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FEATURE

The Story You Need to Tell: A Conversation with Sandra Marinella

Contributed by Elaine Brooks, MA, NC-BC, PTR, CAPF

Sandra Marinella, MA and MEd, is an award-winning writing teacher and author from Chandler, Arizona. She has taught thousands of students and presented hundreds of writing workshops. Her articles have appeared in *The English Journal*, *Seventeen*, *Well Being Journal*, *Psychology Today*, and more. When Sandra faced breast cancer, she turned to personal writing to help with this difficult journey. The experience inspired her to teach “writing to heal and transform” to cancer patients and veterans. As she watched storytelling, poetry, and personal writing help others transform their lives, she wrote *The Story You Need to Tell: Writing to Heal from Trauma, Illness, or Loss*, which was published in 2017. Currently she teaches at Changing Hands Bookstore, a community hub in Phoenix, and at Mayo Clinic in Phoenix, where a qualitative project has established the effectiveness of her writing methods to reduce stress, improve mood, and increase our well-being. Her pioneering work shows us the power of using stories, poems, and personal writing to find our way out of darkness toward resilience and renewal. Sandra will be NAPT’s Keynote Speaker at the 2020 conference in Albuquerque to discuss her work and the results of the study. In advance of the gathering she spoke with NAPTer Elaine Brooks, and their conversation is published here.



Sandra Marinella

Elaine Brooks: How did you come to write *The Story You Need to Tell*?

Sandra Marinella: I was an English teacher who was passionate about poetry, stories, and writing. For years I watched in my classrooms as students discovered the power of poems and stories in their lives. While literature enriched their lives, writing about it helped them to grow as well as to heal when they faced psychological and physical illnesses. For years I wrote in my journals about these experiences. When I learned I had breast cancer in 2012, I decided to research and teach “writing to heal” to cancer patients and veterans. The work was transformative for me as well as for many of the participants. This experience inspired me to write *The Story You Need to Tell—Writing to Heal from Trauma, Illness, or Loss*,

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a transformative guide to personal storytelling. I am grateful it has been well received and that the profits can support cancer research.

EB: The first chapter is titled “Waving, Not Drowning.” You were influenced by a poem written by Stevie Smith. How did this poem influence you?

SM: Poems change us—as I learned with this one. Immediately after my cancer diagnosis, I began struggling with how to manage this disease. At one of my biopsies, I realized that death was one of the possible outcomes for my diagnosis and this thought brought to mind a poem by Stevie Smith, “Not Waving but Drowning.” It captures the shocking misfortune of a man who is swimming and starts to drown. He signals to those on onshore that he is going under, but they think he is waving and ignore him. Tragically, he dies. It ends with the dead man declaring that he was further out than they realized “and not waving but drowning.”

Those words from this beautiful poem gave me pause. When you learn you have cancer, you feel you are further out, too. I couldn’t help but ask—*am I drowning?* As I waited for the doctor to arrive for my biopsy that morning, and she was quite late, I began to play with the poem’s metaphor. I had helped students edit their writing for years. Suddenly I understood: I could edit my own story. My life. So I changed the poem’s title to “Waving, Not Drowning.” From that moment I allowed this new metaphor to take hold of me and frame my cancer journey in a positive way.

EB: How did your cancer diagnosis change you? How has your work with cancer patients and veterans changed you?

SM: Working with cancer patients and veterans has made me understand what a precious gift life is and that we need to live it fully and in the moment. I have worked with cancer patients who were dying but who were “healed” in the sense that they were living in the moment and finding gratitude in all they did. They inspired me to live more fully.

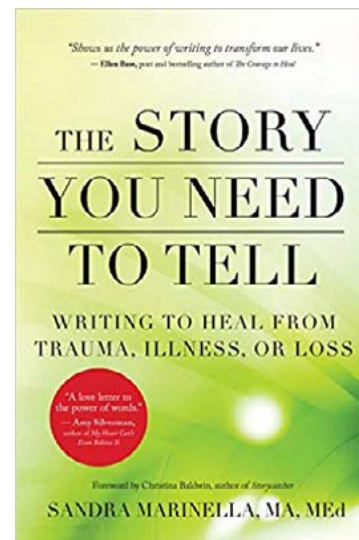
My own cancer has given me new meaning and greater well-being. Now I work with cancer patients and community writers and both audiences are writing not simply to heal but to find greater well-being and meaning. I am grateful to do this work, and I know poetry therapists understand the beauty found in helping others explore powerful poems and personal writing.

EB: There are many touching stories in the book. Is there one that you would like to share here?

SM: The first story that was transformative for me was the story of veteran Barbara Lee. She participated in the weekly writing group at the VA Hospital in Phoenix where all the participants suffered from PTSD. Each week five or more writers would gather in our writing group, and we would read a poem, write, and share our writing. Initially Barbara frightened me. She was an intense poet who always seemed enraged as she entered the room and slammed down her poems. When I started working with her, her poems mirrored her anger about racial or political injustice.

After working with her for several months something surprising happened: Barbara began a new series of poems. Personal poems. Metaphorical poems. The first one I remember was called “Emotional Autopsy,” and the day she read it her tone and her presence changed. Softened. The poem described a woman who had been beaten, raped, bloodied, and left for dead. Her reading stunned our group into silence. When someone asked if this was Barbara’s personal story, she nodded.

I began meeting with Barbara before class and helping her write this new series of poems. One was



called “Wasted Potential.” She wrote about an avocado that had been healthy and ripe but had fallen to the ground, withered, and shrunken into nothingness. This was a disturbing metaphor for Barbara—and there were many others. While this process took months, Barbara slowly released her painful and shocking story of being assaulted and feeling worthless.

Then her poems took another turn and she began to release upbeat glimpses of a new Barbara—what could be understood as her posttraumatic growth. She wrote about painting and equine therapy and sewing. She wrote about her new and lovely life. Here is a poem that shows her transformation before she left our group to focus on her writing and her art.

The Measure of a Woman

I want to be a tailor, skillfully draping, tucking and pinning
the fabric of my being
On the large busted mannequin standing in the corner.
Organza, silk, cotton and wool slip through my fingers.
Faded by time, darted and pleated,
contoured faithfully to the shape of my body.
The measure of a woman is not in the curve of a breast
or line of a thing.
The true measure of a woman is her ability to take up
space in the universe.
To stretch and reach for that which allows others
to be comfortable in her presence.
An abstract construct infuses the mannequin.
No longer content to be an IT.
I emerge from the shadows.

©Barbara Lee, used with permission of the author

EB: Do you have favorite poems that you like to use in your groups? Favorite writing prompts?

SM: I am an advocate of poetry therapy and narrative therapy. Because a poem is a lovely way to frame a story, I always share them in my writing workshops. A few of my favorites that seem to knock-it-out-of-the-park every time I teach are “The Journey” by Mary Oliver, “Kindness” by Naomi Shihab Nye, “The Thing Is” by Ellen Bass, “Fishing with my Father” by Perie Longo, and “Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou. With their beauty

and insights, these poems have disarmed many of my students—even affirmed poetry haters!

When I use these powerful poems, my stand-by prompt is to simply ask readers what words, phrases, or lines capture their attention and why. What is the message they find in this poem? How does it connect to their life?

EB: You identify five stages of writing to heal and change. Would you say more about this?

SM: When I interviewed poet Ellen Bass for the book, I described to her “the five stages of writing to heal” that seemed to keep surfacing in my work. “*That*,” she said emphatically. “I am interested in *that*. Write those stages down and share them. It will help others understand the process of writing to heal.”

I did write them down, and I am thankful for this pattern. While it should not be seen as a locked-in, perfect sequence, it is a process that helps us understand how to integrate writing as a healing and growth tool in our work as teachers and poetry therapists. These stages generally follow this order when we have a personal story that shatters:

- We **experience pain or grief** and need time and space to absorb and accept the difficult experience. (Often it is best not to write during this stage.)
- Eventually we **break our silence** and share this story with someone we trust, such as a counselor, or our writing.
- Then we begin the slow process of **accepting and piecing together** this story and working to understand it, place a safe framework around it, and see the problem as outside that framework.
- This leads to **finding new meaning** in this story and fitting it back into our lives.
- Finally, we **complete the rewriting of this new story** and have renewed energy to move forward, embracing our resilience, creativity, and well-being. (This is often referred to as the posttraumatic growth phase.)

EB: You talk about the power of reinterpreting your story. What does this mean to you and how do you guide people in this process?

SM: This is the most important stage in narrative therapy or writing to heal and grow. When we share our stories in counseling or in our personal writing, the goal is to begin to make sense of our broken stories and piece together better stories to guide and understand our life. Barbara Lee is a wonderful model of how this works. She was horrified by her rape and had carried the painful story of it buried within her for a couple of decades. Once she shared this story, she was able to move this experience from the emotional grip it held on her to a logical place in her brain where she could manage it, reinterpret it, and begin the process of rewriting how she would view herself—as an artist, gifted poet, and a good friend and person.

To guide writers forward in this process I ask Socratic questions, and I work to listen to their story, share poems, provide meaningful writing prompts, and work to be fully present with them as they share their writing or story. It is challenging, rewarding, and *wonderful* work.

EB: The Mayo Clinic collected qualitative data from the monthly workshops you conducted for two years. What would you like to share about the results?

SM: I was thrilled with the results and will talk more about this at the conference. Four outcomes were evaluated: stress, pain, mood, and well-being. Participants reported that the *Writing for Healing* workshops were beneficial in all areas with the greatest benefits noted in well-being and mood. What surprised me the most was that 68.7% of participants reported the outcome on their level of pain to be either very or somewhat beneficial. These results were collected from 199 people attending 23 sessions using *The Story You Need to Tell* as a guide to our writing. Currently at Mayo we are running six-week “writing to heal and transform” classes with the goal of refining our findings.

EB: You are continuing to offer writing workshops at Mayo Clinic and in your community. What else is in your future?

SM: At the heart of what I do now is the discovery and the sharing of words that can heal and transform us. As you said, I will continue to teach about it, but now I often speak at conferences to fellow word lovers—such as our wonderful NAPT tribe who will gather in Albuquerque for the conference. While speaking and teaching are integral to my work, I have locked in time this year to finish a companion workbook for *The Story You Need to Tell*, and to make headway on an initial draft of my next book that will be centered around the neuroscience that helps us make sense of our stories and lives. It is wonderful work—as all NAPT folks know!

EB: Sandi, it has been a joy to discuss your work with you. You have inspired me and I know that we will all benefit from hearing more about your work at the conference. Thank you!

For more information about Sandra and her work, visit www.storyyoutell.com.

SEEKING WRITING PROMPTS

The “Poems as Process” column of *The Museletter* takes poems from the “American Life in Poetry” series, adding writing prompts (written by NAPT members) that promote writing for personal growth and healing.

Would you like to contribute writing prompts for recently posted poems?

Email naptpublications@yahoo.com.