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Episode 92: Creative Writing as a Therapeutic Tool (Recorded, December 2016)

Producer: David Turner – DT

Host: Emily Harrison – EH

Guests: Wendy French – WF & Marie Larkin – ML

Transcript edited by David Turner – 24/1/17

Introduction:

DT: Hello this is Lunar Poetry Podcasts my name is David Turner. Today's episode is a discussion led by poet Emily Harrison about using creative writing for therapeutic purposes.

Emily is joined by Wendy French and Marie Larkin who both work as therapists Employing creative writing as their main tool. The discussion takes as its starting point the fact that Emily, Wendy and Marie all agree that creative writing can be beneficial in a therapeutic sense. The question of whether it is or it isn't, is far too complicated for an hour-long podcast so we chose a side before we started.

Emily and her guests discuss different approaches to using creative writing in groups and with individuals both within the NHS and out in the community, as it were. They cover a lot of ground and I think the conversation will be of interest to those that feel like they would like to go into facilitating workshops themselves and those who feel like they may benefit from creative writing in a therapeutic sense.

This episode was made possible with money I received from Arts Council England last summer so a big thank you to them. There will also be a full transcript available to accompany this episode, again funded by the Arts Council so again a big thank you to them, I am extremely grateful. There'll be a link in the episode description to follow if you'd like to download that transcript.

As always you can follow everything that we're up to by going to 'Lunar Poetry Podcasts' on Tumblr, Facebook, Soundcloud or iTunes or @Silent_Tongue on Twitter. If you like what we do, then please tell your friends or share our episodes online. I don't have a marketing budget or indeed a clue how to do that, so it would be a big help.

Here is the discussion and if you'd like to keep it rolling after you've listened then get in touch on social media. Cheers.

Conversation:

EH: Hello my name is Emily Harrison. I'm a poet, a teacher and also have been a user of psychiatric services in London, both as an outpatient and inpatient. I'm here today with two lovely ladies and I'm going to ask them to introduce themselves.

WF: I'm Wendy French, I've spent many years working in health care using writing as a tool to help young people express themselves when they're going through difficulties.

ML: I'm Marie Larkin, I'm an integrative therapist and I also have a Master's [degree] in creative writing for therapeutic purposes and I run groups now and workshops around using writing to help people and also I use it since doing my training in a one to one situation with clients as well.

EH: Okay, I just wanted to start off by asking if you had to explain to somebody what kind of services you offer. How would you go about explaining that?

WF: I think, the services I offer, I'm offering workshops for people who may find it difficult to express themselves by talking in a one to one with a therapist. Sometimes it's easier to write things down than to talk. I work with individuals and with groups too and the

groups I prefer, I'll be honest, because people feed off one another. They talk to one another, they read out their work they comment on one another and that helps them all to feel better about themselves.

EH: Marie, do you have a similar situation with both one to one and group work?

ML: I do predominantly one to one and my group work is building up now and there is a really different dynamic in the group setting, there is something about people sharing and I think that's part of why groups in mental health are so valuable, it's so destigmatising. That you get to hear somebody say something, "Oh, it's not just me!" But words on the page can also be like that. But one to one therapy does that as well but I think ultimately people are living in the world and experiencing other people and their responses to who we are and how we are, not just the safety of the therapy. I think that is really valuable.

EH: So do you think there would be a specific person or patient or situation in which one to one is much better than a group situation?

WF: Definitely yes, there are people who perhaps have shied away from other people for whatever reason and they take comfort in just being with one person. Even if to begin with they just sit in the room and nobody says very much, that's a sort of a comfort. And because basically we're social animals, so to be with just one person is the beginning of the road to recovery.

ML: Yes. I don't know if you've ever found it Wendy, that with people... Where people would start off in one to one work with you and then at some point want to join a group?

WF: Absolutely. Particularly when I worked at the hospital that happened a lot, people would come and then they'd say, "I'm not going into any something-something group!" Because they had problems, we had a lot of 'language' at the beginning and then they would gradually conform and want to be with the group and be with the others and be part of what was going on.

EH: Do you think it's a confidence thing to have to... It's quite difficult obviously to share experiences and to feel comfortable in doing that with other people, not just with a professional, perhaps?

ML: My view is it's something about courage and safety and knowing that it's possible. That, I think for some people it can take a long time to trust in a one to one therapy relationship. To be able to tell their story, to tell parts of their story that have felt so shameful or so unspeakable. Or where even if it hasn't been shameful or unspeakable, they felt that it's not okay to talk about feelings. I mean that's a big one, people struggle sometimes to talk about feelings so the one to one work can build the trust.

But writing in a one to one therapy context can also be really valuable because... There was a piece of research done with people with schizophrenia, and writing in between sessions was quite helpful for some of them because they were able to keep a dialogue with themselves and keep a form of expression going on the page in between sessions and it

helped stabilise them. But also one of the participants said that she was able to say things on the page that she wouldn't feel okay to say anywhere else. So putting things down for her on a page and then reading it back was sometimes a stepping stone to be able to actually getting the words out of the mouth and to the therapist.

WF: That's really interesting because I've really found that as well... You know E.M Forster said, how do I know what I feel until I see it written down? So I can say that to some of the patients or the children. And also, as you said if they're keeping a diary or a dialogue with themselves they can read back and they might forget what they've written yesterday because whatever chaos is in their mind they can't always remember everything. But then they can read back and think, that's what I felt yesterday. Am I still feeling that? [**ML:** Yeah.] Have I moved on?

EH: I think, sometimes when things are written down there's almost a sense of reclaiming something that you didn't have control over in the first place. Have you found that at all, that kind of... We all write as well... And the idea that when you write something down there's a sense of control over something that perhaps has happened to you that you didn't have a say in but now you have a say in how it's expressed.

ML: I love that idea of reclaiming, I've never thought in those terms [WF: No, it's interesting.] but yes reclaiming. That's one of the things that I've noticed in workshops that I run, there is always at least one person, often more irrespective of what the subject is. At the end of the workshop somebody will say, "I got in touch with a part of myself that's long lost and forgotten.

And it's often something that goes back to childhood and it's usually something around play and it's usually something around... I'm connecting with this thing, I've remembered that I used to really like writing, or I used to really like reading poetry, or I used to really like comedy... Because that's one of the things that I'm particularly interested in, the therapeutic benefits of comedy. But people often find they've connected with something so that... But I've never thought of it in those words that you said.

WF: But also going back to what you said, I think a bit earlier, or maybe it was you Emily when you write something down you're actually removing a little bit of the pain only a tiny tiny bit from your head to the paper. So when you read it back it's just slightly distanced from what you were feeling before. Because it's written on the paper I think and then you can read it and think, "Yes that's me."

ML: You know I work with adults exclusively but you've worked a lot with children. I'm just wondering if you've noticed particular... Obviously not about the content of what's written or the style but if there's something you notice that's different about working with children with mental health problems versus adults and writing.

WF: I suppose I do in a way because most of the children I've worked with have been adolescents and adolescents have their own problems anyway. So you take an adolescence who is troubled just through ordinary adolescence, give a mental health component and you're going to have someone a bit like a caged animal trying to get out.

Whereas, when I have worked with adults they have been more contained. Their difficulties come through in a completely different way than from children who will kick and swear and what have you, until they get to a place where they feel more comfortable. But I've never worked with adults who come in kicking or swearing, they've usually come because they want to be there. I don't know, maybe your experience is different?

ML: I've certainly worked with some people on an individual basis and actually, in a group I used to run in employment support services where people have come not because they particularly want to be there but they feel they should be there more. Or in some cases people have come and said, "I've tried everything else so I might as well give this a go but I'm not feeling awfully confident about it."

EH: I was going to ask the both of you, how do people get involved in your courses. Are they in institutions or through institutions or is there more of a community centre feel where people can don't need to be referred?

WF: Well when I worked at the hospital and I worked with in the forensic department I worked mainly there with individuals who were referred from their psychologist or psychiatrist. And [with] the children, it was part of their schooling, they came over to school each day and I ran a course two or three times a week for writing. They may not want to take part but it was part of their, sort of, program for the day. There were many days they didn't come in or one wouldn't come in and then they would gradually come in. With adults work for CAMS... Do you know, it's adult mental health services and I can't remember what the C stands for.

ML: Child.

WF: Child and adult! Thank you very much, I'd forgotten the most important thing. Child an adult mental health services, I worked for them. So that was voluntary for adults, weekly.

ML: And they run writing groups, or you ran writing groups for them?

WF: I ran writing groups for them yes, it was based in Croydon.

ML: Mine's slightly different, I work in private practice so I see clients... Mostly they will contact me either through a therapy centre that I work in in Brighton or through my website or through the BACP - The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy website. So I'll get most of my referrals that way, sometimes other colleagues refer people to me. And then the groups, I will publicise that on places like Lapidus, the writing for wellbeing organisation, or NAWE - The National Association of Writers in Education.

And I'm just starting with a colleague, we're going to be running some more projects in Brighton. Not in partnership but based at an art gallery, we're wanting to really build the creative side of it. But at the moment I'm not doing any voluntary funded work but there are a couple of places I've got my eye on that I'd like to approach to do some some work

within in particular. But I can't say what they are, I'd love to but because I haven't gone through all the discussions with them.

But places where I might do some voluntary free groups [EH: Amazing.] because I enjoy it as much as anything else, it's part of my living. But I feel like because it's a recording people can't see, but Wendy and I keep looking across the table and going, "Yes!" There's something really special and very enriching about being in a group of people who are writing and expressing, I find.

WF: I love it or I wouldn't do it, even though it's not without its difficulties. I mean, I've just finished a poet residency at the Macmillan Cancer Centre, I know that's not all mental health but mental health comes into [**ML:** Of course!] the wellbeing of people who are recovering. A couple of our really good friends in the group have died, they're all at different stages of cancer. And it's hard but I wouldn't do it if I didn't love it, if I didn't get something from the people and you give of yourself I hope.

EH: This is quite a difficult question I understand this but what are purpose of the sessions? Is it just about self-expression? Is it about helping people, kind of, improve their writing? Can it be both?

WF: Well for me it's both. For me it's friendship because people come to the group, they're isolated in their illness or their mental health problem and they're coming to a group of like-minded people. Or they may be very not like minded but there's something that is bringing them together, whether it's cancer or a mental illness. And they come and they can just be truthful and be themselves, nobody is judging them.

But I think they write because they want to write and I think part of the recovery program, and you may not agree, is the editing of their work too. Taking out the chaotic bits and having a piece of writing that they're pleased with and they think, "I've written that. Out of this bit of chaos, of ramblings and what have you, I've got either this short prose or this poem and I have done that and it says how I feel."

EH: I always feel that there's a sense of self-worth when I create something.

ML: Yeah.

WF: Absolutely.

EH: That there was a purpose there and especially if it's to do with something that's been... Like we talked about the difficulty and the pain being able to just, kind of, do both things at the same time. You are, as I said, reclaiming experience but you're also creating something and there's a sense of pride that comes with that, I think. What would you say the purpose, again that's such a big word, 'the purpose'. What would you like people to ultimately get out of their experience with you?

ML: The first thing I think would be about people finding their voices, not necessarily their creative voice, just being able to find their voice, being able to speak. And that's both

in individual therapy and in writing groups, being able to find your voice, being able to be you, I think. How we say and what we say, being able to experiment with different ways.

And one of the things that I think the purpose of the writing groups can bring, or writing in one to one therapy is, to be able to experiment with that. People will sometimes... Well we all do, we get stuck into our own expressions and our own dialogue and our own narratives and, "Oh yeah, I'm telling that story again and it always ends that way. I'm always that one and they are always that.

Sometimes when you write you can introduce things like exercises or dialogue exercises or character sketches. And as you start writing and using that creative part of your brain you can look at it and, as you were saying before, the page is holding it for you so you've got a record so you can revisit it. You don't have to worry about, "What if I forget? I said that really good thing in therapy but I can't remember what it was.

When you're writing it will come out and you've got it there and you can go, "Oh actually, you know, I always say that that thing was really upsetting. But if I look at it from that angle I can also see..." And it's not an either or, it's bringing that 'also' in. So for me, I was scribbling down some notes when Wendy was talking, thinking about what's the purpose for me. And it's self-knowledge, the ability to express, finding a voice and then that being pleased with something that you've done.

EH: Me and David were talking about this idea that sometimes when you sit down to write and you're not in a very healthy place. For example, especially when I'm having psychotic symptoms I find that something such as free writing where I'm just allowed to write anything I want can be quite dangerous. I can write something on a page that actually can frighten me because I've been given the freedom to, kind of, express quite daft sometimes. But also sometimes quite frightening ideas of not really being connected to reality perhaps.

And I love this idea of the approach, that there is a form and a structure and having a specific task and that's where I think, facilitating comes in as being much more useful and helpful than if I was to write on my own. Because obviously everyone can write and there are opportunities to write but I'm interested in that idea of, what does a facilitator bring? Because for me it's that form, that structure, somebody telling me this is a specific task and I wondered whether you'd experienced that actually being very helpful for patients.

WF: That's how I run my groups, I go in each week and first I give them a sentence and they write. Before we go round and introduce ourselves or say anything, I give them a sentence and it might be, "Last night I laid my dream upon the pillow." And then they write for five minutes and that's really to clear their heads and they read back whatever they've written, it doesn't matter where it's gone, daft, factual, whatever, fantasy it doesn't matter.

And then I take a theme it might be a colour they might be exploring the colour blue. I might ask someone can they remember when they first thought about blue. Did they like blue,

what does it mean? And then I might ask for any stories like Bluebeard or any others where Blue signifies.

Then I go on, "What about the sea? When did you last go to the sea? And tell me something in your childhood." And it goes on like this so they've always got something. They can deviate as much as they like but I never want anyone to come and think, "I haven't got a thing to write about!" And then they can read back, or not but they nearly always want to and then they can take it away to develop into whatever they want.

EH: Do you have a similar experience with facilitating, you feel like you're allowing people to have a kind of a vision perhaps? I always try and think of it as blinkers trying to reduce that space, you're not taking away the creativity but you're reducing perhaps what somebody could possibly be writing down and thinking about?

ML: I think for me that's where it really makes a difference who you're working with in terms of the client group and what they're wanting and where they're at. Because there might be certain writing prompts or exercises I would do that if somebody were in a site in a psychotic phase or if somebody was very prone to visual disturbances, hallucinations those sorts of things or hearing voices. If they weren't terribly well in that moment, then certain of these exercises really would be quite damaging.

So one of the things, for example, that I will do with people around writing for stress management, would be to invite them to write from the voice of something that doesn't speak, usually and literally write from that. Now that's fine in all sorts of circumstances but if you're someone who hears voices [**EH:** Yes, of course.] and who has paranoid fantasies about, say their computer talking to them. That would be terribly damaging so there's something really important about knowing who you're working with at any given time and tailoring it.

WF: I totally agree and that's why sometimes it is quite dangerous going in, if you've got new people coming in you've planned a session but you're not absolutely sure what's going for that new person. You have to... It's very difficult to think, I don't want to mention family because that might be a trigger for all sorts of disturbances.

EH: How do you approach that in a group setting? Is there a time at the beginning where you, kind of, ask people what they want? Is it just because you've, obviously, been working around people who have mental health problems or disorders that you are just kind of in tune to that? Or is it something that is specifically put into your planning that you allow this time for sharing or for the users to say what they would particularly want from the session?

WF: I don't usually ask the users I mean you may totally disagree. Because I think if I had ten in a group there might be ten different things that came up, it's very difficult. I usually, I assess, I have to go with a gut feeling often. You go in, there may be eight people you know well and there may be one you don't know. And so I kind of gear towards the eight but you have to be so careful about that ninth person and watch if agitation starts to come out in them.

EH: And it's about being able to recognise those early warning signs in people?

WF: Yes.

EH: Which, again, can be very individual but also can be can be quite universal. If you can read people's emotions, then you can see when someone is getting slightly agitated. And then would you choose to...

WF: I might go and speak to them quietly and take them away and say, "Would you like to sit here? Would you like to talk to me? Would you like to go and come again? Because we'd love you to stay or come but I don't want you to feel nervous."

ML: Yeah, or for it to be more harmful.

WF: Or for it to be more harmful than helpful, exactly!

ML: I've certainly had the situation where I've had a conversation with somebody outside of the group, I've left the group to get on with something and gone to speak to somebody because something has come up. Or they've wanted me to know about something that might affect them. But I think what you're raising, that whole point about safety is so so important because I think you...

We're really passionate about the positive benefits. Can there be negative benefits? About the benefits, about all the great things about writing and using writing for wellbeing. But, you know, what you were saying was really important about... There are cautions and you might need to exercise a level of self-care. Depending on where you're at in your mental health.

And I think that's what Wendy and I would do in groups which would be to just lay down some boundaries at the beginning, lay down some safety. [**WF:** Yes.] Give people a choice, I think. It's not like going to a class where, "We're all going to do this exercise now." So one thing I'll sometimes do is to say, "There's a choice. Here's an exercise. But if you feel that that's going to take you somewhere that you might not want to go..." Or, "Monitor yourself as you go along. If you find yourself going somewhere that feels like it might be too traumatising or too painful then don't go there, this this might not be the space.

EH: You offer an alternative perhaps?

ML: Yeah.

EH: That's something I was really interested in because I've done creative writing... I've facilitated workshops for children, I work in a school and with adults actually. But there's something... You're working with people who are vulnerable and who ultimately are needing your help in whatever form that manifests itself and safeguarding is something that I was really, really interested in.

So I've been to group therapy sessions where it's just conversation, there was no writing, where there were very clear guidelines at the beginning. For example, we weren't allowed to know each other's surnames, it was suggested that we didn't have contact outside of the outside of the room it was just every week or two when we met up. We would, you know, kind of discuss what had been going on and then that wouldn't leave that space.

And when you're creating something with writing and you're creating something that people... Like we were talking about are very proud of. They may want to share that and I was wondering how you get around that kind of idea that you want it to be a safe space and perhaps a confidential space at times but you would also like people to be able to take what they've experienced out into their lives away from the room with you.

WF: Well I think for me, that has to then stay with the individual. The ground rules are, you never talk about anyone else out of the group, you never say anything that anyone has said you don't even comment on anyone's writing, out of the group. This is all between these four walls and we have to have this level of trust between us. But if you want to go out of the group and go and show your partner or your child something that you have written, that's fine. That's good because they might want to share it because it might help their partner, child or whoever have a slightly better understanding of what's going on I think. That's how I work anyway.

ML: I'd say absolutely the same. Yes. What happens in the group apart from what you have written yourself, is totally private. The same as in one to one therapy people can bring things into therapy and unless there are certain legal boundaries that are crossed where I would have to disclose, that is something different. But what gets said in therapy... And you can say things that are quite extreme in therapy about how you're feeling and on the page.

EH: Why is writing so important in recovering from any sort of psychiatric trauma? What is it about writing as an act in particular? Because as I've got friends who go running or who throw themselves into exercise, throw themselves into other art forms. But what is it about writing in particular that is so important in people's recovery?

ML: All of those things are valuable. I mean, exercise and all of those physical pursuits are really good for lowering the adrenaline levels and detoxing in that way and building up some physical resilience. So that's not to say that it's an either or but the thing with writing I think is that it is permanent. You can't forget it, in that you can it's there and also writing with a pen and paper as opposed to typing uses the brain in a different way.

I was re-reading some research recently and some of it's being contested but there's a general sense that how... The craft, because actually writing letters at a very simple level is a creative process compared to typing because you have to craft the shape of the letters. And you have a choice how it looks, at every point you have a choice how the letters look.

"Is my handwriting going to be like that or am I going to use up the whole page? Am I going to strew across it? I could cross out the things I've done." All of those things that doing it on screen don't offer in the same way. There's a growing body of research that suggests that

handwriting, pen and paper is particularly beneficial for those creative and cognitive processes.

EH: I think where this question came from and why this question is so important is, at no point in my life has writing saved my life. Writing has not cured me of anything.

WF: It's not going to.

EH: Writing is not going to. Writing does not change the chemical balance in my brain, writing has not made the same immediate difference that medication has. But still I need it, I would be lost without it. And I think I want to question what it is about it... If it is not a cure, then what is it? Because it's so important and I couldn't live without it. But at the same time it's not curing anything, as you both said. No, that's not what we're offering.

WF: But you're expressing yourself. You're thinking about yourself and I would say just the pen control the mind or does the mind control the pen? That's why I think writing with pen and paper is so important. Because you don't know what you're going to end up with when you start writing. I mean Robert Frost, “No tears for the writer, no tears for the reader." So you just go, you start writing and wherever it takes you...

And you need to do that, we all need that I think. I think everyone needs it at whatever level, whether it's even just writing a postcard or a post script or... There's something about the physical act of using your pen and connecting with your mind and of course you need medication. [EH: Of course.] But you need to be 'you' and 'you' is up here in your head and it's going to come out with your pen.

ML: I think over time, a bit like mindfulness, if you're using a regular practice of writing it can alter the way the brain 'fires-off'. So you can set up new habits, so it's not going to change if there is a particular condition, it's not necessarily going to change that. But what it can do, as a regular process of reviewing and being pleased with yourself.

One of the things that came up was about you know I can be pleased with what I've written and engaging in something that literally gets the brain to fire in different ways. It can, over time build up new patterns and it can... It's what it symbolises I think. A lot of the time in mental health one of the things that that is so difficult to be with is the fact that the world doesn't feel safe. Whether it's our immediate world or our internal world, it doesn't feel safe.

And there's something about that regular process of writing and getting to know yourself and having somewhere that you can go, that is safe you know that no one's going to judge you. Even if in that moment you're judging yourself really badly. You can choose where you go on the page and even though it might not be an easy choice like in depression... You know we'll say, it will help you if you take up exercise. It will help you if you don't sit there doing nothing and ruminating, it will help you if you distract yourself. Actually it's quite difficult at times when you're really depressed to actually take that first motivational step.

EH: Yeah, of course. Are there any particular methods you use for people who are perhaps quite reluctant to open up to begin with? I am imagining if somebody was hoping to get into facilitating or creative writing therapy and the difficulties they might have. And we talked about the idea that if you're stuck in a certain type of behaviour or perhaps you've been told you aren't allowed to express yourself, obviously, it's great that you have that person in the room with you. How do you get past that barrier if they are finding it particularly difficult to open up to begin with? Is that a very slow process?

WF: It can be slow. It's not going to happen overnight if someone is very reluctant or very distressed and they can't... I mean it can be a lot of time [spent] maybe just sitting there and then maybe just reading a little bit of something from somewhere. Maybe nothing to do with whatever's going on for them but something that soothing a poem that takes you somewhere else, takes you to the sea somewhere. And then after time I find that they will start to write but it can be very slow. [ML: Yeah.] It just depends.

When you said that Emily I was thinking about how it's a bit like... Unless you are a very practiced comedian, if you say to someone, "You know, I'm quite funny. I always make my friends laugh." And they go, "Right tell me a joke." It just goes, in the same way that if you say, "Right here's a piece of paper, write something." You're going to go, "Whoah! I can't do that.

EH: You're right, a blank page can be so frightening!

ML: It can be.

EH: We were talking about this idea of having to put some blinkers on, of having to have a structure because it frightens me to just be told, "Okay talk." You know, when people ask you, "How are you feeling?" And I am feeling so many horrible or wonderful things at once, I'm just going to say fine. Because I can't find the words and I can't find the way to express myself.

So sometimes perhaps you know we say, oh people were very reluctant to talk. And then you know... I work with children and, "Are things okay?" And they say, "Things are fine, they're fine." And it looks like, oh well they can't express themselves but I actually think it's that they just haven't ever really been able to or allowed to be.

WF: Allowed!

ML: Allowed! You see, that's the thing. I was thinking if you walked into a space and someone said, how are you and you felt that person genuinely wants to know. And it wouldn't matter how you were that you could say, actually I'm feeling quite suicidal today that they wouldn't either want to dismiss it or be horrified or just try and take it away from you. Then you'd probably feel okay about saying it.

Not okay as in great, I'm feeling suicidal but as in, you'd feel I can actually genuinely tell this person how I feel. I think it's about, [how] we often don't feel we're allowed or that the other person really wants to hear what we're feeling. And so part of that group facilitation

part of that one to one therapy is about allowing people in their own time to get a sense that actually they are allowed. What they have to say is wanted.

That there's no pressure because when you were asking that question it sounded a bit like you know, you were bringing that pressure that we all have about, you know, "What happens if I've got this piece of paper in front of me and I don't know where to begin?" And that happens in groups sometimes, people well you know...

Or I set exercises for people to do in one to one therapy in between sessions, you know, maybe you might want to do that. And people sometimes come back and say, "I couldn't do it. I wasn't able to do it, I just looked at it and so I ended up writing that instead." You know, that's not getting it wrong, that's great. But if you haven't or if you can't, maybe that's where some of the prompts and things that we learned in going to a taught group.

You can learn or from some books you can learn some techniques that will get you started past that first sentence and it's about going, "It doesn't matter. I don't have to worry if I'm not going to start writing the thing I really think I want to be writing. I'm just going to start off with writing any old thing." That's where free-writing [comes in] where you might just start writing.

"So I'm going to write for five minutes. Well I don't know what I'm going to write, I don't know. This is boring, I'm really stuck I'm really stuck. This is really stupid..." And you just keep writing whatever comes into your head, eventually it will take you somewhere.

EH: Yeah. It reminds me a lot of when I was an inpatient in Mile End Hospital and there was nothing to do. So they'd sign you up for all these activities and you'd go to yoga and you'd go and get your nails painted and actually it was quite nice. It was very relaxing. But I remember one of the sessions was art therapy so we were asked to draw something and I can't draw, at all. I'm not visual and I would put my hands up and say I'm sorry... And I couldn't think of anything.

You know, if someone gives me a pen and says doodle, I might draw like a little house. But I don't have the capacity in my head to create something visual on the page. I can, on the other hand, obviously I'm much more comfortable with words and I could have written pages and pages and pages of something. I think sometimes I try and think about people who are being asked to write who don't have any confidence.

Who perhaps have been told through school or through, you know, through learning difficulties, dyslexia or whatever. But have problems with writing on top of you know expressing themselves. And just that feeling of having a blank page and somebody saying, "Okay write." And that being like when somebody told me to draw something and I felt I can't possibly, I actually felt quite miffed about the situation. "I just can't do that!"

WF: I often quote Jen Hadfield the poet who said, "Take a blank page and let the wilderness in." So I say to them, just write wilderness and then put I remember, and then see where that goes. Or if you don't want to put that, just think about letting the wilderness

in just let your mind go to the paper and write anything. Even if it's, "I don't know why the hell I'm here!"

That's fine, you know just let it in. And usually people will write something, even if it's an angry rant. It's a start.

EH: I work with lower sets, smaller lower sets in the secondary school that I'm in and I remember asking them to write me a letter once. And one of the pupils just wrote, "I hate school." And he needed me to know that. I was asking them to write about their lives, about what they were doing and all he needed me to know was that he hated school. You know, that meant more perhaps than somebody writing pages upon pages that they always tell people. Sometimes I think people might create things in sessions that although it looks very small has been a huge step for them individually.

WF: Yeah. Because I always say it's not about quantity and the quality will come with whatever you write, whatever it is.

ML: I suppose I feel a bit fortunate in that respect that I'm always working with people who... So if it's a group, people have chosen to come so in the groups that I run I'm not going to be working with people who don't... Who aren't interested in writing because they've chosen to sign up for it. And in individual therapy people have chosen to come for therapy, I don't work with people who are literally forced, they're not part of a system where they have to attend certain sessions.

So again I'll give people a choice, some of my clients really enjoying engaging in work around writing and some really don't want to and so I have the good fortune not to have to impose it on them, if you like. But I think it's really interesting to hear from what you're both saying that... It was almost like an omission on my part where I hadn't thought about the people who have to go to a group where they're expected...

Like children, you know, it's just so obvious that, you know, how did I not think about it? That they have to write and of course they might not want to. Because the clients who come to me that don't want to write well they don't have to.

EH: Do you feel you can offer them more of an opportunity to refine that writing, though, if you've already got people who very willing. Then do you feel that you can also offer them something as writers? That you can kind of help them hone-in their craft?

ML: Oh that's really interesting. When people are using writing in therapy, I'm not encouraging the idea of the craft of writing other than if certain forms or techniques might be helpful to get the writing going. But in that context it's about being expressive. But I have in various contexts, from people publishing works to people doing doctorates and writing thesis people have wanted help with their writing in that context. And it's much more about engaging with the emotional aspect.

It might be the emotional blocks to it. But sometimes if people are writing characters or if people are wanting to think about their audience. I think that the kind of work that Wendy and I do is helpful to expanding the creative relationship with your own creativity.

EH: Wendy do you agree?

WF: Yes.

EH: Do you feel that sometimes it is possible to help people, at least approach things in a way that might create something more interesting?

WF: Yes. I think when they've got writing and they themselves want to improve after a bit, as they're getting better or accepting more of whatever's going on for them.

I was just going to go back to something that Marie was saying earlier about schizophrenia, and I've probably got it wrong now, and the chaos in the mind. Because when I worked with children and they were on the ward and they were told, you're going into writing now and they would come in. There were people who had been absolutely frantic, in a frenzy on the ward all over themselves and by coming in and by giving prompts for writing they kind of contained their mind.

Now, I know it's probably the opposite to what I think you were saying earlier. Sometimes it can be too restrictive or if someone's in a psychotic place and you give them... Again it's knowing your group and you give them a prompt, it might not be the right thing but on the other hand it can sometimes contain a thought up there.

And they might write chaos or they might write something that's nonsensical around say blue for instance because I mentioned that earlier but they will be concentrating on the blue word and [**ML:** Yes.] using their mind to help them come into the world a little bit more.

ML: Yes. That reminds me of something that a psychiatrist said to me who worked with, specifically people with schizophrenia and he was saying that one of the techniques they used to give to their clients was to tell them to keep talking. To keep talking, literally and talk to, not necessarily talk to the voices if the voice is very busy and feeling threatening. This is a reason you may have seen someone walking down the street talking to themselves.

And the reason for that [technique] was that, if your brain is engaged with formulating the words that are coming out of your mouth it can't at the same time be generating this other dialogue. And so maybe that's what you're also saying, that whilst you're focussed on the writing your silencing the other voices?

WF: You're pushing those other things aside. You're silencing the other voices.

EH: Which is good for voices, intrusive thoughts I suppose as well. To have a focus. For me, in particular, I really enjoy having like, a space to sit, somewhere to be sat down. I have a desk or you know I sit at my kitchen table sometimes but I am on a chair and I have something in front of me that is... This is going to have my complete attention right now and

it can really... In the sense that it also takes you away from a place it can really allow me to realise, okay I am in my kitchen.

And then I begin to write about that, "I am in my kitchen right now. I'm sat on my chair right now." You know this mindfulness, just being in the moment, not worrying too much about the past. Especially with anxiety, anything to do with the next thirty seconds or above, it's really helpful. We were talking about the physicality of writing and like I said having that page, that chair and knowing that that is all that matters for...

I will write for thirty seconds, if I'm still happy I'll write for another thirty and then you create... Sometimes it doesn't even matter about the content. And I think that's what is important, we've touched on this before in our conversation earlier when you were saying it doesn't have to be good and as soon as you realise there is no wrong way to do something it can be really quite freeing. It can be exciting and ultimately I think obviously it can be incredibly helpful.

How as facilitators do you protect yourselves during sessions and in after care? You're exposed to some very traumatic and difficult things. We were speaking earlier about this idea that you take so much on but ultimately you know you're human beings. Sometimes, people are drawn to certain professions because of their own personal experiences that might be similar to what people are expressing with in a group situation. What do you do to protect yourselves as facilitators?

WF: I think it's very important to have someone outside, a mentor [perhaps] someone outside the group that you can talk to or a supervisor that you can go through the group process with. What's happened, so that you're not carrying the whole baggage yourself. I mean you still are but you can talk things through and think about how to handle things next time.

I don't think there is really a protection is there, it has to come from within really. We have to know when we have to stand back a bit, which isn't easy if you're running a six-week group and there is somebody who's very disturbing [in the group] for five weeks. You have to carry it around and have someone you can talk to. That's my advice.

ML: Having come from a therapy training as in therapy trained background and then from the Masters that I did there was a lot of emphasis placed on safety and on safety for both, participants and for yourself. And yes supervision is one of those. I mean as a therapist it's a requirement where you meet with a supervisor and talk about your work and talk about yourself as well.

It's checking in where you are and has somebody's story really affected you. Has it touched on something that's maybe raw for you and as therapists we have therapy throughout our training. And a lot of therapists will be dipping in and out of personal therapy as well afterwards so there is that aspect.

But in the same way that also we're inviting our clients to write, that we might also write. So if we feel enormously affected by something, you know, we could write about it. And that's

where that other aspect of safety, where we might shred things or you know you might... If you're doing something just to express this for yourself as with clients, you can say you don't have to keep it if you don't want anyone to see it. You can you can get rid of it.

But I think training, knowing your boundaries, knowing when you need to stop. I mean, knowing if there might be things going on those are... I had a period in my life when there were a whole series of events that happened and I needed to take a little bit of time out because I knew I wasn't going to be able to be fully present and available to the people I work with. So I think there's a lot about knowing yourself.

WF: But also, I mean, I trained as a family therapist and when we'd have our meetings at the time... One time I was having a lot of problems with one of my sons so any family that came with a son, with a problem of the same age that was something that I didn't go near. And I would take a completely different problem with a different family.

So it's the same in a group really if you know something's going on for someone that might be touching on something on you, you take a completely different stance with how you'd run that group or what you take in for them to write about.

EH: We've had a very rich conversation today about some really important issues. And I think I would like to end with an idea of how do people get involved? Whether someone... We were talking about that you might need to be referred and that was something. But how do people get involved in the work that both of you are currently doing?

WF: Well for me the work I've been doing, well the recent project I've been doing has been at the Macmillan Cancer Centre at UCH in London. And so people could... It was going on, it was a free workshop two hours every Tuesday afternoon, people could just sign up. When I've worked in schools, people have generally been referred. So it's different. I haven't got a private practice so I'd just go.

ML: Do you sometimes do things with Lapidus?

WF: Yes I have done in the past. I haven't done for a couple of years. Yeah but I have done.

EH: So Lapidus is?

ML: Lapidus is this national organisation but they have regional groups as well, for example, there's one in London.

WF: I started the London one a few years ago but I very rarely go now.

ML: But they sometimes do workshops and they do training things. I think if people were interested in learning how to do it, I was thinking you can go to various workshops and then there's the course that's run by Metanoia. The one that I did, that you can go free a year and do a certificate, two years and do a postgrad diploma or three years and do the Masters and it teaches you how to do it.

WF: It's based in Bristol and London. So there are two locations.

ML: Yes, that's right.

EH: And if you're interested in participating?

ML: Then [**WF:** Lapidus is the best I think.] Lapidus is the best way and NAWE, N-A-W-E, both of their websites have lists of workshops and groups that people are running nationally.

EH: Oh, nationally? Great.

ML: Yeah. And you can also look on places like Meetup. The website Meetup that runs you know things to go to. They've got them in London and all the various towns and cities. And people often offer workshops on there as well. But I'd say just check out, if you're struggling with your mental health and you're going to join a group. A writing group and you want it to be something that's going to enhance your wellbeing, I would say check out the credentials of the person who's running it.

WF: Absolutely! You have to be so careful, there are people who start writing groups like that with no qualifications and it's dangerous. Lapidus, I think is a good start. You might not want to sign up for a year's class.

ML: Like the Metanoia? You might just do a workshop.

WF: Exactly but with Lapidus you can do odd workshops and it will show you how interested you are and the routes to go to take your interest further.

ML: Yeah but definitely if your mental health can be precarious or if you struggle with your with your mental health then in those situations I think it's really important to look for a facilitator who has experience of working in mental health. [**WF:** Absolutely!] Which isn't to say anything bad about facilitators who don't because there's lots of writing groups for wellbeing that are run by people who got loads of experience doing writing for wellbeing.

But I think if we're talking about borderline personality [disorder], if we're talking about bipolar, if we're talking about psychotic illnesses, for example. I think the space that you can be held with someone who if you had a wobble.

WF: Yeah.

EH: Would be able to respond appropriately?

ML: Indeed, would know how to be with you and contain that. That's a personal view and [**WF**: I totally agree.] I don't want to offend anybody who's not doing that.

WF: No because writing for wellbeing is quite, quite different.

EH: I think it's important that you make that point and the differentiation between those two things, I think is really very important.

WF: Yes, writing for wellbeing is very commendable but writing with people with mental health problems is quite different.

EH: Thank you to both Wendy and Marie, thank you so much. To finish off with we are each going to read poetry written by young people in psychiatric hospital. We will be reading the work but not the names of the writers.

[We do not have permission from the authors to reproduce the poems in this transcript.]

EH: Thank you to both Wendy French and Marie Larkin for coming today.

WF: Thank you.

ML: Thank you. It's been really good to share.

WF: It has, to air our views. Thank you very much. Thank you, Marie.

End of transcript.