

# Writing Through the Rough Spots

By Ellen Schmidt

I was dumbfounded. I'd always gotten along well with people. But now my new co-worker, Kay, cut me down relentlessly with caustic comments and it really hurt. How could this be happening? I was relatively new on the job and puzzled over Kay's thoroughly irrational behavior. It helped that friends and family provided support and suggestions. And it helped to discover that I wasn't the only target of Kay's cruel behavior, but her subtle jabs and general nastiness made me uncomfortable.

Then I discovered something else that helped me deal with this situation: I wrote a short story! As I wrote I felt all the power and pleasure of a child playing with a dollhouse. I could make the characters do whatever I wanted them to. In my story Kay announces at a staff meeting that she is moving to California. Afterward I stop her on the staircase at work and tell her just how awful

it has been bearing the brunt of her cruelty. How wonderfully liberating to write that story! In a totally safe way, my mind opened up to different pathways of thinking and to a greater sense of control. In addition, I gained greater insights into what made Kay tick and why I felt intimidated by her. And so began my understanding of the power of writing to help create clarity about challenging situations.

“...I felt all the power and pleasure of a child playing with a dollhouse.”

Once when I was preparing to give a week long out of town workshop, I got anxious one night when I was trying to go to sleep. I took the pad next to my bed and wrote “*What if...*” I proceeded to “awfulize”, a great word one of my students has since used to term this kind of a thinking, line by line beginning with *what if*.... *What if* no one comes to the workshop? *What if* they come, but it leaves them cold? And *what if* they walk out? I went on for a while with this. But then I began to run out of those kind of possibilities and decided to give the opposite kind of *what if*-ing a chance. *What if* people come to the workshop, feel comfortable and stimulated? *What if* they come away inspired. Something was happening in my brain! I kept turning the flashlight off to go to sleep only to turn it right back on again with a new batch of *what if*'s. They tumbled out and soon they started to range beyond the limited confines of my immediate situation. *What if* we listened deeply and carefully to each other, not just waiting till it's our turn to say something?...*What if* kindness got passed around the way a contagious disease does?...*What if* our skin wasn't waterproof?...*What if* young people dyed their hair gray?...*What if* you could have a con-



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versation with your great, great grandmother?...I realized that *what if-ing* provides us with alternate scenarios, gives happenstance, coincidence, the unexpected, the extra-ordinary a chance. I have used “*What if*” as an introductory exercise many times since and always find that people are refreshed by what they and the others in the group write.

Writing has always been something I love to do. And then I found it was actually a very useful tool. With constant “talk” going on in our brains all the time, writing accesses a different voice than the one we think or speak in. Using it can give us new insights and surprises. People often come to writing workshops and feel fear-fear of not being good enough, fear of being judged or ridiculed, or not being able to be honest about their feelings. They may feel pressure to look good, sound good, write cleverly, impress or entertain others.

With these thoughts in mind, I designed *Writing Through The Rough Spots*, a workshop series providing a non-judgmental, safe environment to write about challenging events, tough conversations, lingering memories, and sticky circumstances. What at first may seem insurmountable or overwhelming receives definition, shape, size, and parameters through the process of writing. The focus stays on the writing – how to make it strong, immediate, and vivid, how to make an experience come alive and closer, or to make it recede if you want to view it with greater distance and perspective.

If you’d like to start writing through your own rough spots, I have a few suggestions:

- Writing from the heart may be very difficult if you are thinking about writing for someone other than yourself, especially someone close to you. You might end up writing for them. You may feel the need to say nice things, meet others’ expectations, or exclude some things. If you share your writing in its first stages with others, they may not know much about writing and give you feedback that may or may not be helpful. (There’s always time for editing later if you wish to do so.) Write for yourself and share it only with a trusted writing group or writing partner.
- If you have trouble with self-censorship, judging, or getting started, try using a “dead” ballpoint pen and old-fashioned carbon paper. Write automatically for a set period of time, say 15 minutes or longer if you’re comfortable. Write without stopping or looking at the copy of what you wrote.
- Keep a pad, pencil, and flashlight next to your bed so you can scribble down a dream or an idea in the night or when you first wake up. Even if you don’t share the bedroom with anyone, use the flashlight because low light will have a different effect on your writing than if you turn on the light.
- Carry a pen and small notebook in your purse, backpack, and car at all times.
- Make some times and physical spaces for complete quiet. Use a notebook to reflect what you experience.



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## Amy Tan

The award-winning author of five NY Times best-sellers, including novel-turned-film *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan acknowledges a family history of depression and suicidal thoughts; personal experiences with both have led her to long-term use of psychiatric medication.

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