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The Women's Wrioting Group—Nurturing the Heart of Primary Care

Elizabeth T. Toll, MD; Selby M. Conrad, PhD

As a primary care physician interested in the interface of medicine and creativity (E.T.T.) and a former art therapist-turned-psychologist (S.M.C.), we had wondered if a patient group focused on writing could encourage the creative reflection we've found so valuable in our own lives.

We identified several women we thought might be good candidates, all longtime patients we'd worked with and cared for in the combined internal medicine-pediatrics primary care residency clinic where we practice. All have forged



Supplemental content

deep family and community bonds over decades living in their urban neighborhoods around the clinic. All have been touched by personal and family challenges related to human relationships, school, work, physical and mental health, substance use, violence, loss, and resilience. Several have relatives in 1, 2, 3, and even 4 generations who have also been our patients.

We invited 5 to a monthly hour-long group visit focused on writing and held over a healthy, home-cooked lunch. All women showed up for the inaugural meeting, and 3 ultimately formed the group. We watched for additional patients and over time asked 3 others; one became a loyal fourth participant.

At the first meeting we discussed our mutual goals and decided the women would select a theme, do some writing at home, and then speak about the experience at their next meeting. They could share their work with one another or keep it private. We would schedule, bill, and document the meetings in our electronic health record as group therapy visits. Our front desk booked their next month's appointments as the "Women's Wrioting Group."

The unusual spelling proved prescient. Over time, the women discovered that writing and speaking about their chosen prompts offered new ways to understand, accept, and internalize important events, memories, and emotions and support one another in doing the same. The process helped them revisit turbulent experiences and sometimes to right them. Writing led to "rioting," and so they remained the Women's Wrioting Group.

We brought a notebook to the first meeting to keep track of scheduling and potential prompts. It soon became a repository for the remarkable comments emerging from the group, where we noted the "author's" initials but did not indicate if she had made the remark in writing or conversation. "Wrioters" read their work aloud as they chose to; we did not circulate, correct, or personally review it. The writing was for exploration and understanding.

The first theme, "The school without walls," generated a lively discussion about the diverse ways people learn and the

difficulty of helping children avoid one's own painful life lessons. The women selected the prompt "Then and now" for their next meeting, leading to "What we learned, what we were taught." "Family is a big problem" followed. "We're going to have to be on time all set up for this one," they joked. "There's a lot to write and say about that subject!"

Indeed there was. "Don't let them rent space in your head," advised one Wrioter, recalling negative influences in her family.

"The apple does not fall far from the tree," observed another, "but it can roll."

"I wouldn't want to repeat most of what I learned, but it belongs to me."

"Church has been one of my teachers from the earliest days," stated one woman, describing how her faith had offered a reliable source of guidance and strength when these supports were missing in her own family.

The next month's prompt emerged organically from our discussions. The family theme led to "Where I get my strength." As the Wrioters related positive and negative forces that had shaped them, their writing and conversation revealed many memorable lessons arising from their closest relationships. They chose "The blindness of love" for the following meeting's prompt, generating observations such as "Fake love is blind love." One woman interpreted blind love as the experience of being blindsided by both romantic and family love.

The Wrioters identified deeply as mothers. Their shared experience as single parents permeated the group, leading to themes such as "When mothers are fathers." They wrote and spoke about why men walk or are pulled away from the raising of children in urban neighborhoods and recounted poignant, painful stories about racism, the school-to-prison pipeline, and fatherless children. One woman had tried to fill this gap for her son by striving to serve as both mother and father, treating him "the way I thought a man should treat his son." Every year he honors her efforts with a Father's Day card.

"How about 'Scared for my son' for next month's prompt?" suggested a Wrioter.

"Strong Black women need to play many roles—Grandma, Mama, Daddy," noted another.

In order to stay strong, "You've got to do you first," remarked a third.

The Wrioters said it felt special to have a notebook and pen, something to say, and an audience to listen. Several had used writing as an outlet in the past. Being part of a group enriched the experience:

"The more I wrote, the happier I got."

"It's amazing what writing it down can do."

"I'm trying to pull back my tongue [in my family]. That's where the writing comes out."

“It’s like you have a feeling within like a balloon filling up, but you don’t have any pins in there to pop it. I can [write] whatever I want, and it’s out. I call that churching—when you relieve what’s in your chest.”

Other subjects arose spontaneously in discussions about the writing and reflections about the prompts. Eating lunch together generated talk of favorite dishes and family traditions and created an informal setting to speak about modifying recipes to make them healthier. We commiserated about the difficulties of following nutritional guidelines for diabetes and weight reduction on tight budgets with limited access to fresh foods. When one young Wrighter brought her 6-month-old to a meeting, she provided an unexpected hour to observe her natural connection to the infant and offer positive feedback about her mothering skills. At other meetings we helped Wrighters weather illness, surgery, and the death of loved ones.

As leaders of a therapeutic group, we kept the focus on our patients, although the Wrighters occasionally speculated about how our lives differed from theirs. We listened. After a particularly painful conversation, the women chose “The life and death of family” for the following month. We suggested the format of 55-word stories.^{1,2} They were intrigued to try expressing complex experiences in a few words.

At the next meeting the women shared and spoke about their work. One related the story of an uncle killed in a nightclub and another relative beaten by police in an ambulance. A Wrighter observed sadly that her family comes “all together for death, but we are apart in life.” Then someone asked if I (E.T.T.) had written my own brief story, unexpectedly, as I had not typically been writing about their prompts and had never shared my work. I replied that I’d been thinking about this theme myself and in fact had written a 55-word story:

Last month we chose this prompt for you, but then it became mine, too. My father, 93, grew weaker and weaker, then took his final breath, his clear mind and strong will to live proving no match for Death. A great hole has opened in my heart as I grieve this second and last parent.

As I began to read, and the Wrighters realized I had lost my father since our last meeting, they spontaneously rose up as a single force, surrounding me with warmth, hugs, and a genuine compassion I have rarely experienced. Tears flowed. In an instant, they had tapped into their own lifelong experiences with loss to offer comfort, a powerful reminder that true healing travels in more than one direction.

In all, we met about 20 times over 4 years, our initial plan for monthly meetings disrupted by patients finding work, competing commitments, a protracted maternity leave, and the pandemic. However, whenever the Wrighters appeared for routine visits they would invariably urge us to schedule the next group visit. In spring 2021, after we were all fully vaccinated

for COVID-19, and with the ultimata of one of us taking another position (S.M.C.) and the other retiring from primary care (E.T.T.), we booked a final meeting. The patients spoke about the enjoyment and value of the group. “This has been one of the best experiences of my life,” stated one Wrighter.

“Can we figure out a way to have a reunion at least once a year in the future?” asked another.

One of us (S.M.C.) created a blackout poem (a form often used in expressive arts groups) using the Wrighters’ printed words and rising-sun imagery created with an ink pen to represent the resilience we had witnessed over our years working together (eFigure in the [Supplement](#)). We shared it with the group at the final session as a summary of their words and our experiences, with the aim of facilitating our collective termination process.

The Women’s Wrighting Group, like our primary care work with urban patients, yielded many lessons about the human condition. Repeated encounters with love, loss, pain, confusion, faith, and redemption have given the Wrighters a profound and nuanced understanding of the toughest parts of life, evident in their writing and conversation. To quote one: “The past is where you learn your lessons; the future is where you apply [them]. Don’t get stuck in the middle.” The great mystery is why these powerful women have used their struggles to foster kindness, compassion, wisdom, and humor instead of bitterness, spite, and negativity. Might it be connected to their ability to feel and reflect, also manifest in their interest in writing?

We often wonder how to find and nurture the heart of primary care in our changing medical world. This small group of women Wrighters offered an inspiring reminder of the short distance between pain and compassion. If we create time and space to stop and listen, our patients and their stories have much to teach us and may even offer a bit of healing.

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Additional Contributions: For our Wrighters, with deep appreciation for generously sharing these and many other stories.

Additional Information: The quotations in this essay were drawn from the facilitators’ notebook and either came from participants’ writing or comments they made during the group conversation. All gave us permission to share their words through this essay and image.

1. Scheetz A, Fry ME. The stories. *JAMA*. 2000;283(15):1934. doi:10.1001/jama.283.15.1934

2. Fogarty CT. Fifty-five word stories: “small jewels” for personal reflection and teaching. *Fam Med*. 2010;42(6):400-402.