



Center for Journal Therapy

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Conversations with Kay

Writing Through Transitions

*a conversation with
master coach
Leia Francisco*

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Writing Through Transitions:

A Conversation with Master Coach Leia Francisco

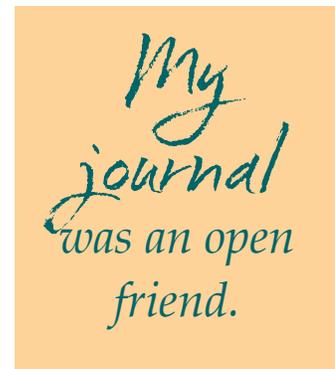
Interview conducted in January 2008

Kathleen Adams: I'd like to start with your own journal practice. When did you start writing a journal and what has its impact been in your own life?

Leia Francisco: I started writing in my teen years. I loved the power of words to help and encourage myself, right at my fingertips. I continued journaling on and off through my 20s and 30s and, in particular, at times of difficult transitions for myself. My journal was an open friend, a means through which I could navigate turbulent times and explore them for personal growth. I've continued right to this day. Journaling offers a naked beauty. It offers us a way to explore and be ourselves that very few other venues offer. So it's still part of not only my daily practice but also my profession.

KA: How did you begin incorporating writing into your coaching practice?

LF: Most of the typical assessments in coaching are done in written form. *Write the 10 most satisfying accomplishments of your life. Write about your goals.* I discovered that for those coaching clients who enjoyed the writing, there simply wasn't enough depth. So I began to explore journal writing as a much deeper supplement to my coaching practice. That's when I discovered the Center for Journal Therapy and began a focused study of journal theory and facilitation. It really has markedly changed my coaching practice and helped the people that I coach.



KA: You referenced your clients who enjoyed the writing. What about people who don't greet the page quite as readily? How do you help them move into the writing process?

LF: What I generally find is that when people approach coaching and there is an opportunity to write, some of them bring the old baggage of expectations. Some bring the miseries of high school and college and the feeling that they're going to be judged or that they're not good enough. So a big part of my work is to help the client understand that this is a process of self-discovery and a private means of going through the coaching experience. Sometimes that's just as simple as starting in a very basic way, like making assurances of privacy and manageability. I worked with an executive who was put off

about journal writing because she felt that she didn't have the time to do it, and she felt that perhaps it would be too revealing. So I began by assuring her that any time she wrote in her journal, she did not need to share it with me, or anyone. That freedom opened her up. We worked with very short writes and simple prompts. *What is the change that I most want?* Make a list of words and phrases, then take one of those key words and perhaps write more. Once she broke through those old paradigms of being a bad writer or feeling the need to be perfect grammatically, she was able to write in short spurts. Then the door opened to longer and deeper kinds of writing.

KA: Permission is one of my primary areas of advocacy. I think we can't overemphasize that a client can't really do it wrong. Among the therapists I work with, it's generally

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agreed that when a client is willing to use a journal in therapy, we typically get more done in less time with better outcomes. Does that happen in the coaching world, too? Do you find that things move differently or on a different trajectory when your clients are using writing as a tool in the coaching process?

LF: Absolutely. I can think of two clients that I'm working with now who expressed an interest in keeping a journal. Within a matter of weeks what emerged for them were patterns and images and metaphors that spoke to them on another level, in a powerful way. When a client is going through a change, whether a job promotion or retirement or divorce or separation, there is the external event that one can write about almost as a diary. What the journal allows my clients to do is to explore what this change means on a deeper, more internal level. It speeds up the process of great insights. That has been true with nearly every client that I've worked with once they committed to writing on their own behalf.

KA: Do other coaches know about this? Is journaling a well-known modality in the coaching field?

LF: I would say that coaching as a community appreciates writing, but very little has been done in terms of aligning and designing journal tools specifically for coaching. I think it's a totally untapped field. In your world, the therapeutic world, probably most therapists know that journal writing is good. It's the same in the coaching world. *Write about your experiences* or *Keep a journal*. But it stops short of truly helping the client engage in specific ways for their specific needs and what's going on in their lives. I hope to be part of widening the knowledge about what writing tools can do in the coaching community. Of course, keep in mind that coaching as a profession is still relatively young; it only

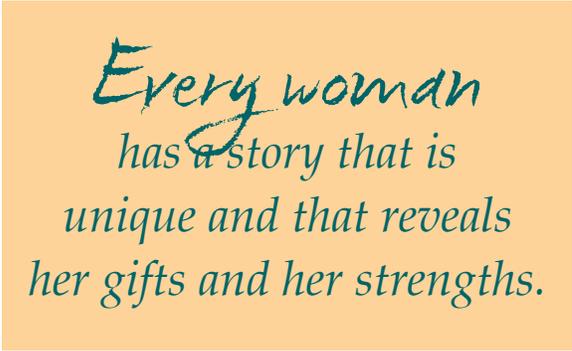
began about 25 years ago. I expect that over the next several years, we'll start to have more specific tools and alignment.

KA: You've done a significant amount of service work in your community with women who were in diminished circumstances who needed assistance with resource development. Have you used writing with these women?

LF: Writing certainly offers opportunities to disenfranchised or marginalized women in a way that few things do. Women who are recovering from substance abuse, or who are transitioning out of a shelter that protects them from abusive partners, or who have limited job skills or are impoverished, often are so caught up in the events that swirl around them and the meeting of immediate needs that something like writing can be considered a luxury. But if they have an advocate who can show them that writing can help empower them, they're more willing to try.

KA: And you are that advocate.

LF: I wanted these women to know that every woman is a story. Every woman has a story that is unique and that reveals her gifts and her strengths. In a way, it's almost like a memoir, to have a woman who is transitioning out of a domestic abuse shelter talk and write about her personal strength, her strength in coming to a shelter, being able to stop that cycle of violence. Creating story marks that passage in a particular way. It allows the women to objectify, acknowledge, own and celebrate it. To say, *This, these words on the page, this is my story, this is who I am. As I read this, as I speak it, or, as we might say in more formal language, as I objectify it, I see that I am OK, that I am strong and that I have a future.* Particularly what I would often do with women who had gone through cycles of poverty, who were trying to get a leg up financially, is have them write their future story. Very often when you're caught up in that cycle it's hard to think of anything except the present pain. So if you can help a woman imagine what her life might look like if she got a job that paid her a living wage, what that would mean to her and her children, it breaks that paralysis. It creates possibilities.



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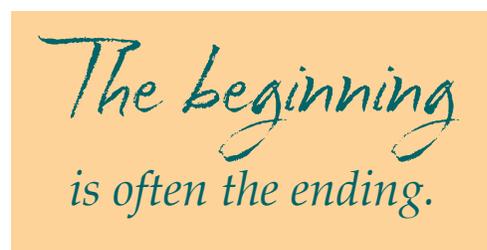
KA: That's the power of the personal story. Your coaching work, whether it is with executive women or women in poverty, specializes in transitions. What's the difference between change and transition?

LF: In my private practice, women come to me knowing that they're anticipating a change. They might be getting a promotion, getting married, having a baby or retiring.

Or they might have been thrust into an unexpected change — divorce or a change in job circumstances. The external even is the change. It has a time element and some likely outcomes.

What fascinates me is the transition. The emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual orientation to that change. The transition is the interior experience of the external circumstances. Facilitating the process of healthy response to change is the work that I call transitions.

I work with people who want change, but sometimes they don't know what that is or how to go about it. Part of my job as a coach is to help them clarify what they really do want and how to get there. The transitional process is much more unique. I'll give you an example. I worked with a high-level government client, who wanted to move out of



one agency into another. Indeed, she was put into a senior executive leadership position at the new agency, and she came to me talking about all the challenges, the low morale, having a huge learning curve. So it would seem that really what we were working on — the problem solving — was around how she could manage this new part of her life.

But as we began to work I said, "I think you have not let go of the old job." This became a true epiphany for her that she had not worked through the loss — the mourning, if you will — of that previous job. She had been in the new job, in the change for several months but emotionally she was still trying to deal with the ending of the old job.

KA: The beginning is so often the ending. Sometimes we have to start with the end before we can move forward.

LF: In western society, we rush through changes. We have a mechanical view. *I have to go from point A to point B and let's get on with it.* So we plunge into the middle of making that change. In the exceptional wisdom of traditional and tribal societies, there is a time of recognition that the old way was gone. It might be changing the way you were dressed. It might be painting a flat color on the face. It was a way of honoring the past and acknowledging that things had to be left behind.

We westerners, particularly Americans, are less understanding of how important it is at the point of change to look at what we need to leave behind, what the losses are. When I work with coaching clients, very often I will ask them what is ending for them. They're reluctant to mention that, as if that's a form of weakness. Sometimes they tell me that they don't want to grovel on the loss. On the contrary, if we can recognize and honor what is ending, we will actually move through the transition process easier.

There's plenty of research on this. I worked with an organization where there was

a merger between two very different parts of the company. One of the participants in my workshop came up and said, “You know, we still haven’t had an opportunity to recognize that our former director died suddenly about two months ago.” So I suggested to her that before the merger was effected, there be some kind of celebration or a toast to the previous director.

The more I work with transition, the more respectful I’ve become of honoring the endings. It might be that you create a timeline of accomplishments. It might be that you simply sit down, as I had one client do, and identify what’s ending for you. It could be your old view of what work is. It could be your single life, what you’re leaving behind. It could be a certain set of values that you have. By recognizing and acknowledging the endings, you’re able to let go. It doesn’t mean that you’re leaving everything behind. In fact, part of the ending is deciding what you want to store away and what you want to take with you and reframing what those endings might mean. If you’ve lost the old job or you’ve decided on a new career, you still bring many of your skills, values and talents to the new job. It’s just a different package. On the contrary, what I’ve also found is that if you don’t honor the endings somehow they will pop up in the next transition. There will be a resonance of that unfinished ending.



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KA: I’m thinking about what you said earlier, that sometimes you have to start simple. Although the process you’re suggesting is deep, the journal route there can actually be quite simple and accessible: A list of things you’re leaving behind; a timeline of the significant events, both positive and negative, a five- or ten-minute write on what you want to honor from the past. If I were a client coming in confused and stressed and not really able to think all that clearly about what’s next for me — these feel like they might be manageable.

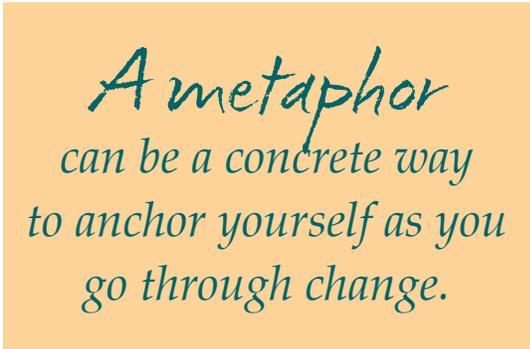
LF: The beauty of the journal is that you can provide different tools for different styles. This writing ritual can be very simple, but the minute you put it to the page, it becomes a marker for you.

I’m trained in William Bridges’ model, and he has a very elegant and simple three-part transition process. You start with the ending. What are you leaving behind? What is now going to be part of your past? The middle, which is the most interesting time to me, is what he calls the neutral zone. Many people who have change models define this in different ways, but it’s that in-between time. You no longer have the old norms and the old way, but the new beginning isn’t quite clear to you.

KA: I call that the time between the trapezes.

LF: Yes. The time between the trapezes. It's a time of confusion. It's also a time of tremendous creativity. One of the things that I would like to do in journal writing is help people tap into the enormous creativity and all the unconscious work that is being done to prepare one for the third stage, which is the new beginning. Journaling provides a container, particularly in the neutral zone, for all those chaotic feelings. You're not sure about anything. There's no floor beneath you. You're forgetful. You seem overwhelmed. The journal holds it all. It also is a means of support and it validates your transition history.

If you write your way through a significant transition, then you have your personal transition history to go back to, and it will always be a validation of your ability to be resilient and to renew yourself through change. You'll be able to see how you went through the breaking apart and then the renewal, the new goals in the new beginning. I've used



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Dr. Ira Progoff's technique of Stepping Stones with great success. If clients are feeling very overwhelmed about their ability to get through the transition, I ask them to list some significant transitions and then write about how they navigated them. It amazes people. They know they got to the other side, but by re-experiencing their ability to handle doubts and eventually to see a new light, a new beacon, they are better

able to control some of the anxiety around that neutral zone. And the Dialogue technique, also originating in Progoff's work — I've had clients write a two-part conversation with Change or Transition.

I've also had success using graphics, symbols and metaphors. A metaphor can be a concrete way to anchor yourself as you go through change and transition. You might create a metaphor for this process of walking along a path. Perhaps the road less traveled, as Robert Frost would say. Where are you on the path? Is the path smooth? Are there rocks? Is there a side road you're interested in? Or it might be a sailing metaphor. Where is the lighthouse? It might be an animal. You're a horse galloping through a field but you don't see any fences. Where do you go? There are lots of opportunities for people who are very concrete to say, *The transition I'm experiencing is like a...* Perhaps these images can be represented in a piece of artwork or a collage.

KA: As one who is not an artist, I love collage because I don't have to do anything except choose and arrange things. I love what you offered, *If this change were a...* It brings journaling, in some essential sense, down to even a single word. So I'm going to try that

with you. You're in transition. You have just relocated to the Hill Country of Texas after retiring from directing the Office for Women in Fairfax County, Virginia, just minutes from Washington, DC. How long has it been? Six months?

LF: I've been in Texas for about 5 months now, yes.

KA: If this stage of your transition for you could be summed up in one word or an image, what would that be?

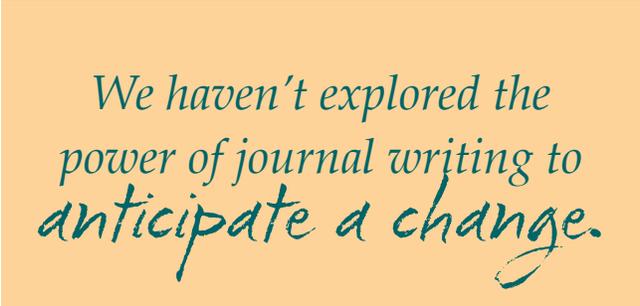
LF: Hmm. I have two thoughts. The image is a bird. From my house on the hilltop here, I can see wonderful, swooping birds in flight. The word is *reinventing*. We haven't yet explored the power of journal writing to anticipate a change. If you can do that and anticipate what the transition is going to be like, it doesn't take away the confusion, but it allows you to be more in control and more understanding of what you're going through. I certainly did that when I transitioned from one career and then began doing more of my coaching and journal writing. It has helped me significantly as I came to a very new place, a very different culture. Another transition is seeing my son, my only child, enlist in the military and enter his new adult life. So it is the power to reinvent. And only journaling, for me, gives that full expression.

It's just this wonderful story. I haven't mentioned the technique of dream journaling, particularly in the neutral zone. If it's not a full dream that

you want to write about, capture the images and metaphors in the dreams, even just dream flakes. Little snatches of a dream have helped me significantly understand what I'm going through. I dreamed of wearing a winter coat in summertime when everybody else was dressed in shorts. Then a few nights later I dreamed about buying wonderful new clothes in rich colors and fabrics that are soft to the touch. It was a clear message to me of shedding the old and looking for the new.

KA: You've disclosed the personal transition of your son enlisting in the military. I'm sure your journal is helping you manage the complex feelings that mothers have when their sons go to war.

LF: Yes. I have been reading about the number of spouses of soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq who are keeping personal journals. I think it would be wonderful to explore what this might mean in a larger community sense. That might be part of my work here. My first graduate work was in English. When I first started teaching writing, many of my

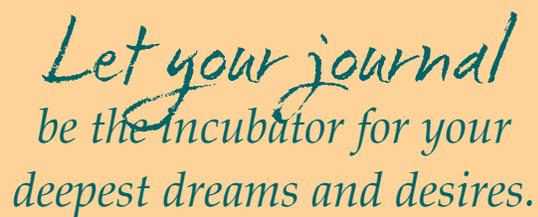


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students were former and recent veterans of the Vietnam War. I found that their writing about that experience was therapeutic for them and certainly eye-opening for me. I began to see the power of writing in a very direct way.

Now, in my dual role as a military mom and a facilitator of writing process, I'm very interested in the writings of the family of military men and women. A couple of military wives expressed how helpful it was to record their own feelings and not just the events of each day but also to feel free to talk about their moments of doubt, their pride in the work that their spouse was doing, and also to keep a family history, if you will, in the journal. I think that there's a great deal of wisdom there for women who might want to share part of their writings or, if not share their writings, to talk about how journal writing has helped them during this time of absence in their lives.

KA: When I work with couples and families I often introduce the concept of a community journal. This is a journal written by more than one person at a time. It still has privacy, but with a shared intimacy that the privacy is extended to the partner, and sometimes to the entire family unit. It can be a very bonding experience as well as, as you say, a way to hold the process and serve as a container for the struggle and the silent witnessing of endurance that is required of us when we are a nation at war.



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LF: It would be, I think, very heartening and very revealing if perhaps the spouses themselves were to create a community journal. We know the soldiers are on the line. What we don't know is about the loneliness, strength and courage of those who wait.

KA: For your Pen Tip, I'd like to shift gears a little bit and talk about a different type of transition, one we each experience at least once a year. I'm talking about the transitions of new cycles, whether it be a new year begun on a birthday, or the new year we all experience on January 1. Can you offer a writing process for a fresh start?

LF: This is a great opportunity for creative imagination, to begin a brand-new year with a brand-new vision for what you want to create in your life for the next 365 days. We've talked about the writing prompt, *What do I want to let go of?* The corollary prompt is, *What do I want to create?* This can be filled with sky-is-the-limit dreams and ideas. Dream big! Let your journal be the incubator for your deepest dreams and desires. When you're clear on what you want, you're much more likely to recognize opportunities when they come along.

About Leia

Leia Francisco, MA, ACC, CJF is passionate about helping individuals and groups maximize their growth and well-being. She helps people understand clearly what changes they want and how to make those changes. As a coach and consultant, Leia brings exceptional skill and experience in all types of changes, both professional and personal. Her success in leading and developing nonprofit initiatives deepens her work as a community coach.

Leia has two specialties. The first is creating programs for women, including career development, personal well-being and purposeful living, and managing change. The second is individual coaching and programs in expressive writing and journaling for personal growth and healing.

Leia has been recognized nationally as an expert on career development and women. She has been a guest speaker throughout the country. She has appeared on affiliates of major television networks, radio, and cable productions and her work has been cited in *The Washington Post*, *Cosmopolitan* magazine, and *Reinventing the Corporation*. She is currently a columnist on workplace issues and she has written a book, *Writing through Transitions*. Leia studied with Kay Adams for her Certified Applied Poetry Facilitator (2006) and Certified Journal Facilitator (2007) credentials and has been core faculty for the Therapeutic Writing Institute since it opened its cyberdoors in the spring of 2008.



About Kay

Kathleen (Kay) Adams LPC is a best-selling author, speaker, psychotherapist and visionary. She has directed the Center for Journal Therapy since its inception in 1988. In 2008 she launched the professional training division, the Therapeutic Writing Institute, which offers a fully online curriculum leading to credentialing as a Certified Journal Facilitator (CJF) or, for licensed psychotherapists, Certified Journal Therapist (CJT).

Kay's first book, *Journal to the Self* (1990), is a classic that has helped define the field of journal therapy. She has also written *The Way of the Journal* (1st Ed. 1993, 2nd Ed. 1998), *Mightier Than the Sword* (1994), *The Write Way to Wellness: A Workbook for Healing and Change* (2000), *Journal to the Self Workbook* (2002) and *Scribing the Soul* (2004).

Kay is a beloved teacher whose innovative work has helped hundreds of thousands of people heal, change and grow. Her dynamic presentation style is fluid, clinically grounded, intuitive and engaging. She is the voice of journal therapy at conferences, hospitals, mental health agencies and seminars around the world. A tireless advocate for the healing power of writing, Kay is a three-time recipient of the National Association for Poetry Therapy's Distinguished Service Award. She was a finalist for the first Season for Nonviolence Peacemaker Award in Colorado for her work bringing journal therapy to populations as diverse as people with HIV/AIDS, breast cancer survivors, recovering addicts, and survivors of violent crime.

In an About.com poll, Kathleen Adams was listed (with Anais Nin and Anne Frank) as one of the three most significant influences on contemporary journal keeping.

