

## CHAPTER ONE



# *Finding My Voice*

*“I can tell you that what you’re looking for is  
already inside you.”*

— Anne Lamott

Before I immersed myself in the pages of my journals, I had denied myself permission to write my story for a well-rehearsed series of reasons. But I was aching to find my voice and write my truth, and I could feel my strong women writer role models, whom I quoted liberally in my black books, urging me on:

Brené Brown has said, “Owning our story and loving ourselves through that process is the bravest thing that we will ever do.”

Oprah says, “Turn your wounds into wisdom,” and through her book club, endorses the brave souls who do just that.

A piece of wall art by Kelly Rae Roberts in front of my computer for many years read, “Your beautifully messy complicated story matters (tell it).”

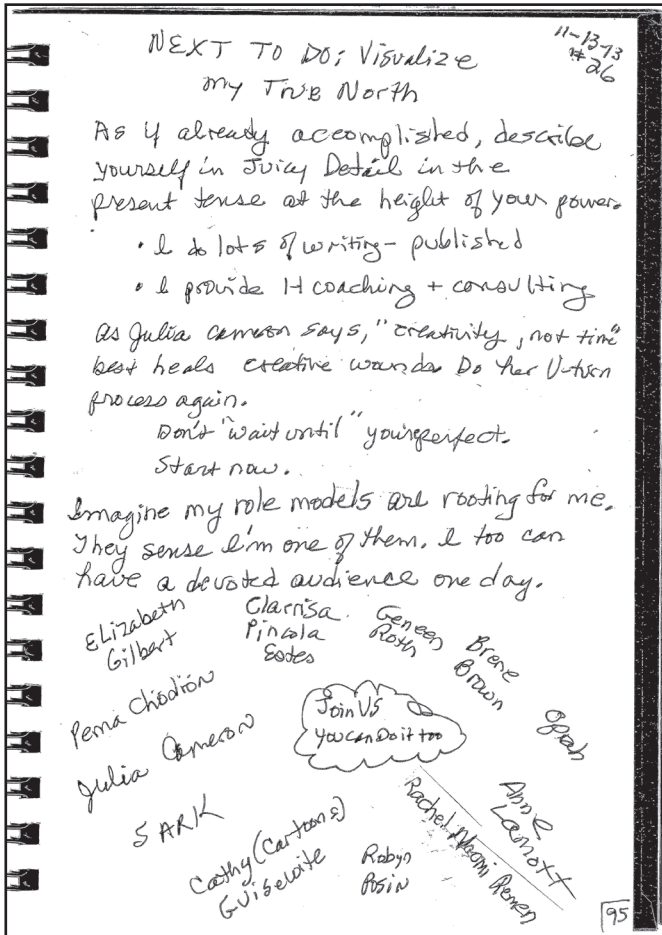


Image 1: Role models rooting me on to write my story.

So, when I found myself out of work and searching for what to do next (beside writing in my journals), I finally gave myself permission to write every day—for six months—without beating myself up. This may seem like a small thing, but for me it was a huge breakthrough. I started in December of 2013, doing all the exercises from three of Julia Cameron's books I hadn't previously read. Having devoured almost all of her other writing, her wisdom and encouragement flowed through my veins. I wrote with as much aliveness as I could, setting aside my academic training and

drawing on what I had learned decades before from Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*. I claimed successes, explored grief, and allowed myself to be freer than I had ever been.

But wouldn't you know it, my pesky inner seeker, always looking for external guidance and validation, wasn't quite done with me yet. For the last chapter of the manuscript, I kept trying to write my story using someone else's framework. I started by analyzing *The Hero's Journey* by Joseph Campbell, and then, I began looking at my life from a feminine perspective, as described by Kim Hudson in *The Virgin's Promise* and in Lissa Rankin's blog on the divine feminine. Next, I applied Maureen Murdock's *The Heroine's Journey* to my development and challenges. I even wrote my story as an obituary for never having fulfilled my potential. Finally, I tried to write my story as if it were a television series.

Ugh. I realized I was stuck and had the good sense to stop.

Eventually, I told my seeker to take a break and asked myself, "What can I learn from *me*?"

To find out, I employed the coaching process I'd used with countless clients to see if I could get over the hurdle of "Who am I to tell my story?" I wanted to see if I could form a narrative and honor, as the poet Mary Oliver wrote, my "one wild and precious life."

**Coach Kathryn:** So, tell me a little about what you are trying to do.

**Client Kathryn:** Well, I'm trying to own my experience and write my story. But it's not working. I feel stuck and unworthy. I've tried so many times, and I see others do it, but for me, I just feel like I can't or don't deserve to do it.

**Coach Kathryn:** I can appreciate how hard this is for you. I have compassion for the bind you put yourself in, and I see how feeling as you do stops you from starting. I also think I can help. Would you be willing to explore why each of your reasons for not telling your story makes sense to you?

**Client Kathryn:** Well, sure, if you think it will help. I certainly know my negative reasons well. First of all, my early wounds were subtle, so

I imagine others who have suffered real hardship will criticize me for discussing my challenges. I mean, what right do I have to complain? Growing up in a lovely suburb of Chicago, my two younger sisters and I had financial security from our doctor father and creative stimulation from our artistic mother. My grade school was almost entirely white and Jewish, and while I studied Jewish persecution in Sunday school, and Jewish history is part of my cultural identity, I didn't experience daily prejudice or microaggressions. I didn't even learn about white privilege until I conducted research with a diverse group of women who had done inner work on racism and were helping clients deal with oppression. Second, having been raised to keep family matters private, I assume others will feel that revealing our family dysfunction is inappropriate and self-indulgent. Third, I stop myself from writing my story because I can't guarantee a successful outcome and reception. What if no one is impacted by or even interested in what I have to say? There are wars, climate crises, and systemic racism in the outer world. Who cares about the inner world? And how would those who might be interested find this needle in the haystack of so many other publications? Besides, we all die in the end, so what difference could my efforts make? Finally, on a practical level, while my journals provide an intimate and in-depth look into *my* life, they are comprised of notes, quotes, fragments, sketches, scribbles, etcetera. With so much inner anxiety, it's hard for me to think straight about my life, much less create a narrative out of all the creative chaos.

**Coach Kathryn:** Thank you so much for sharing your reasons for not writing. Yet, I know you really want to tell your story. Would you be willing now to think of a response should each one of your objections be true? Imagine you are supporting a friend who is similarly troubled. For example, "Yes, my wounds were subtle, and others may not think them significant or worthy. So what? This was *my* experience. Maybe I can shed light on this type of history for others who don't have my insights."

**Client Kathryn:** Now that you put it that way, yes, perhaps people who didn't live my experience could learn from me, just as I learn from reading about people who went through things I didn't.

**Coach Kathryn:** Great, keep going!

**Client Kathryn:** Well, I suppose I could be mindful of the reader and still authentically expose my core issues—that wouldn't be self-indulgent. Sure, I had white privilege, but it's important not to let guilt or criticism stifle owning all aspects of the life I was given. I could even be honest about wanting a guarantee and being afraid of taking risks by writing. I certainly wouldn't be the first. As we know from social media, online bullying, and the op-ed pages, no one is beyond criticism. Everyone can be thrown under the bus, or as it is now referred to, "cancelled." Given that, I guess I have to challenge myself to say what is most true and important for me to express.

**Coach Kathryn:** Nice breakthrough. Now, relating to what you said about dying, how can you find meaning in the time remaining, however long that is, which none of us knows?

**Client Kathryn:** I think the key will be to set priorities based on my desires and not my fears. I don't want to give up prematurely and limp without aliveness until the end. Not when I have the power to change that vision.

**Coach Kathryn:** Yes, you do have that power. And I think you have already begun.

**Client Kathryn:** Thank you. It's funny how talking to myself with the compassion, tough love, and intelligent advice I could always offer others never seemed possible until now. Instead, I would bury myself in work, trying to meet the expectations of other leaders. When I came up for air, I'd have that nagging feeling of betraying myself. Others clearly valued me, or they wouldn't have kept relying on me for the contributions I made. So it finally dawned on me that what I had been doing at work was actually significant. This gave me the courage to dig

deeper and listen to my inner voice, which was telling me what I really wanted—and deserved—from my job. I think I'm ready to try this same approach in writing my story.

I guess how I feel now is that I am reminded of the process I often resist but eventually works for me. I have lots of pieces to consider, like the many tiles my mother used to make a mosaic table in my childhood. My concerns pull me one way or another, but together they create a pattern. When I think about my most relevant value in this process, it's what will give my life meaning: I will die satisfied knowing I finally owned and told my story. There are real costs of criticism and public humiliation for my sensitive self. But on balance, the possible benefit to others who may identify and be helped by my experience outweighs the risks.



Image 2: A photo my mother took of one of her many mosaic projects, 1958.