

# Learning Self-Therapy Through Writing

an experience in  
Creative Journaling

by Dr. Nathaniel Gadsden

Biography by Kelly Sloane Britt

*Learning Self-Therapy Through Writing an experience in Creative Journaling*

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This manual is not intended to take the place of a professional counselor or therapist. It is the recommendation of the author that this manual is used only as a guide by the reader. The author conducts workshops on the use of this manual. For more information visit [www.upublish.com/books/gadsden.htm](http://www.upublish.com/books/gadsden.htm)

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## *About the Author*

*by Kelly Sloane Britt*

Nathaniel Gadsden wears many hats. Poet, counselor, father, Reverend, husband, teacher, doctor of philosophy. During a period in America when intellectualism tends to breed classism and inaccessibility, Nate successfully challenges and defeats such stereotypes. While he is accomplished in many arenas, his foundation remains spiritual and his door is always open. With a wealth of knowledge and experience to call his own, Nate Gadsden is ever prepared to share his wealth while remaining a perpetual student of life.

Comparable to the custom of village poets and storytellers in traditional African cultures, years ago a tradition was initiated in his Grandmother's living room. Nate recognized at an early age that each member of his family migrated to his Grandmother's home for counsel and words of advice. He realized that while his Grandmother was not well educated by today's standards, the wealth of her experience and her willingness to share her journey with others was priceless. This was Nate's first confirmation that experience was a most credible teacher.

While still a youth, Nate became aware of how beautiful and tragic and wondrous the journey of life is. Born and raised in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, he learned first hand the realities of the welfare system, the single parent household and the devastation of alcoholism. While he often found himself grief stricken by his circumstances and painfully aware of life's ironies, Nate never felt defeated. On the contrary, he began to question everything and everyone and embarked on a journey in search of his own voice.

During his high school years, Nate embraced the value of community. His extended family willfully accepted the task of providing he and his brother with a spiritual and healthy living environment. He participated in organized sports and upon entering college, formed the first of many communities he would create.

Nate's awareness of his immediate surroundings as well as the enormous change that was occurring in his life and in America fostered a need for him to begin documenting his journey. He was energized by the documents and orators of the civil rights and black pride movements. He was inspired by the voices of the Last Poets and Gil Scott Herion captured on vinyl. The power and relevance of the written and spoken word intrigued him.

Poetry became a logical outlet for Nate as it allowed him to document the realities of the journey of his while creating a forum for addressing those realities. Strangers and friends gather not only to hear the poet speak but to hear the poet capture pain and hope and promise in words. The feeling can be communal; the listener's eyes may close or the head rocks to and fro and then, "yes!". For a moment, one individual's reality is personified or perhaps enlightened by another. In the oral tradition, Nate discovered that poetry breeds community and, in the poetic sense of the word, he also found home.

As an orator, Nate commands an amazingly humble yet motivational, compelling and accessible presence. Trite references or clichés are not permitted. When he speaks, one feels that truth, light, empathy, clarity, and vision are at play. All the makings of healthy and spirited community.

A living testament to Dr. Gadsden's understanding that arts breed community, compassion and awareness, the small extended family of the Writers Wordshop. The Wordshop has become a forum that isn't consumed with racial, class or ethical issues. It is, however, a forum for exploring such issues. Devoid of traditional formulas for educational outlets, the Writers Wordshop is a venue that promotes dialogue beyond elocution and transcends the partitions of the Neighborhood Community Center. Issues, realities, myths, statistics, and rhetoric are internalized, questioned, and thoroughly examined. Slowly undressed and artfully crafted, Nate facilitates the creation of a new life line from the mind to pen to paper. A new community.

With all of the hats that Nate elects to wear in a given day, community and awareness remain. He generously continues the tradition his Grandmother initiated years ago with his immediate family and an extended family of communities he has either created, cultivated or nurtured. Whether at work in the community at the Neighborhood Center, the Writers Wordshop, Christ Community Outreach Church or in counsel with troubled foster children or hospice patients, Nate considers himself a life long student of human behavior. While his experience and education permit him to engage professionally in efforts toward improving the lives of others, he is ever aware of the priceless gift he receives when granted the opportunity to engage in such an exchange.

Recently, Nate presented poetry at a Pennsylvania university. After his reading, an excited student told Nate of how thrilling the reading was and that the students needed him there. He was flattered to learn that by sharing his experience, the student felt such a tremendous amount of kinship. After considering the matter further, he laughed out loud. "They thought they needed me? I needed them!" His ability and need to keep one foot in the community, whether that community is the "hood" or the academy, is surely one of his greatest assets.

In 1998, undoubtedly with the increased public awareness of the value of poetry, Nate was appointed Poet Laureate of the City of Harrisburg in 1998. A new hat. Nate's understanding of the diversity of human kind and his ability to weave in and out of the intricate social confines of American society will surely prove beneficial in this arena. Perhaps his awareness of the similarities that exist within all humankind and his ability to transcend judgment will help foster a greater sense of community in the City of Harrisburg and the Central Pennsylvania region.

Poet, counselor, father, Reverend, husband, teacher, doctor of philosophy. Many hats. One simple message. There is always more to learn, see, feel and experience if one is willing to share.

We said Amen - For the word had been spoken.  
We broke hands - and I did not speak.  
We broke hands - and I did not speak.  
I was honored.  
I was honored.  
I gave witness to the work - and that was enough.”

Excerpt from The Journey  
Dr. Nathaniel J. Gadsden

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Do you know that you are the only one of you?  
You are absolutely unique. There is no one like you.  
**You** are the original article. God only made **one**, and  
you are **it**.

Think what this means! You are a completely  
in charge of your own life. **You** determine what  
happens to **you** by being true to that self which you  
really are. Shakespeare said, "To thine own self be  
true, and it must follow as the night the day, thou  
cannot then be false to any man."

So be yourself today! The world is waiting for  
**you!** Do what you have to do, joyously and with all  
your heart!

*Anonymous*



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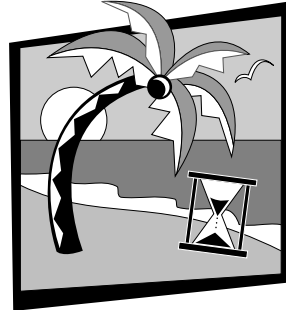
## **OVERVIEW**

### ***Learning Self-Therapy Through Writing***

The multifaceted model for this course is designed to serve as a guide to help you get safely off the emotional merry-go-round that often keeps people 'stuck' ~ with writing as the primary tool for change. The imagery of poetry, the creativity of story-writing, and the exploration of feelings through journaling are pathways toward a foundation for self-discovery. As you engage the written word throughout the *Learning Self-Therapy Through Writing* series, you will develop effective methods to not only recognize feelings such as anger, pain, abandonment, grief and even happiness ~ you will also learn to define, examine and manage those and other feelings!

Learning to achieve emotional stability is often quite a precarious balancing act. Emotions can be overwhelming. Unchecked and unmanaged, emotions can render us incapable of successfully functioning day-to-day. Faced with painful occurrences of the present, fears about the future, and unresolved issues from the past, one can begin to feel 'stuck'. Or, to coin an old phrase, one may have the sense of being "up the creek without a paddle". But congratulations! You have made the decision to claim a more harmonious life! You are now ready to begin the revealing journey that takes you far, far away from the place we will call ~~~

**Someday Isle.**



### **The Model**

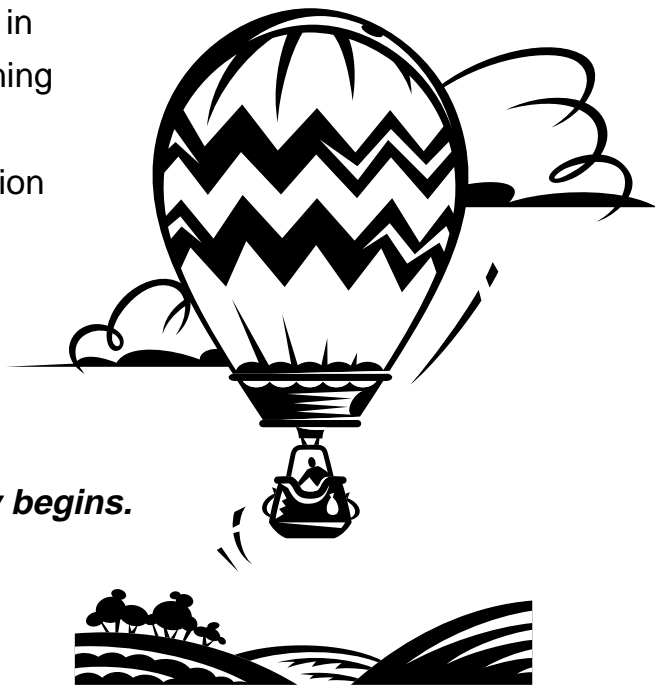
**Someday Isle** is not the place you want to be! As the model for this series, 'Someday Isle' translates to "**Someday I'll**".

How often do you proclaim to yourself, "Someday I'll do this" or "Someday I'll do that"? Most of us unconsciously set ourselves up for defeat. We do so by thinking and uttering these self-fulfilling prophecies which thwart progress, contentment and success. *Learning Self-Therapy Through Writing* sets the stage and prepares you to realize the potential within. This series will also empower you with the skills necessary to direct the course of your life ~ for the rest of your life!

## HOW IT WORKS

IT WORKS BEST WHEN YOU WORK AT IT! As you plan your getaway from Someday I'll, you will encounter four bridges. These are the Bridges of ***I AM ~ I CAN ~ I WANT TO ~ I'LL DO IT TODAY!*** *Learning Self-Therapy Through Writing* provides clear guidelines and encourages expeditious timelines. For your journey, several tools are required. They include pen and paper, your workbooks and journal, a willingness to do the work, and an open mind. The activities include creative writing, self-examination, and mutual sharing with others who have also chosen to cease dwelling on Someday I'll. At times you may feel the journey is too rocky and the waves are too steep. Yet as you trek through the pages that follow, you will internalize that YOU are in charge of your life. *Learning Self-Therapy Through Writing* is a lifelong mission toward the fulfillment of personal freedom and happiness!

***And now, your journey begins.***



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## ***Introduction to Learning Self-Therapy Through Writing***

***Who Am I? What Is Most Important To Me?*** These are the questions we seldom ask, although throughout our lives, we strive and struggle to find out who we are to make sense of our existence. The search can be a happy exploration or a painful struggle – often both. Seeking understanding of our sometimes puzzling thoughts and feelings, we typically try to assemble the many bits of our behavior to somehow make a whole. And while this is going on, we frequently lose ourselves in the defenses we have so carefully set up to keep us from seeing ourselves and keep us from being ourselves! What we are seeking is ~ identity.

When we are unclear and unsure about our own identity, feelings of insecurity, self-defeating thinking, and the ability to sort out emotions becomes progressively skewed. When we are unclear and unsure about our identity, it is difficult to make choices based on true needs and desires, or even to realize options and alternatives. Clearly, establishing identity is the starting point toward self-examination – and ultimately, the ability and know-how to acknowledge and address the issues which affect our lives.



### ***Exercise***

1. Write a brief paragraph answering the question: “Who am I?”
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Write a brief paragraph answering the question: “What is most important to me?”

## MY DECLARATION OF SELF-ESTEEM

I am me.

I was uniquely created by God. There's not another human being in the whole world like me—I have my very own fingerprints and I have my very own thoughts. I was not stamped out of a mold like a Coca-Cola top to be the duplicate of another.

I own all of me—my body, and I can do with it what I choose; my mind, and all of its thoughts and ideas; my feelings, whether joyful or painful.

I own my ideals, my dreams, my hopes, my fantasies, my fears.

I reserve the right to think and feel differently from others and will grant to others their right to thoughts and feelings not identical with my own.

I reserve the right to think and feel differently from others and will grant to others their right to thoughts and feelings not identical with my own.

I own all my triumphs and successes. I own also all my failures and mistakes. I am the cause of what I do and am responsible for my own behavior. I will permit myself to be imperfect. When I make mistakes or fail, I will know that I am not the failure—I am still O.K.—and I will discard some parts of me that were unfitting and will try new ways.

I will laugh freely and loudly at myself—a healthy self-affirmation.

I will have fun living inside my skin.

I will remember that the door to everybody's life needs this sign:  
Honor Thyself

I have value and worth.

I am me, and I am O.K.

*ANONYMOUS*

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# SELF IMAGE SELF IMAGE

You have written about your self image ~ who you think you are, and what things matter to you most. This should have provided some insight into fundamental notions of your 'self'. While it is important to develop your own sense of self, it is also relevant to analyze why you think of yourself as you do.

When reviewing your past, what are the most troublesome issues you believe prevent you from becoming the person you desire to be? For instance, as a student in middle and high school, you may have developed serious problems with procrastination over the years that were never checked. A result could be that you are now puzzled as to why you never seem to complete assignments – at least not on time. Or, maybe you felt someone close to you had little faith in you becoming successful and often told you so. They may have put you down. A result may be that today, you find you have low self esteem. It is important to learn to examine why we develop other-than-positive self images.

Only through touching the root cause are we able to hope for and work toward change. Indeed, you can re-write the script and begin to see yourself as you want to be, and then make the life-changes to help you reach that goal! You can take charge!

The following exercise is designed to help you develop insights as to why you see yourself the ways you do:





## *Exercise*

Recollect the images you had of yourself as a child; as an adolescent; as a teenager. It is important to be frank and honest with yourself. Try to use 'one-word' descriptions and very brief phrases.

A. Childhood image ~

B. Adolescent image ~

C. Teenage image ~

D. Present image ~

E. How do I want to see myself in five years?

F. How would I like to view myself in ten years?



## *Exercise*

Write your autobiography. (*Use only the front and back of this page.*)

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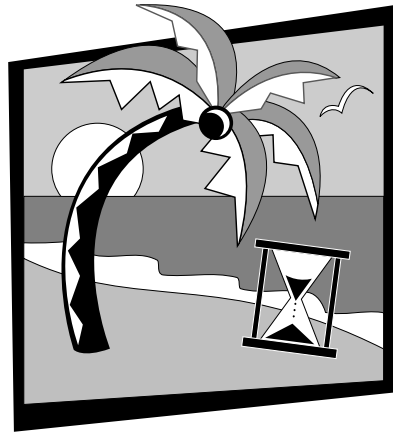
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*Discussion Questions  
About Your Autobiography*

1. What part of your autobiography was the most fun to write about?
2. What part was the most difficult to write about?
3. Did you write about parts of your life from your early childhood?
4. Did you include your achievements in your autobiography?
5. Did you include any failures in your autobiography?
6. What is the one thing you left out of your brief autobiography?

---

*Someday I'll.....*



Now that you have begun to consider your self image, and defined who you are and what is important to you, let's go a step further. It is time to approach the first Bridge of Someday I'll... ***The Bridge of I AM.***

This exercise is designed to further help you identify who you really believe yourself to be ~ and how you really feel about yourself. In an earlier exercise, you wrote about "Who am I?" and "What is most important to me?"

Now, try and list the things about yourself that you find puzzling or even mysterious ~ what drives you to do the things you do. For instance, in relationships, you may express feelings you know aren't true and wonder why. Or, you find yourself saying 'YES' when asked to do something and you really want to say 'NO'.

Do you often make decisions you know are not in your own best interest? Do you believe you consistently sacrifice your own wishes and desires to do what someone else wants you to do? Could you be a 'people pleaser'?

This exercise does not refer to those necessary and required commitments such as work or school, or the typical give-and-take required of committed relationships. No, it refers to circumstances in which you had - or have - a choice, and made decisions you later regretted. While we all do this occasionally, 'people pleasers' habitually go out of their way, with the hope that others will like them more. One result is that you then feel put-upon, unhappy with yourself, and resentful toward the person or circumstance.



## *Exercise*

1. Do I often say things to people that I do not feel or that I do not mean? Give three brief examples where your behavior has fit these circumstances.
  
2. Think for a minute. How did you feel in those scenarios? In brief phrases, list the feelings you had at the moment you were being dishonest with yourself. Contrast those feelings with how you felt sometime later about having been dishonest with yourself.
  
3. Respond: Why did I choose to behave in those ways? What was / is the payoff? In brief phrases, I will list how I benefited from misrepresenting my true feelings.

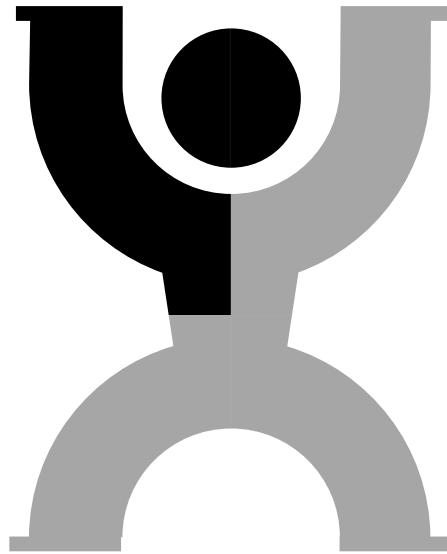
## FRIENDSHIP

There is nothing in this whole world, Lord, like having one true, enjoyable, understanding friend. No one is ever so lonely that he doesn't have a friend. To find one, all you have to do is go out and help somebody. Now and then say to a friend, "I love you." Those words weren't meant only for sweethearts. They are just as significant, beautiful and life-enhancing when said to a dear friend. A true test of friendship: If you died, which of your friends would you trust to clean out your drawers? When I talk, my friend listens. When my friend talks, I listen. That's one of the reasons we're friends. Friends are like bracelet charms. If you truly love and enjoy your friends, they are part of the golden circle that makes life good. If you want more friends, smile more! I've never known anyone who smiled a lot who didn't have a lot of friends. Friends are too precious to lose—even when they disappoint us. Lord, help me to forgive this friend—it is only because I need and love her. (And because I'd want her to forgive me!) Friends are worth forgiving. The heart has many doors, of which friendship is but one. Don't be too quick to bolt them.

*Anonymous*

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# The bridge of I AM



***The Bridge of I AM*** is where you come to grips with who you are, and how you feel about yourself. It is the fundamental arena in which beliefs about 'self' are created and nurtured. To identify what "I AM" means is step one toward becoming the person you desire to be. It is the area in which you discover why you think of yourself as you do, and what things over your lifetime have brought you to your conclusions.

The importance of the self-concept in an individual goes far beyond providing a basis for one's reality. The self image begins to form very early in life. In infancy, we constantly explore ourselves and the world around us. We learn what is 'me' and what is 'not me' and discover we are a separate being. We learn to respond to our own name and acquire a sense of our own identity.

As we grow, we develop an increasingly complex and sophisticated image of who we are. Our self image is heavily influenced by certain 'significant others' ~ the persons with whom we are in close interaction. In early years, these influential persons almost certainly include our parents / caregivers, siblings, and other family members. Later, neighbors, teachers and schoolmates help shape our images of ourselves.

---

In our interaction with these significant others we come, to a large extent, to see ourselves as others see us. We learn from others' reactions what our qualities are and the value or worth attached to these qualities. We learn the areas of endeavor in which we do well and those in which we do poorly. We learn how competent, how attractive, how acceptable, how lovable we are.

With increasing age, we become less vulnerable to others' opinions about us. We pay less attention to the external forces of our environment. We arrive at a firmer sense of self that is less open to challenge and change because of what others seem to determine about who and what we are. Still, those early reactions regarding our personal worth and personal value tend to stick in the sub-conscious. Therefore, we also may become more adept at masking undesirable personal qualities and hide them from ourselves as well as from others ~ until we become strangers to ourselves and barely know who we are.

Some psychologists believe that the basic human force or tendency is about our striving to maintain and enhance the concept of 'self'. Yet others in the field of human behavior do not assign the same preeminence to the self image ~ that the self image is not what drives our thoughts, attitudes, feelings and actions. No matter which school of thought you accept, we probably would all agree on one thing; that when an individual has a solid notion of who he thinks he is and why, it is easier to understand present behavior, relate the present to the past, and even make some predictions about the future. To make the changes you want to see in yourself, it is first necessary that you have a clear picture of who you are!

The following exercise is designed to help you determine whether and how your present self image is anchored. Is your image of yourself tied to institutionalized roles and statuses? How mutable (changeable, variable, alterable) do you believe your self image to be, if at all? Are you a puzzle to yourself?

Before starting this exercise, review the workbook page titled: Writing Poetry: Some Basic Techniques. It is intended to provide some fundamental methods for developing writing skills, with a focus on poetry. It will also stimulate the ability to make close observations, and find new and unusual relationships among things in the world. This includes making connections between your world and YOU!

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## ***WRITING POETRY: SOME BASIC TECHNIQUES***

Poetry is the most concise and powerful form of discourse, and writing poetry can be a tremendous help in further developing language and thinking skills. It requires focus, encourages the writer to think about feeling and meaning, and aids in learning to articulate abstract ideas. Poetry guides us to listen to language and choose words and phrases with care. *Learning Self-Therapy Through Writing* presents ideal methods of linking one's self with all things. By verbalizing feelings and thoughts ~ and mirroring them back to one's self ~ the stage is set for self-discovery, acceptance, healing, integration, and change where desirable.

The reading and writing of poetry are inseparable. In *Learning Self-Therapy Through Writing*, sharing is an essential ingredient, although you alone must determine what is appropriate for your private journal – which will be discussed later. You may share with an entire class, or with a small group. You may share with your facilitator. The willingness to share your strengths and weaknesses through the written word provides several bonuses. A few of them are listed:

1. Talking to others about issues that impact your life can result in valuable feedback. You get fresh perspectives, and new ways of viewing things.
2. Verbalizing your own challenges often triggers others to recall similar experiences, allowing you to know that you are not alone, that others have been there!
3. Expressing your feelings through poetry, word association, and other writing styles and techniques increases your ability to more concisely define emotions.
4. Logging your thoughts through journaling is a powerful way to measure changes and similarities in your thinking, attitudes and behaviors over periods of time.
5. Learning to develop ideas through writing is empowering. Writing improves communication skills and stimulates self-expression with others ~ and with yourself!

---

## ***POETIC TECHNIQUES***

Writing about one's self is often considered one of the most difficult of all writing tasks. As you continue *Learning Self-Therapy Through Writing*, it will be helpful to also develop methods of incorporating language that defines exactly what you want to say ~ even though what you want to say may be symbolic, or may involve the use of imagery. Several techniques are incorporated in the poem below. Try to visualize the words you read in the poem by Judith Steinbergh, called *Fireflies*. Steinbergh says she wrote the poem while sitting in a field in Maine.

### ***Fireflies***

Cool green fireflies  
flit over the Maine meadow  
dark then lit.  
They stitch the summer night  
with pale threads of light.

Fireflies rise  
out of grass  
like hundreds of  
green eyes blinking  
linking us  
to the distant  
stars.



---

## Focusing Questions

We begin with sense imagery.

- a. Which sense does the poet focus on?

*Almost entirely on sight.*

- b. Can you hear some examples of alliteration?

*Fireflies flit. Maine meadow.*

- c. Which words rhyme exactly?

*Flit and lit. Night and light. Blinking and linking.*

- d. Which words sound similar but do not rhyme exactly?

*Lit and Stitch. Dark and Stars.*

- e. What comparisons can you find?

*The simile of fireflies rising like hundreds of green eyes, and, the implied metaphor of fireflies stitching the night as if they were sewing it.*

- f. How does the poet connect the earth and sky?

*Pale threads of light.*