

*"I miss my brother like the earth misses peace."*

— Carlos, age 14, in a poem about the shooting death of his older brother

My voice is a baby's cry  
Never heard  
Can't speak  
No one listens  
Always ignored  
Feels sad and alone  
Feels like no one cares  
About me, only themselves  
Feel unloved  
The baby finally cries itself  
to sleep,  
and dreams of nothing.

— Rachel, 15  
(residential treatment)

I remember times  
Good times—  
Times when I could smile,  
Genuinely;  
Times when I could laugh,  
Innocently;  
Times when I seemed so young—  
So protected.  
Then came the day,  
That fateful day—  
April 20, 1999—  
The day my innocence was lost,  
Along with the lives  
of 15 friends.  
Friends killing friends—  
My friends  
Killing  
My friends!  
Friends killing innocence—  
My innocence  
Friends killing dreams—  
My dreams  
And yet they are still friends...  
Killing...  
Friends...

— Jocelyn, 15  
(Columbine student)

Every day in America, children face enormous events that people of any age would find difficult to endure. For young people the emotional toll is heavy, and often suffered throughout their lives. Imagine the cavernous depth of Carlos's loss. Listen to Khib, a 15-year-old in a residential treatment center, who found his voice and a way to express his pain through writing poetry:

*"People who have never heard the word poetry are still poets. When I was full of anger, breaking things, or just keeping warm inside myself crying, that was my poetry...when you can identify what your poetry is saying and start using the canvas of your world and not just breaking things there is so much flavorful love. I've learned how to voice my soul through poetry, and it's just invigorating to think back to when I always had these feelings inside me, but I never let the world see my shine."*

What is our obligation to children who lose family members to violence, alcoholism, or drug addiction? What can we offer those whose lives are fractured by emotional or sexual abuse?

Art from Ashes Inc. is a Colorado nonprofit organization formed in 2003 to address the therapeutic needs of high-risk young people through poetry and other creative arts. The Phoenix Rising writing and spoken word process was developed after extensive research and 14 years of working with high-risk youth. Art from Ashes contracts with other youth service organizations to provide therapeutic poetry and creative arts workshops for high-risk youth, including youth in residential treatment, those who live in urban settings, are homeless, incarcerated, court-involved—any young person in need of hope and a self-determined future.

The Phoenix Rising process combines expression — the articulation of painful events or circumstances in their young lives; connection — the ability to release the pain and fear of those experiences among peers and mentors; and healing — using the power of strong, healthy words to encourage an identity that is not based in victimization. Recent statistics of our work with youth conducted by the National Research Center have shown that of the participants surveyed, 100% of the youth enjoyed the workshops; 73% feel better about themselves; 80% cared more about the feelings of others; and 80% wanted to be more involved in their community.

The *Report on Community Based Youth Organizations* by the Carnegie Foundation found that young people who are involved in after-school community arts programs:

- are 4 times more likely to have won school-wide attention for their academic achievement
- are elected to class office within their schools more than 3 times as often



ART FROM ASHES INC.

Phoenix Rising poetry program • 853 Inca St., Suite 1A • Denver CO 80204 • 303.837.1550 • [www.artfromashes.org](http://www.artfromashes.org)

*Empowering struggling youth through creative programs that facilitate health and hope through expression, connection and transformation.*

*I sang a song around the flames, and a phoenix emerged from the angry coals*

– James McDonald, 21

Wish I could be outside  
With the power to decide  
Where to go; what to do  
I am wondering...  
I have been moved  
from institution to institution  
from placement to placement  
with hardly any encouragement.  
As I end this poem  
I might be set free  
Only in myself  
Only in me

– Aaron, 15  
(residential treatment)

I can see the anger in his eyes,  
I start to run  
as fast as my legs can sweep.  
I fall into a ditch and I hope  
that he can't hear  
my heart beat with fear.  
He's gone but he will soon return.  
I want to look in the mirror,  
but I fear the scars that cover me.  
I wish you would just  
take me away.

– Matt, 13  
(residential treatment)

**Who am i?** (an inner dialogue)  
by Ketha, 19

You're a nobody going nowhere.

**Oh, I am going somewhere,  
and I will be somebody.**

No, you worthless, useless  
bag of skin and bones,  
you are a no one,  
you are worth nothing,  
no one loves you,  
and no one ever will.

**Oh, but you're very wrong.  
I have many people who love me,  
and I am worth more  
than life itself...and so are you.**

- are 4 times more likely to participate in a math and science fair
- are 3 times more likely to win an award for school attendance
- are more than 4 times more likely to win an award for writing

As well, numerous studies claim that participation in the arts promotes positive outcomes in other academic disciplines and in social development and cognitive capacity and that learning in the arts helps shape motivation, intense self-discipline, confidence and perseverance.

As early as the first century, physicians were prescribing poetry for their patients. Benjamin Franklin used poetry therapy with his patients in the 18th century and published their work. Many other scientists and doctors, including Freud, Adler, Jung, and Reik have attributed much of the understanding of the subconscious to poetry. Because of its effectiveness in dealing with trauma, the benefits of poetry for health and wholeness are now recognized by those in contemporary medical and scientific communities.

*“By encouraging people to put difficult emotions and memories into words, writing therapy provides therapeutic release. For this reason it has been shown to be particularly beneficial for those who tend to keep their feelings internalized. After a session of writing therapy, many people say they feel calmer and more in control.*

—WholeHealthMD.com

Providing an opportunity for young people to express themselves can draw them out of isolation—and listening carefully to what they have to say is therapeutic in itself. As Paul Tillich contends, “Listening is the first duty of love.” Additionally, writing and hearing your own judgments, emotions and behaviors is key to self-awareness. And because most young people in the workshops recognize the love and respect afforded them, they also begin to acknowledge a connection to people of various cultures, races, religions and lifestyles.

Art from Ashes provides creative therapies to marginalized youth, many of whom have been wounded by abuse, neglect or societal abandonment. If a young person has been consistently discounted and devalued, they can end up alone, angry and with feelings of worthlessness. This sense of helplessness and isolation can lead to violence, criminal acts, “lack of conscience,” high-risk sexual behaviors, substance abuse and/or suicide. Rather than declaring the behavior of high-risk youth an outrage and filling our correctional institutions with discarded young lives, the best way we can show our commitment to youth is to empower them to have healthy and productive lives. If young people feel heard and respected, if they develop a sense of self that is not based on the messages of failure they have received, and if they can relate to the struggles and dreams of others, they can begin to create a positive future for themselves and for their communities.

*“Poetry shows that someone was there before you—lonely, brutalized, aware...and that someone has survived with some passion, some compassion, some humor and some style.”*

—Maya Angelou

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## What Could You Offer the World?

from *This Is Us, Under Society's Crust* by Catherine O'Neill Thorn

One of the young men in the poetry workshop, 13-year-old Jay, would come to each session and sit quietly without participating. He wore a black sweatshirt, with the hood up, almost completely covering his face. Jay would huddle into the darkest corner, occasionally peering out from under his hood. After the first three weeks, I asked him to please write one small poem. He was resistant. Even though I made a point never to insist upon participation, I asked a few more times. Although one of the older boys reminded me of my own rule, I had noticed that with some young men their reluctance is based purely on fear of rejection. I wanted to assure Jay that his poetry would be respected, that his voice would be heard.

At the end of the program, Jay shyly approached me with the following poem:

### Isolation

I sit in the corner  
not knowing what to do  
not wanting to talk  
but people want me to  
wanting to cry  
not able to  
not knowing why  
God I want to cry

Despite my assurances that his poem was valuable and meaningful, Jay did not write again for a couple of weeks. During one session, the exercise was to write about something valuable they could offer the world. I asked Jay if he would write another poem for me. He looked scared and quickly shook his head, no.

"Don't you have something you could give to the world?" I asked him. Again, he shook his head, but also added, "I don't know," – an opening if I ever heard one.

"Hasn't anyone ever told you that you have a special gift?" I persisted.

"No," he repeated.

"Has anyone ever said 'thank you' for something you did?" I tried again.

"No," he repeated.

I reminded him that once I had asked him to write a poem for me when he didn't want to. "And you wrote me a lovely poem," I told him. "That tells me you have a big, generous heart. Doesn't the world need that more than anything?"

I saw his eyes light up. "I guess."

"Well, if you *were* going to give your heart," I said, "would you hold it close at first?"

"No!" he said emphatically. I was surprised.

"How would you give it?" I asked.

He stretched his arms wide out before him, palms up. "Like this." It was the first time I had seen him grin.

"Why don't you write a poem for me about how it would feel to give your heart away? And how you would want someone to take it."

He looked serious and nodded his head. During the next 15 minutes, I watched as he hunched over his notebook, choosing each word carefully.

When he handed me the poem a while later on a torn piece of notebook paper, he said he didn't want to read it out loud. I asked if he would allow me to read it to the group for him, and he nodded.

### If I Was Going To Give My Heart

If I was going to give my heart  
I would put it out into an open space  
Whoever wants it can take it  
Take as much as you like  
I have a lot to give  
But please be gentle, my heart is fragile  
Don't throw it in my face, it would break  
My heart is already scarred  
I don't want another  
Be gentle  
I care—  
Even if you don't, I care  
Please...  
Take my love

When I finished, there was an emotional silence. After a minute or two, the boys did something I had never seen before. Several of them got up and gave Jay a hug. The rest reached into the circle to pat him on the back, thanking him for his poem. From what I could tell, Jay's poem expressed what many of these young men feel, despite their brokenness: a desire to be recognized; to be heard and loved; and a longing to give love.

The most effective way to reach young people who have suffered is to listen to them, to remind them that they are more than their circumstances—more than their fears—and to let them know how valuable and how powerful they are.



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## Columbine pupils to share poems

Writing to heal, four to read works at Auraria coffee shop

By [Holly Kurtz](#)

Denver Rocky Mountain News Staff Writer

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Alex Marsh reads "details of other mass atrocities to get perspective." Allison Carter can't take a single step without knowing "somebody was murdered here, and it's all my fault, I couldn't save them."

Four Columbine High students have been healing line by line, verse by verse.

Now Marsh, Carter, Devon Adams and a girl who asked to remain anonymous are ready to share their words with the public, poem by poem, in person and out loud.

Tuesday at 7 p.m. they will read their writings at The Daily Grind Coffee House on the Auraria campus. Afterward they will sign copies of their chapbook, *Screams Aren't Enough*.

Some of their work is untitled. None of it rhymes.

All of it comes from the heart.

"I'd go insane unless I did it," Adams said of her poetry. "This is my leveler. This is the time I get to express myself and take a deep breath."

Publisher Catherine O'Neill Thorn and her friends since last May have used poetry to let fresh air into the girls' lives.

It started when Columbine students were finishing the 1998-1999 school year at Chatfield High, after the April 20 shootings at Columbine that left 15 people dead and more than 20 injured.

Thorn is a poetry therapist. Words are keys she uses to pick the locks that guard uncomfortable emotions. She figured Columbine students had some pretty uncomfortable emotions.

She gathered her friends, including Joy Sawyer and Clarissa Pinkola Estes, and held a writing workshop at Chatfield for Columbine students. Then they began poetry club meetings after school.

Guiry's Paint Wallpaper & Art Supplies offered a spare room and told the group they could draw and write on the walls. The students soon were surrounded by life-sized works of art.

When Guiry's needed the space back, the group moved to SHOUTS, a Littleton teen center near Columbine High that opened after April 20.

"They made it home," Thorn said.

The early poems were honest, but short. It was tough at first.

"The kids made me pass some sort of test but you never know when the test is," Thorn said. "You just know you passed it. Oftentimes we felt like spectators rather than participants."

The group eventually became just four students, making it more intimate.

Last week's meeting felt like a slumber party. Group members sprawled on beanbag chairs calling each other nicknames and making jokes.

But between the jokes and the tips on making curfew were poems filled with horrific images -- like razor blades buried in innocent-looking apples.

The girls were rehearsing for their reading.

Carter read about feeling as if the school turned on her and swallowed her life, of seeing her classmates run and scream, of planning, at age 16, to be an overprotective mother.

"I will always remember wondering why God let it happen," she read.

In *Vodka*, Adams remembered Columbine killer Dylan Klebold. A different, younger Dylan who swam and played and danced.

"Oh Devon," Thorn said, after Adams finished, "that must have been hard for you ... God, I'm so proud of you guys!"

Later, Adams wondered out loud whether people would really want to hear the poems. Whether they might rather ignore and forget.

So Marsh told a story:

One day an assistant principal called her into the office for sharing "disturbing" thoughts in class.

"No changes will happen unless people are disturbed," Marsh said.

"Are you the one to disturb them?" the administrator asked.

Marsh thought a moment.

"Every revolution," she replied, "begins with a single voice."

*For more information on Tuesday's free poetry reading, (303) 733-7282.*

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## The Power of Words — Find Your Metaphor

By Jan M. Faust

*Think of an area in your life where you need renewal and encouragement. Choose one word to act as a metaphor, a word you can imagine at any time. This word should help you picture and express that sense of renewal. Perhaps “river” can express relaxation. Need to retreat and take some time for yourself? Perhaps “a well” represents going down into your depths. Feeling happy and able to give of yourself? Describe yourself as a “fountain.” Want more playfulness in your life? “Dolphins” surely know how to play. Need to call on some courage? Perhaps the “lion” is your metaphor. Think of your own.*

*Drum, dolphin, house, fountain,  
river, well, lion, tree ...*

*Write a poem about any of these. Don't worry whether it's “really” a poem. Remember: This isn't for a class, it's just for you! One way to begin is to simply start with the initial phrase, “I am a river,” and just start writing about yourself as a river.*

*— John Fox, author of “Poetic Medicine,”  
(Putnam Publishing Group)*

As a poetry therapist, John Fox is not out there prescribing “write two stanzas and call me in the morning,” to his clients.

What Fox has learned is that even if he doesn't prompt them, his clients struggling with loss, grief or anxiety will just do it without instruction.

“I hear story after story of a person getting up at 2 a.m. to make a poem to express something about loss,” says Fox. “It's a spontaneous action, where people will turn to poetry where just words are inadequate.”

Poetry therapy is one of the newer entries in the world of creative therapies that uses the arts — painting, drama, keeping a journal and others — to further therapeutic goals and enhance well being. By writing poetry a person may gain insight into and integrate emotional, cognitive and social aspects of the self. Increasingly, since the 1940s, mental-health professionals have turned to these kinds of therapy to tap into areas often passed over by conventional talk therapy.

While Fox lightly defines poetry as, “where you don't write all the way across the page,” his tone belies a certain reverence for the poetic process, as distinguished from “just” writing.

“I think that a journal allows for a large landscape, a collage of writing about one's life, one's experiences. Poetry allows you to sort of distill that down and maybe you just write about one thing. It's like having a wide-angle lens and coming up for a detail shot.”

What that verbal shot, when developed and printed on paper, can show is a unique window into the psyche and a first step toward the healing process.

“I believe the things that make up a poem — the metaphor, the images, the rhythm, the sounds, the reliance on feeling, as distinguished from trying to sort of explain something — it all comes back to somebody being able to really get to the core and say what matters to them,” says Fox. “And then, to hear themselves say it.”

The above exercise was used to treat a doctor who works in a trauma unit in Indianapolis, Ind. She turned to poetic therapy to help her with a stressful work environment in which she confronted pain and death routinely. She wrote, "I am a well, ancient, enduring. Even in the stark and arid times, I have never gone completely dry."

"This 'well' is a place in me, but it also reminds me of a place in my patients," Dr. Mary Kay Turner comments in "Poetic Medicine" about her poem. "The well says that there is something more, something eternal, something within us that is renewed through human experience."

Fox explains how the poem came to be: "I asked a question that evoked a response. She chose the well, so she gets a sense that there's depth. There's a place she can descend down to."

Fox tells people to find a quiet and safe place to write, and then put pen to paper. When it's finished, he urges them to read the poem aloud. "There's an incredible power when someone who a few moments before had these evanescent words in the back of her head, then made it into an image. And, now, it's on the paper and she can read it out loud with her own voice," says Fox. "She might before say 'Oh, this is nothing.' But when she reads it aloud, she may hear things that she was totally not quite getting at the time of writing."

He acknowledges that some people are afraid to open up to this kind of exercise, especially when people are conditioned to expect grades or critiques. His approach is to tell people to write honestly, to respect and appreciate themselves and, in particular, their uniqueness as individuals.

"That's where the whole issue of trusting ourselves comes up — appreciating that not only aren't they Auden or Yeats, but Auden and Yeats aren't them, either. It takes a little bit of courage to try it yourself."

## WRITING THERAPY

WholeHealthMD.com

### WHAT IS IT?

Writing therapy involves putting thoughts and feelings into words as a therapeutic tool. It is based on the belief that recording memories, fears, concerns, and/or problems can help relieve stress, promote health and well being, and lead to personal growth.

There are a number of different types of writing therapy. One popular form is known as **journal therapy**. Unlike the kind of diary writing in which a person keeps a log of daily events, journal therapy focuses on expressing emotions, and delving into one's internal life. In addition to putting a problem or concern into words, journal therapy also can help people work out a solution.

Even though journal writing has been around for centuries, it didn't become popular as a therapeutic technique until the 1960s, when psychotherapist Ira Progoff founded Dialogue House in New York City. Dialogue House was the first to offer formal workshops and classes in what Progoff called the Intensive Journal method, an extremely structured form of journal therapy (see What You Can Expect, below). In 1985, psychotherapist Kathleen Adams founded the Center for Journal Therapy in Lakewood, Colorado, which today offers certification to journal therapists. These two centers are just two of many in the U.S. and abroad that now offer journal therapy classes and workshops.

Two other popular types of writing therapy are **letter therapy**, which is often included as part of journal therapy, and **poetry therapy**, which is taught by therapists who are certified in this area. Letter therapy involves writing very personal letters to people, living or dead. Although these missives are usually never sent, they are intended to express the writer's most candid thoughts and feelings. Letter therapy offers the writer the opportunity to tell someone the truth without the upset of a face-to-face encounter. In poetry therapy, a person may be asked to create original verse that draws upon their experiences and emotions or to write responses to someone else's poems as way of expressing their feelings. Often poetry therapy includes reading and creating other forms of literature as well, such as short stories or memoirs.

Many people find writing therapy appealing because after initial sessions with a therapist it is inexpensive (often free), self-initiated, flexible, and portable. It also requires no natural writing talent; what matters is the ability to put one's innermost thoughts and emotions on paper. Those in writing therapy typically work one-on-one with a writing therapist, who may be a psychologist, psychotherapist, social worker, or other mental health professional credentialed in this technique. There are also writing therapy workshops available through centers such as those mentioned above, as well as guidebooks for home use.

### HOW DOES IT WORK?

By encouraging people to put difficult emotions and memories into words, writing therapy provides therapeutic release. For this reason it has been shown to be particularly beneficial for those who tend to keep their feelings internalized. After a session of writing therapy, many people say they feel calmer and more in control.

In addition, some scientists believe that the release offered by writing affects the body's physical capacity to withstand stress and to fight off stress-related infection and disease. Writing therapy has also been shown to have a positive impact on heart rate and blood pressure.

## WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT

Your experience in a writing therapy workshop will depend on the type of writing involved as well as the workshop leader, your reasons for being in the workshop, and the other workshop participants. At an Intensive Journal workshop, for example, you will receive a three-ring binder with color-coded sections that correspond to the different aspects of life and the healing process. The workshop leader first explains what the divisions are and then shows you how to start writing in them. The notebook is designed to work as a whole: One section stimulates material for another. Those interested can read their journal entries out loud. After the workshop is over, the process can be continued independently.

Working one-on-one with a writing therapist can have many interesting dimensions as well. Typically, the therapist will begin each session by asking you to write a short “check-in” piece about how you’re feeling, what’s going on in your life, and so on. The therapist may then guide you through a writing a longer piece designed to address the issues brought up in the “check-in” piece. The remainder of the session will probably be spent exploring the information revealed in the longer work, with the writing therapist offering suggestions for writing “homework” to be done before the next session. If you see a psychotherapist who uses writing therapy techniques as a part of an overall treatment process, there will probably be less emphasis placed on the writing assignments.

Writing therapy workshops often take place over a day or two, although they can be longer, and participants may be encouraged to return for further workshops. The number of sessions required for one-on-one therapy depends on how deep-seated a person’s issues are.

## HEALTH BENEFITS

Writing therapy has been used effectively to help people with a number of physical and emotional problems, including a life-threatening illness such as cancer; chronic conditions such as asthma and rheumatoid arthritis; drug and alcohol addictions; eating disorders; and trauma. It has also been shown to be beneficial for combating low self-esteem, depression, and stress-related ailments.

In addition, writing therapy has been employed to help people cope with grief and loss. For example, poetry therapists were asked to work with the students of Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, after the shooting tragedy there in 1999.

Studies have also shown that when people write about emotionally difficult events for just 20 minutes a day for three or four days, the function of their immune system improves. In a 1998 study published in the journal *Health Psychology*, college freshmen who wrote about their feelings and problems and created coping strategies, were found to make fewer visits to the medical clinic than those who didn’t write.

In another study, published in 1999 in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, a striking connection between writing therapy and relief from chronic illness was shown. Researchers found that asthma patients who wrote about difficult experiences such as divorce, physical abuse, and car accidents improved their lung function by an average of 19%. Rheumatoid arthritis patients who wrote about these subjects improved by an average of 28%. In contrast, a control group of patients who wrote about innocuous subjects showed no improvement at all. It is important to note that the writing therapy was not used as a substitute for standard medical care, but as a complement to it.

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