

# RIGHT NOW! COACH

*Where maybe someday becomes right now.*

## Write Now for Health

by Rochelle Melander

"Finding meaning does not require us to live differently; it requires us to see our lives differently."

—Rachel Naomi Remen

I often tell my friends, "Life sucks and then you write a book about it." At least I do. Writing helps me make meaning out of misery. According to social psychologist James Pennebaker, writing about life's difficult events can help people heal from trauma. Pennebaker asked his subjects to write for fifteen minutes a day on four consecutive days. Half of the group members wrote about a difficult or traumatic event in their lives. The other half of the group, the control group, was asked to write about their day or to describe their living environment. A year later, Pennebaker examined the subject's medical records. The people who wrote about their difficult experiences were healthier than the others. What made the difference? According to Pennebaker, it was the meaning making that mattered. The people who showed increased insight into their difficult situation during the four days stayed healthier than those who simply wrote about their feelings or the color of their carpet.

When we make sense of our lives—especially the suffering—we get healthier. We *need* to examine our suffering. We also need to discover the greater purpose behind the suffering we encounter. According to Pennebaker, we would be healthier if we processed our tough times through writing.

Many clients enter coaching because they are experiencing a difficult time. Our work together often includes the search for meaning in the midst of difficulty. The conversation may begin with complaint-focused stories about the people and events that stand at the heart of the painful experiences. The clients are looking outward—at the difficulties they face, at the wrong done to them, at the people who hurt them, and at the obstacles they must overcome. As a coach, my job is always—over time—to support clients in shifting the camera's focus. I want them to pan the camera onto their own life and process, asking, "What does this teach you about you?"



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At the beginning of coaching the “this” we’re talking about is almost always a difficult experience. Over time, I encourage clients to examine all kinds of life experiences (joyous, challenging, inspiring, boring, moving) from the question, “What can you learn about yourself from this?” I’ve developed a series of questions to support clients in examining their lives. It usually works best to reflect on these questions alone and discuss them in a follow-up session.

\*What happened?

\*Why do you think it happened?

\*What effects did this event have on your life?

\*What do you know now that you didn’t know before this event happened?

\*What meaning might you derive from this event?

I have been struck by how life shifting this exercise can be. A friend reported that her best and worst experiences of the year were the same events. She discovered that it wasn’t so much what happened in her life that mattered but how she responded to it. A client offered a similar story, saying that her experience of even bad events shifted when she changed the story she had created about them. For example, she felt more content when she viewed the loss of her job as an opportunity to find a better job instead of as a personal failure.

I did this exercise for the first time last Mother’s Day. My schedule took me out of town that afternoon and, in a fit of loneliness that threatened to become despair, I listed the three things I was grateful for and why they had happened. In my reflections I saw the too-often invisible chain of events that lead to the good things that happen in my life: small kindnesses, loving gestures, blessings that I would ordinarily dismiss as random. I counted the evidence of grace and love in my life. Yes, I was alone. But on the plane with me I had cards from family members and friends and a whole pan of Rice Krispies Treats that a friend had made for me. Another friend would meet me at the airport, leaving her own Mother’s Day celebration to welcome me. Asking what the events meant, and how they had come to be forced me to look at the choices I was making in my life and the grace that followed and met me even when I could not see it.

In order for us to find meaning in the hopeless and happy events of our lives, we need to examine them from more than one direction. As Remen said, we need to see the events differently. When we do this, we have the opportunity to change the way we think about and live our lives. In connections that seemed random and fleeting, we find the people who love us back to life. Instead of seeing despair and emptiness, we may see the places where we have found warm welcome.

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