

# Writing a Map of the Territory Ahead

A Workshop with Young Adult Cancer Survivors

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**H**igh above Manhattan, with skyscraper windows showing an orange sunset draining into the city's speckled light, eight young people came together once a week to wrestle creation from destruction. They were bound by shared experience, were all cancer survivors at various stages of treatment, trying to grapple with the emotional and physical toll of their battles in the way they knew best: through art.

It was my job to guide them. The joint project between Teachers & Writers Collaborative (where I'm a teaching artist) and The LifeLab (a survivor resource organization) was to be the first in a series of writing workshops, scheduled to meet once a week for fifteen weeks to serve the dual role of memoir class and support group. In their twenties and thirties, the men and women here were expecting—hoping—to get a grip on what had happened to them. More crucially, they wanted to figure out where they would go now. But during the workshop, something else happened, something more significant.

As the first weeks of class passed and I began to go over the work they had handed in—mostly in-class writing assignments—a pattern began to emerge: parallels in their writing that were unexpected. Though they created extremely personal work, always, they had also begun to create, together, a document that had much further-reaching implications: it became a guidebook, a detailed *Fodor's* for anyone forced to go on the journey that they had all navigated. At its core, what they wrote was a description of how to make it through.

I would love to credit intricate planning and forward thinking on my part for what came out of the class, but in truth I treated the residency much like any other: I used many of the same exercises I always use; I rarely requested that the students write about cancer specifically—though they always asked if they had to, they often didn't want to. I didn't, in fact, have a master plan to walk them through their experiences as much as one that would, one step at a time, give them the tools that would allow them to better express whatever it was they wanted to say. Just like I always do.

To wit: we started with poetry—small and simple exercises meant to break down their experiences into the simplest, clearest frame of reference. Using the model of Joe Brainard's "I Remember," a book-length poem drawing on memories of this poet

and artist's childhood, students located the parallel memories that made up their collective consciousness. Nikki Giovanni's "Knoxville" focused their five senses on places they both loved and missed and on those they did not miss at all. Wallace Stevens' classic "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" helped shape their experiences into metaphor, and Jean Valentine's "Strange Lights" (the first cancer poem they read in class) gave those metaphors precision.

They charted out their experiences—not just in the radiology rooms and hospital wards but throughout their lives both pre- and post-diagnosis. They wrote what they had lost and what they had found, and then used Hosai Ozaki's Taisho one-line poems as a model to boil those experiences down to their most powerful essences.

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Shifting into narrative, the class experimented with points of view, tense and perspective, and formal and informal styles of writing. They wrote letters, altered framing techniques, and expanded small poems into burning memoir.

This was all what you would expect to see in nearly any writing workshop. Except what I began to see was work


striking not only for the simple power and beauty of many of its lines but for something I, personally, hadn't encountered in so many voices before: they had, individually and without conferring, mapped the contours of survivorship. Put together, their separate works had become a collective cartography of the nature and nation of an illness, one whose borders were remarkably consistent throughout.

These eight writers had, as if by agreement, become explorers: each in their own ship, yet comprising a single expedition. One could trace the same mountains and valleys, the same rocky shores and cold currents of struggle, by following their eight different paths through the fight with disease. Like explorers, they rarely knew what they were in for. The literature on cancer, though plentiful, sketches only the barest outlines of what can seem like the end of a flat earth: each experience individual, specific, and particular. Put together, though, these writers showed that it is, indeed, a common voyage.

Starting with the quotidian "life before," they all struggled with surprisingly similar demons: the loss of hope, the loss of friends, the loss of desire—only to be greeted at the end by the blank space of "after." They described not only the struggle just to get through, just to survive the journey, but also the struggle to figure out who they would be after they returned. Because each one of them had changed, and significantly, in ways they could not yet fully hold within their hands. Their illness had given them a sense of how precariously we who are healthy sit here on this other continent and that knowledge had altered them deeply. The people they had become were irreconcilable, in many ways, with who they had been before the illness, the changes so profound as to demand a re-invention of self. And, though none of us knew it when they started, that is what they needed to write about.

So they did, they wrote it down. They wrote, as one student put it better than I possibly could, their “shifting geographies, tragedies,” and in doing so, created a guide for others forced to take the same involuntary journey.

I had neither intended, nor expected, that their journeys would be so similarly spread out upon the page, and when, at the end of the class, they saw their work put together in an anthology, it became clear that neither had they. As one student later wrote, “This was every bit a team effort as [much as a] transformative personal discovery and healing through the medium of the written word. What I gained in addition to my own personal self-discovery was a belief that there is reason for hope and progress for young adult cancer survivors to rebuild their lives and get busy living.”

At a party for the release of the anthology, each student sat in an almost stunned silence, reading each other’s words. One said, “I can’t believe how this all fits together.” Another replied, “This is amazing. This is a real book.” Each, in turn, recognized what they had done: While before they had been trapped in the individuality of their experience, they had—spontaneously—now become part of something greater. They had created a resource for others: because what they did together in that room, following the orange light on its westward trip over the Hudson, was to write a map of survival. 

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