THE CATALYST

The door creaked open and invited me in

Supporting healing for veterans navigating the transition to post-service life.

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NANCY

The door creaked open and invited me in. I wrote that line in November 2022, while facilitating a Writers Collective of Canada (WCC) workshop, as part of the *Healing Unseen Wounds: Her Story** series for woman-identified people who served in the Canadian military.

WCC** is a charitable organization that inspires exploratory writing in community. The unique workshop methodology invites participants to share first-draft writing, practice deep listening, and offer feedback to others about what resonates in their first drafts.

I first heard about the Her Story series months earlier when WCC's Co-Executive Director, Shelley Lepp, requested a meeting seeking guidance in developing a program. I happily offered my insight based on lived experience as a former military Sea King helicopter air navigator turned author/academic studying gender and military.

At the end of the call, Shelley said, "Let me know if you're interested in becoming a facilitator with us." I smiled while thinking, "Wonderful workshop idea – I wish you the best – but not for me. No way."

As a military member, I learned to lock out my emotions.

As an academic, I learned to revere publication.

As a fiction author, I learned to edit, edit, edit before sharing even a word of writing.

WCC was about to profoundly change my thinking and my practices.

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SHELLEY

After my meeting with Nancy Taber, I knew she would be invaluable to the development of our program. Her thoughtfulness, insights, and lived experience also made her an ideal candidate to train as a WCC facilitator. Engaging those with lived experience in both the design and implementation of our programs is integral to all WCC workshops. In this case I knew it would be especially critical in connecting with military personnel given the nature of the community, barriers of rank, and reluctance towards vulnerability. I wanted nothing more than to convince

Nancy of the value in our program.

For many veterans and service members, mental health after discharge is a challenge and creates a barrier to meaningful engagement with family and community. Engaging trained non-clinicians and alternative supports, such as arts-based interventions, provide options for those without access to or interest in clinical interventions. While not a replacement for therapy and other traditional mental-health supports, an arts-based approach like the one WCC offers can be more accessible and appealing for many in need.

WCC writing workshops have an added benefit of being conducted in a group setting, which addresses some of the isolation that frequently accompanies mental health challenges. The *Healing Unseen Wounds: Her Story* workshop series offered participants a place to find voice alongside resilience and hope; a place where stories could be unlocked and community formed.

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NANCY

Shelley's warmth and energy, paired with my participation in WCC's facilitation training, unlocked my hesitancy around being a WCC facilitator for members of my community of lived experience.

In WCC workshops, facilitators also act as participants, writing in response to prompts, reading their work, and giving feedback to others. I knew that, if I committed to facilitating, I had to embrace the entire method, including demonstrating vulnerability, letting go of any particular outcome, and sharing raw writing.

And I did.

What I found was that WCC's unique workshop method offers a structure and protection that allowed me a feeling of freedom. The voluntary sharing of stories with a commitment to confidentiality led to meaningful moments of connection, understanding, and support. Participants held space for each other, writing and listening to stories of joy, pain, humour, regret, and pride. We nodded, smiled, laughed, and cried when someone wrote of being a woman-identified person in a military context. I felt seen and heard.

The promise that all writing was considered fiction meant I could write anything I wanted about a character and their emotions—not about me and mine—which meant, ironically, I could pour myself into the story. I felt no need to filter experiences or feelings. I let it all out on the page.

My writing improved because I could throw myself into the process without worrying about the outcome. And it was fun! Even writing about difficult experiences, even crying, was oddly fun. I could be creative and playful or gloomy and serious, sometimes all at once.

Now, I work to bring everything I've learned in WCC workshops into my life: write in a search for connection and community, lean into my experiences and emotions, find joy in expressive writing, and look for the good in every person. I don't always succeed in all of this, but I'm trying.

When I wrote, "The door creaked open", perhaps I was speaking of myself.

Authors:

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**WCC was established in 2012 with one workshop at Toronto's toughest shelter but has grown to nurture a network of nearly 300 trained volunteer facilitators and 130 partner agencies nationwide with a focus on those underserved and under-heard. Visit our website for more information.

*** WCC's workshops for veterans were established with the support of the Mental Health Commission of Canada's SPARK program with a specific lens on veterans and military families navigating the transition to post-service life.

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