it would be an unsatisfying life. Or because artists are notoriously haunted and give way to drug addictions and suicide. Or maybe because the singular story you have to tell isn’t something other people will want to read.

And so, you wrote secretly? Or you wrote in your journal and in your English class and to your best friend (on ruled notebook pages with looping penmanship, hearts serving as periods?) who thought you were brilliant. And you stood in bookstores and thumbed through writers’ magazines and tried to figure out how someone became an AUTHOR.

Right?

And that is why you are here with me now. The dream to write something significant—and to have your words read by others—though the desire may have gone dormant at times, is bubbling up in you.

### Let it Burn

Again, grab your journal and dump onto the page the story of how you’ve been discouraged or heckled for your writing dreams. Write the details of what people said to you. Write your feelings. Write about the frustrations—the ways in which you have been delayed or waylaid. Do this exercise when there is time to cry, in case you need to take some time to dislodge the feelings from your body.

Leave all of the discouragement on the page. And when you think you're done, give yourself a little think and add to the story of discouragement. Get it all out of you. Let the page hold it for you.

Now tear the pages out of your journal and burn them (be safe!). Let's symbolically discard all of the external sabotaging messages.

## The Encouragement—Knowing Your WHY

Before inviting a writer to join us for our nine-month Get-Your-Book-Done program at The Narrative Project, my coaches and I conduct an interview. Our goal in this interview is not to assess for writing proficiency, per se (writing skills can be taught and revised or edited into a manuscript, after all), but to assess for the YEARNING to write a book. I firmly believe that desire equals calling. I say it all day long to my coaches and the writers in our community. “Desire equals calling.” If you have a longing to write a book—I mean a longing that keeps you up at night from time to time—you are being called on by the Universe to add your story to the collective consciousness in a concrete way. You are being tapped on the shoulder by the Numinous to speak some “truth” into the Human Field of Understanding and Insight. At this stage in my work helping writers get their books done, I can safely say I have interviewed many hundreds of writers about their desire to get their books done and out into the world, and without fail, those who have a driving YEARNING to complete a book are driven, they say, by one of the following urges.

### Identity and Self-Expression

Some people, like me, have a long-standing identity as a writer. One of the most significant things that happened to me after I announced to the world at eight that I would become a writer is that two grown-ups in my life did believe me and mirror back to me my stated identity as a writer. My great-aunt Margaret bought me a journal and gave it to me on my 9th birthday. My Uncle Bruce, only twelve years my senior, took me seriously, as well. He had a dream to become an author too and he did not see my vision for my life as a ridiculous, aberrant idea to be amended or squashed. Instead, he saw it as something to be nourished. Uncle Bruce got me a year-long subscription to The Writer Magazine. It arrived mid-month in my mailbox, and each month I waited for it as eagerly as I'd waited for each Ocean wave to crash onto the shore that fateful day when the mantle landed on my little shoulders.

Of course, the content of the magazine was over my head, though I did read it the best I could, picking up the idea that poetry and fiction and non-fiction were different genres of writing and that there were things called “characters,”

and “plot-lines,” and “settings” in some kinds of books. But, although, I was too young to absorb much of what I read, I did absorb one thing: someone in this world looked at me and SAW that I was a writer.

The identity—as someone who manipulates words, who creates beauty and meaning and story out of words and then puts that beauty out into the world—is the predominant, driving force behind the yearning for many people to get their work out into the world. To be seen and known as a writer is the fuel for their fire.

## Your Life has Given You a Message You Need to Share

As for this next reason people are called to write, let me just say, this is certainly the most common motivation I hear in the interviews I do with writers considering joining The Narrative Project’s Get-Your-Book-Done program.

It is distinctly human to both want to make meaning of disparate events in life and to want to leave a legacy of that meaning-making journey.

Ronna Russel, author of *The Uncomfortable Confessions of a Preacher’s Kid*, was such a writer. Ronna had grown up in a strict, fundamentalist religious family where sexuality was restricted but where there were vast family secrets surrounding sex and sexuality. Punishments for disobedience were handed out harshly. And while lies were among the offenses punished, honesty about one’s true feelings were not really allowed.

Ronna came to me with a lot of words written but with no particular narrative arc in place. She told me, “I want to get this story out there because if I can help women embrace their sexuality and get free from religious oppression, I will feel like my struggle was not for nothing.”

As I said, Ronna is not alone in this longing to offer a gift to others hewn from experienced pain.

As she wrote and revised, the journey from sexual oppression to sexual freedom took shape on the page. By the time she finally published her book, she’d established a small following of other women who had experienced similar religious rules and constrictions who were blown away and encouraged by her story.

So many would-be authors want to make certain that their hard-earned wisdom does not go to the grave with them. A book is eternal.

## I Want To Set The Story Straight

This third reason for putting a story out into the world is understandable and laudable. Some people come to the page because someone else has owned or dominated their story, and they are ready to take their story back. While writers like Ronna may have a message to offer the world right from the beginning of their writing process, others sort out what their story means as they write, ultimately taking a stand against another story that has dominated their personal landscape. Let me give you an example. Jill is a writer in my Next Chapter revisions program as I write this paragraph. She is working with us toward the completion of her book. At first, when she came to Get-Your-Book-Done,

she thought she was going to be recording events from her father's life for posterity. She loved and admired her father and had tried to emulate his integrity through the course of her life.

During her first months with us, Jill did write a great deal about her father and his influence in his local community. But there was another story underneath her admiration of her father that needed to be told.

Jill was born to a well-appointed family who prized community contribution and education. She was set up to be supported in becoming the lawyer she ultimately became. But there were two things about Jill that would throw a monkey wrench into her parents' plans for her. First of all, Jill was born with a cleft palate—meaning she didn't look "perfect." And secondly, it would turn out that Jill is a lesbian.

While Jill's parents were good, kind, thoughtful people, they also had a story about what makes a successful, happy life. An unscarred face and a traditional woman/man marriage were on Jill's parents' roadmap on the path to happiness... but, Jill didn't fit those bills. So underneath the story of what Jill's father had accomplished was another story wanting to be written. It was the story of a woman who defined her own sense of beauty and happiness in a way that did not match the expectations of two very well-meaning, but misguided parents.

Jill is writing the story that only she can tell. She sets the story straight (sorry for the irony there in the phrase) about what a roadmap to happiness actually looks like—or can look like. Jill illustrates what calls many of us to the page: the unsilencing of previously silenced stories.

So many writers (perhaps you, reader of this book) are pushing back against a story that was handed to them by family or culture. And because the original self-definitions handed to you had an audience in the form of family and community (which is why they've been hard to shed), the corrected version of the story also needs an audience, as well.

## Your Why

Regardless of which of these reasons drive you to feel you need to write a book, you probably won't turn to action until you dig a little deeper and discover what would make you put a stake in the ground, commit hours and hours to the writing and revising of that book, pay a coach to help you, and face the daunting task of doing something you have no idea how to do.

You have to ask yourself some hard questions because finding a way to take a stand is going to be central to getting your book done, writer. If you can't take a stand for what you have to say, you won't be able to put it on the page in any kind of compelling manner.

I've expressed my belief that your desire to write your book is your calling to write the book, but that doesn't mean you've made the commitment to put time, money, energy, and the proverbial sweat and tears into the project, does it?



## Finding Your Why

Well, let me ask you a few questions. Grab your journal Write everything that comes to mind answering the following questions.

What do you stand for in this life?

Who are you fighting for?

What matters to you?

What keeps you up at night?

Now, number a page from 1 to 15 and write 15 sentences that start like this: I take a stand for...

Don't skimp on this. Your first responses might be, "I take a stand for my right to take time away from housework to write," but as you dig deeper, you will find that your themes begin to emerge. You might write, "I take a stand for everyone who has been silenced and who needs to find their voice."

Knowing all your levels of "WHY" will help you hold onto your resolve when the hard parts of the writing journey begin to emerge.

## The Inner Saboteur(s)

Make no mistake—once you're clear about what you genuinely want to take a stand for in the writing of your book, you've only got one little, teeny, tiny (not!) thing to do to hold onto that stand. You've got to deal with the Inner Saboteurs.

Now, while knowing what you're taking a stand for is crucial to getting started on your writerly journey, there is another element to taking a stand for the book you have in your heart to write. The biggest struggle in the writing journey is that which comes from within once you've gotten clear about your message.

Here's the deal, dear one... Writers are truth-tellers. We are the ones willing to examine stories, figure out what they mean, and render them on the page for others to read and ponder. Everyone who commits to doing this is going to have some part of the self rise up and scream, "NO!!! That's too dangerous!" And that part of the self is going to do anything in its power to prevent you from writing. It's going to tell you you're a shitty writer. It's going to tell you you have more important things to do. It's going to tell you:

You will screw up your relationships if you write this book.

You will expose your lack of talent if you put this out in the world.

You will show the world once and for all that you are stupid.

You don't have any skill—go get an MFA first.

## Your Saboteurs

Go ahead and make your own list of what you hear in your head when you think about writing your book. Once you know what the voices are saying, what's next?

## Inner Critic Relief

*Start your SIX-PART DEEP-DIVE that will revolutionize your relationship with the critical voices in your head currently sabotaging your intentions and making you feel like a failure! Any thought or emotional energy which creates pain or brokenness is the so-called Inner Critic and these energies significantly decrease our happiness and our creative productivity. There is a way to get out from under a heavy burden of negativity and grief and to activate freedom and flow. Start today at [thenarrativeproject.net/product/inner-critic-relief-on-demand/](https://thenarrativeproject.net/product/inner-critic-relief-on-demand/)*

## Take A Stand

I guarantee you that voice does NOT want you taking a stand for the story you want to tell.

But I am here to tell you something.

Be gentle with the inner saboteur because, those sabotaging voices are trying to protect you from making yourself into a fool and making a mess of your life. BUT... they are doing this because they are unaware of something very important. Here it is (and it's life-shattering news, so pay attention): You are not a child anymore. You are a grown-ass-adult who has been through some hard, hard things to get to where you are. You are a powerful, resilient, resourceful person who can face anything that life throws at you. All of the things your Inner Saboteur is afraid of are manageable. Even if the threats the Saboteur makes did unfold, and I'm not saying they won't (you will very possibly have backlash from what you've written; you may discover you don't know what you are doing; someone could call you stupid), you would handle the situation because you've already been through worse, haven't you?

If you let those sabotaging voices get their way, while they might protect you from mean people, isolation, criticism, and the like, they will also stop you from living into your calling: to write this book.

But how do we deal with those powerful voices in our heads?

In my experience, knowing what you're taking a stand for (see the exercise above) goes a long way, but having absolute clarity about your very specific MESSAGE can really soothe the Inner Saboteurs. These negative, critical parts of the self are managing your safety because they fear exposure. But once they know you are approaching your writing with purpose and clarity, they will often

concede to settle down—at least for the drafting process (sometimes they re-emerge right before publication). Though their methods be rather mean, what these parts want is your well-being. When they know that you are transforming pain into personal power, they will let up on their efforts because they will start to trust that you can handle what comes your way.

### **What is Your Message?**

If I gave you an audience of a thousand people and seventeen or eighteen minutes (such as in a TED talk) to offer your hard-earned wisdom to them, so that they would walk away from your time together with a chance to NOT have to learn life's lessons the hard way, what three bits of wisdom would you give them?

Take your time articulating these three pieces of wisdom clearly in your journal. These lessons are likely closely connected to the themes in the book you are writing or want to write. These bits of wisdom are your message. Now write a letter to your Inner Saboteur, explaining why getting this message out into the world is important to you and to those who will read your book.

### **The Dream Comes True**

One day, you'll get your book done and out into the world.

For me, the dream to write a book never went dormant—even when I did have to eventually face the question of how to actually make money. The older I got and the more experiences I put under my belt, the more oceans I encountered, and, therefore, the more I had to say. The words wanted to pour out of me. Eventually I chose English and theater as my majors in college and became a high school English teacher. I wrote papers and curriculum and taught my teenage students how to write essays and short stories, but still, privately I wrote creative pieces that mostly didn't see the light of day. Of course, when there was opportunity, I published here and there. I wrote plays for my students to perform and short stories for my friends to read. I formed critique groups, took writing classes, and found a writing-intensive graduate program when I was ready to get my master's degree as a family therapist. That program required me to write a hundred-page personal epistemology, so at least there my craving to write was being satisfied. I even wrote "shitty first drafts" of two novels during National Novel Writing Month a couple of years in a row after grad school.

In short, I continued to organize my identity around being a writer and wanted more than anything in life to write—and complete—and publish a whole

book, but I could not figure out how to do it. I couldn't discern how to formulate a reliable narrative structure, create a plot that would convey a book-length storyline, and craft a habit that would carry me through draft after draft. Simply put, although arguably I had always been a WRITER, I didn't know how to turn myself into an AUTHOR.

Then, I found myself turning thirty-five. I'd been through a divorce and had recently met a new man I liked. I had that master's degree and a private practice that supported me. I had a home. I had a dog. I'd even traveled a fair bit and had stood at the shores of most of the world's oceans... still all without my book.

What led me to writing and completing my first book was surprising. It was, in fact, the Marathon. I capitalize the word because next to the Ocean, the Marathon has been the biggest change-agent in my life.

I'd been a runner from about age 27. Three miles here. Four miles there. I started running solely to supplement going to the gym—to get outside in the summers. But to challenge myself, I decided I wanted to train for a half marathon (13.1 miles/21.1 kilometers). Why not? I was fit enough and enjoyed my forays into running. I learned all about what it took to run long distances: how to slowly increase mileage, how to hydrate and fuel the body. I thought I would be fine. So, I signed up and I trained. I put in the work, and I did complete that half marathon over one Thanksgiving weekend in Seattle.

But in Seattle, November can be rainy. I stupidly wore cotton from head to toe—cotton sweatshirt, sweatpants, socks (which, if you're not a runner, you may not know: don't do this—cotton holds water and makes you chafe). My misery by the time I finished the race was profound, and I promised myself I would NEVER run a full marathon. To double the wretchedness of that race was unthinkable.

But some years later, the new man in my life challenged me to train for a full marathon and promised we would sign up for a race in Europe so we could go on an international adventure. Silly with love and ambition, I abandoned my earlier vow and agreed to do it. We trained together, and I ran my first marathon in Prague.

That race—not unlike my standing at the Ocean's edge—turned me inside out. At mile seventeen, I felt I might collapse. After mile upon mile of boom, boom, boom on my legs and holding myself upright in spite of jet lag, I was empty. The pain in my thighs pulsed and burned. If I'd been a waitress on my feet for the number of hours I'd been running and told I couldn't take a break, I would have walked off the job. I was completely spent—had never felt any exhaustion that rivaled that “mile seventeen” weariness. “I can't go any farther,” I said to my companion. But there was nowhere to go. I was in the outskirts of an ancient, foreign city, I was with thousands of other runners, who seemed, unaccountably, to be fine. And there were more than nine miles before the finish line would appear. There was nothing to do but reach inside of me and see if I could find a reserve to finish that darn race.

Turns out, inside of me, there was, indeed, a reserve to finish my first marathon. I had to turn my attention deeply inward and talk to myself every step of those last miles, had to make a new decision with every SINGLE stride that the pain in my quadriceps was less relevant than pushing my foot off the pavement and landing the next footfall.

When I finally crossed the finish line, although I was arguably numb in some respects, I was also very, very alive. Not alive like, “Oh, wow, I’m still breathing. That’s cool. Thank God.” NO. I was alive like the kind of alive I was when I was eight and stood with my toes at the edge of the Ocean with the sunset supervising my new awakening passion to become a writer. That’s the kind of alive I was. I was alive like, “Holy shit I am MORE than I ever imagined I could be.” A vortex of self-knowledge had opened up, and I knew I had to explore what was in there.

And how else? With words.

I came home and started writing about running—with a vengeance. I was hooked on running long distances. I was mesmerized, horrified, confused, and curious about what had happened to me in that race. How does a woman who has been steeped in sadness and a sense of not-enoughness from very early in her life, who is demoralized by divorce and failure to become what she hoped to become (a writer), figure out she’s a badass who is resilient enough to pull anything off she sets her mind to? She runs a fucking marathon, that’s how. And then she writes about it.

I started blogging about running.

I started journaling about running.

I started writing emails about running.

I started writing race reports for my local running club.

Then I ran another marathon. And then another. And another.

And I kept writing about what was changing inside of me.

I took a year-long writing class with the brilliant author Laura Kalpakian and declared I was going to run a marathon on every continent—that I was going to run the whole world, pen in hand.

And as I blogged, especially, and friends commented on my race reports and reflections, I saw there was a universal truth to explore in my own experience of self-discovery. I was putting words to something other people resonated with—runners or not. I began to understand that I myself was the vehicle for the exploration of the themes of strength and restoration and belief in self. I figured out my stand and my message!

I hired a writing coach who taught me about the publishing industry and guided me through a book proposal.

And I organized my whole life—work, family, household tasks—around running and writing a book about running.

## Dream That Dream!

Imagining you have an audience is a wonderful way to feel your way into your content and your motivation to get your writing done. Grab that journal. Open to a blank page. What is the one thing you really can't stop thinking, talking, and writing about? Write the draft of a blog post about this topic. Tell a story. Craft the moral of that story. What questions would you ask your readers? What do you want your readers to take-away from this post? What action steps do you hope they will take after reading it?

Now, consider posting (on your blog or on social media—or even sending this out by email to a few people you think might be interested). Even if you already engage in blogging or have a robust social media presence, do this exercise AS IF you are on your trajectory to become a published author with a faithful following.

## The Book

A few years after that first race in Prague, I swung open the glass doors of my local bookstore, stepped inside and let the smell of new books hit me. The pyramidal display of colorful, just-released hardbacks tickled my curiosity—though I wouldn't stop to browse through them right now. Not today. Village Books in Bellingham, Washington—one of the best places in the world—was about to make my most deeply held dream come true. I was about to see my book—the book I had sold on proposal to the publisher some fifteen months earlier—on the shelf. A real bookstore shelf.

I started for the memoir section, keeping my gaze down so I wouldn't catch the eye of anyone I might know—not the staff, not a friend. This was a sacred, personal moment for me. I didn't want to share. I didn't want anyone interrupting it with greetings or congratulations—not yet. Not until I knew that my dream had become a reality. I rounded the corner, glanced down the alphabetical listings by author, and saw: there on the shelf, under "O" for Ostman, was *Second Wind*! And it was on display! The staff had placed my book facing outward, the beautiful golden cover with the image of my running shoes on top of an animated globe was glowing to catch the eye of potential readers. Beneath it the staff had put a small tag: local author.

Local AUTHOR.

Not "teacher." Not "family therapist." But AUTHOR!

I stood in that aisle of the bookstore and started to cry. And then I folded myself onto the floor next to the display, grabbed one of my books and held it close to my heart. At forty-three, I was seeing the fruition of the dream that had been sparked in me when I'd stood at the Ocean's edge at eight years old. I was

an author... of a book! It might sound dramatic, but I thought, *If I die tomorrow, I can be okay with that*. I could be okay because I knew readers would find my book, read it, and be touched by it. Because you know as well as I do, dear writer, that what is brewing inside of you must find its way onto that page, yes, but you won't be quite satisfied until someone READS it.

## Imagine

Write about the moment you see your book in physical form for the first time. Come on, Writer, use your imagination! Does it happen for you like it did for me in a bookstore aisle? Or does it happen in some other setting. Play it out on the page! Use your senses. Give it scenic details. Make it real.

## Writing Your Book Will Change Your Life

Finally, dear Writer, why is it so damned important for us as writers to be published? I mean, why wasn't it enough for me to write my little ABAB poem and leave it in the back of the coloring book? Why did I have to show it to all the adults in my life, most of whom disparaged my dream?

Let me tell you a tale of two storytellers. I want you to understand why I am on a mission to help you get your book completed and OUT INTO THE WORLD.

As I've indicated, besides coaching writers, my other job for the past 20 years has been as a psychotherapist. In that work I've listened to people tell thousands (I'm not exaggerating) of stories in the privacy of the counseling room. One therapy client whom I saw for a decade circled through our weekly sessions with nearly the same anxiety in every meeting. Jim believed he didn't matter. He believed he was a worthless piece of shit, and nothing I said could pry that story away from him. He had grown up in a home where his parents were preoccupied to the point of abandoning him. His father traveled for work and was rarely home, and his mother spent all of her time caring for his younger sister, who was often quite sick with a rare and chronic illness.

Every single week, he would recount personal stories to me about how his wife and his sons had disenfranchised him somehow and bemoaned his loss of personal power, but when I encouraged him to have boundaries, he countered me. Dodged me. Argued vehemently on behalf of his story of worthlessness. He COULD NOT jiggle loose.

I did my best. I gave him books to read, offered family therapy, gave him homework, and reasoned heartily against his "I'm a piece of shit" narrative. But he was very, very committed to it. There was to be no narrative arc—no hero's journey where the main character might find his elixir and arrive back home

victorious.

I was often frustrated in my work with Jim because he was an accomplished man. He was kind and creative and funny. But nothing I could do would help him see in himself what I—and others—could see in him.

When a therapy client is determined to tell the same story over and over, I have scant chance of helping them shift the conclusions they've come to believe about themselves, life, or other people.

But writers?

When you WRITE your story, with the idea that someone else may one day read it (whether you ultimately take it to publication or not), you simply cannot stay in that endless rut of repeatedly making the same meaning. When a writer puts a story down on the page, of necessity, you bring to it an intentional focus, a new consciousness. You, the writer, MUST create an arc—a beginning, middle, and end. Writers have to grab the free-floating narratives muddling up their brains and wrestle those narratives into a form that describes the change in consciousness of the main character. That is the power of the page. For the reader, yes, but for the writer too. This wrestling of the narrative doesn't happen in one draft, of course. You, like my therapy client, do have to go back over the story many times, but you are always reviewing it with an eye for the next stage of the character's journey.

Because of your desire to have your story be read by others, you want to free it from your mind and put it on the page to figure out if and how it holds together, revise it until it does, and then hand it over to someone else to interact with it in the form of a book. And this desire to have your words go out into the world as a book will require that that you heed the call to hover above the story and see both the forest AND the trees. That is to say, you will need to be able to see the story from the reader's perspective and from your own perspective as the author at the same time. And if you have this desire to get your story out into the world, let me tell you something astonishing: You must loosen your grip on the initial version of the story and see deeply, see clearly, see wholly what your STORY ITSELF wants to convey. You have to let the story become what the story must become for the sake of the person who will one day hold the book in her hand. Especially if you are writing about your own life or about events that run parallel to your life (as in fiction informed by real events), you'll need to realize that although life does not happen in a narrative arc, a book needs to! What occurred in your life by happenstance and in willy nilly fashion, leading you to make, perhaps, troubling conclusions about yourself or the world, must become orderly, must take form in a way that will be consumable by a reader.

So... story #2:

Sean Dwyer was a writing student in The Narrative Project who embodied both of the first two listed motivations to write a book. First of all, he was a lifelong writer who absolutely carried that definition inside of himself as an identity. But he also had a story stuck in his body that he HAD to write.



When Sean first jumped into my Get-Your-Book-Done program, we didn't even know if he could write anymore. Sean had been rear-ended in his car more than a year before he joined us and had lost a great deal of cognitive and verbal dexterity due to a traumatic brain injury. He needed to write about his accident and the impact of injury on his brain because he was plagued by grief over the changes in his life and he needed to make sense of what had happened to him.

Both Sean and I understood that he was likely not going to be able to keep up with the rest of his cohort in terms of generating word-count each week. We also knew that his capacity to look at a computer screen for long periods was very limited. But Sean was determined to join my program because worse than the brain injury was the loss of his sense of writerly identity. Previously an active man who could mentally keep up with any conversation, who could drive without fear of what was coming at him from behind, who could speak several languages fluently, who could manage work and home life and creativity all at one time, he found he was a fraction of his former self. And this bothered him—to put it mildly.

Sean wanted two specific things from his efforts to finish his book about the accident and its aftermath, even if he couldn't get it to publishable quality. His first goal was personal, he wanted to reclaim his identity as a writer and to make peace with the new iteration of himself that he was clearly going to have to accept. This was a hard task, given all of his new limitations and the replay of the accident that was rifling through his memory all day and all night. After a year of "healing," he was still very impaired and there was no promise he would return to his former capacities. Still, he did not want to spend the rest of his life pining away for who he used to be. He wanted to embrace, learn to love, and even champion what he began to call "Sean 2.0." He knew that turning himself into a character in his own story, which would require him to take that character on some kind of transformational journey, would force him to grow in his acceptance of what had become of his former self. In other words, he needed to get that story out his body and put it on the page where it could be manipulated and sculpted.

The second thing Sean wanted from writing a book about his traumatic brain injury was more inclusive. The very idea of writing a book that could help others who were struggling with similar injuries gave Sean a sense of purpose that rivaled the despair he felt over his own losses.

Sean's first motivation—his belief in the power of influencing meaning for himself by turning himself on the page into the character—is one of the most common outcomes for people who write their stories.

The act of writing and re-writing simply DOES carry with it a substantially different process/power than telling and re-telling a story in therapy. The reason for this is the IDEA of the audience. Should you finish the book and get it out into the world, you will be in conversation with (possibly) a large number of people. And part of the reason for this power is the possibility for revisions—for crafting

and re-crafting sentences, chapters, and narrative arc until one has achieved the mastery of the theme—or message—one wants to achieve. It stands to reason then, that in achieving some kind of meaning-making through the writing of a book, you free the story that has been haunting you and, therefore, you potentially free your very self.

You change YOU. And the idea of the audience is key to creating that transformation.

## **But Do You Deserve this Transformation?**

It is my firm belief that you and I were put on this planet to live and understand and tell stories—both factual and fictional. You see, story is the only thing that liberates human beings from their self-imposed and other-imposed shackles. And the reason story is the only thing that can liberate us is because story is actually the very thing that imposes shackles in the first place. If someone has a story, for example, that some people are valuable and other people are disposable, then that belief will be operationalized in the lived experience of the powerful people who impose such a story, and also for the people on whom the story is imposed. A story has been enacted. There are very real consequences to the stories we tell.

Believe it or not, everyone is inclined to unpack unhelpful narratives, uncover power differentials in such narratives, challenge those narratives' legitimacy, and imagine a world with a new narrative in place.

But the people I work with, that I have the privilege of supporting in The Narrative Project, after participating in our community, know what I want you to know, dear writer. That oppressive, unhelpful, limiting stories which have been spun must be unspun and unraveled. They then have to be re-spun and re-raveled in order to set us free—from guilt, from loneliness, from definitions pressed on us by others—from whatever does not serve.

Dear reader, if you have a story to tell, for goodness' sake, write the book.

If you are still here with me, you have a deep longing to say something, to put something together that will mean something to you and to your future readers. So here is what I have to say: Write the book.

## **In Conclusion: You Can Do It Too**

Maybe like me back in the day, you too have been to a dozen writers' conferences, become inspired, and have done little to nothing with that inspiration. Maybe you've bought and read books about the craft of writing and ended up feeling discouraged that you haven't followed through on your dream.

Or maybe you've quietly mulled over the story you want to write in your mind without ever telling anyone about it, lest either speaking it out loud jinxes you or you become discouraged by others' reactions. I too flailed for decades. But that day in Village Books, I held in my hand the evidence that I'd figured out—finally—how to complete a book, how to get it out of my head, onto a page, and

out into the world! That eight-year-old girl was a writer, but I was an author!

And one day YOU will be an author, too.

You CAN do this, and I am happy—no, I'm privileged—to stand beside you right now. No matter how many times you've opened your laptop only to close it in frustration... No matter how many drafts you have (or haven't) written...

No matter how many barriers you face—internal or external—in getting your book into the world, I've got your back!

### ***Get Your Book Done!***

*Like many of us who KNOW we have lived through an experience that simply must be written, you've probably gotten stuck somewhere along the writing path. Most of us who long to write our books do a lot of PAINFUL stopping and starting.*

*Are you ready to get your book done?*

*The Narrative Project 9-month Get Your Book Done! program will give you EVERYTHING YOU NEED to complete the first draft of your memoir, and prepare you for developmental edits.*

*Don't wait another day! Take a stand for your story, take a stand for your book, take a stand for yourself.*

*Info and application at [thenarrativeproject.net/the-program/](http://thenarrativeproject.net/the-program/)*

“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story within you.”

—Maya Angelou