



THE OPRAH
MAGAZINE

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to De-Clutter
An Easy Holiday Plan

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Starting Tonight!**
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on pg. 56

**Do Good,
Feel Great**
The Giver's Guide
to Better Health

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: LORENZO AGIUS. GREGOR HALENDA. ALISON GOOTEE/STUDIO D. GEORGE BURNS. MARKO METZINGER/STUDIO D. PEDEN + MUNK. OLIVER MUNDAY AND JAMES BAMFORD.

Feeling Good



Power of the Pen

A writing assignment that promises to make you healthier, happier, and less stressed? *Anya Kamenetz* discovers the off-the-page benefits of using her words.



ON A THURSDAY MORNING LAST JUNE, I REALIZED I NEEDED TO MAKE SOME changes. I was at the playground with my 18-month-old daughter, Lulu, when it hit me that I'd become *that* mom. While other mothers were chatting, handing out snacks, or snapping photos, I was hunched over my phone—e-mailing, rescheduling, texting—and barely keeping track of Lulu as she dashed around.

My life as a new mom had become a precarious stack of activities and chores—take Boo to the vet! set up Lulu's playdate! run five miles!—that I felt increasingly ill-equipped to balance. The last straw came when my husband and I went on our first big weekend away—a rented house with friends. We dropped off Lulu with my mother, drove five hours to the house, and the next morning got the call: Our daughter had a fever and probably an ear infection. There was nothing to do but drive home. Admittedly, I blew my disappointment out of proportion. The real issue: I had come to a personal and professional crossroads without a road map to help me make sense of it all.

It was at this juncture that I read about Self Authoring, an online series of guided writing exercises that the Department of Education hailed in a 2013 report as a promising tool to boost resilience and perseverance—skills not only critical for academic achievement but also for determining whether people lead happy, successful lives. They had research to back their

claims: One of Self Authoring's creators, Jordan Peterson, PhD, a psychology professor at the University of Toronto, had tested part of the curriculum on 85 students who were struggling academically at McGill University in Montreal, and the students' collective GPA rose by 29 percent in a single semester. In 2011, the Rotterdam School of Management at Erasmus University in the Netherlands made a portion of the course mandatory for incoming undergraduates. The result: a nearly 10 percent increase in GPA, a 15 percent decrease in dropouts, and the highest-performing cohorts in the history of the school.

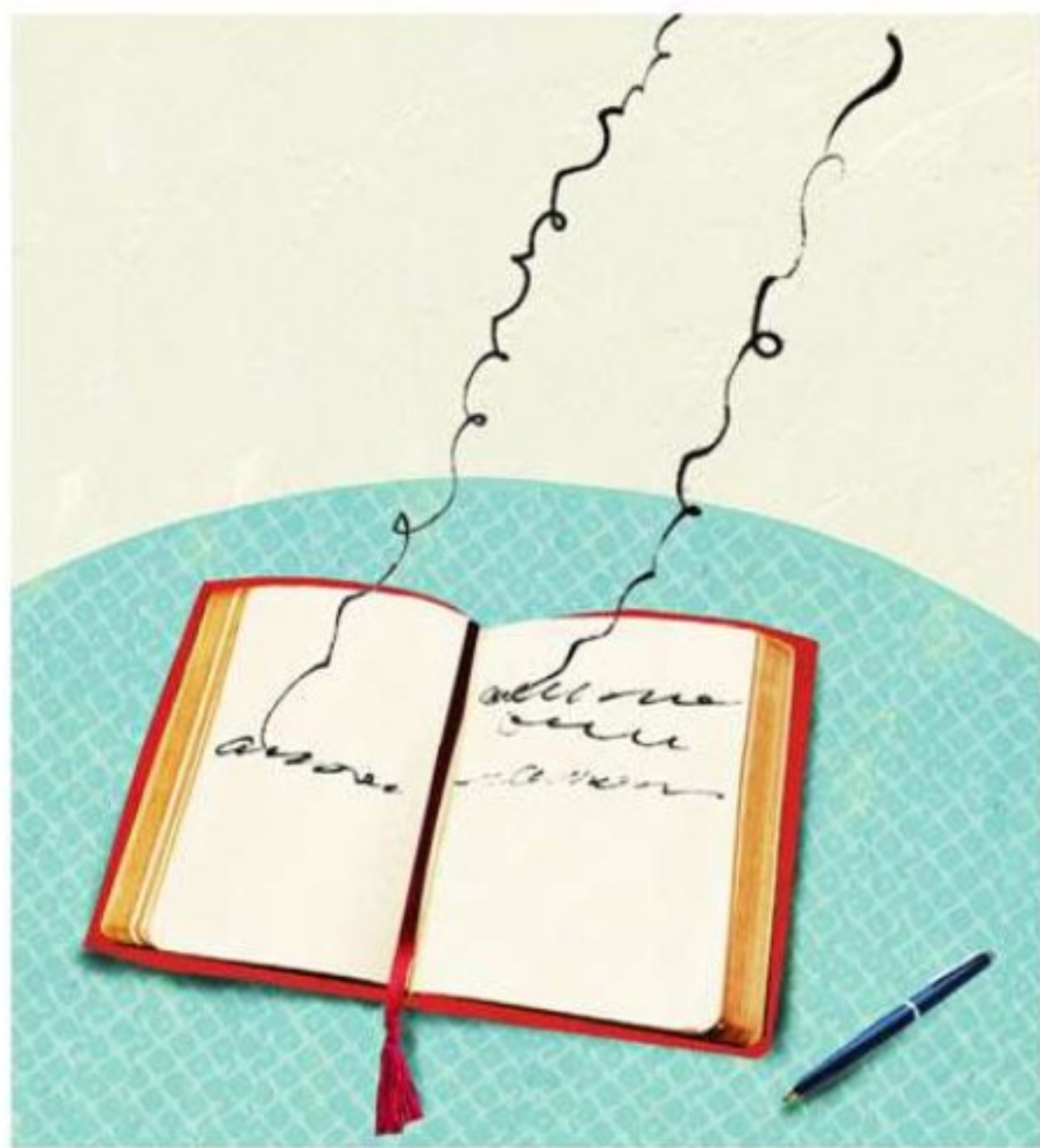
I could understand how a little bit of written soul-searching could help a bunch of previously underachieving freshmen. But as a writer, I was skeptical that yet more typing could make a quantifiable difference in the way I felt. Still, I reached out to Peterson—who assured me it would.

"If you understand the linkages between your past experiences and current emotions, your stress will begin to lift," Peterson said. He pointed to the work of James Pennebaker, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin, who had found that students who wrote about the worst thing that had ever happened to them felt sadder initially, but six months down the road were visiting doctors less frequently. Dozens of subsequent studies by Pennebaker and others showed similar benefits to physical and psychological well-being. Asking people to document difficult emotional experiences was shown to improve immune function, lower heart rate, and ease blood pressure.

Though I wasn't convinced it could work for me, I forked over the \$30 it cost to complete the course at selfauthoring.com. It turned out to be a daunting undertaking, requiring 20 hours; by the time I got through all four parts, I'd written 30,000-plus words. The first phase, "Past Authoring," was a stitched-together autobiography. I had to divide my life into seven "epochs" (I went with early childhood, high school, college, post college, marriage, infertility, motherhood) and then list up to six "significant experiences" within each. Deciding what to include—being bullied in middle school by

a 13-year-old neo-Nazi? cheating on boy-friends in high school?—made me aware of how I edit myself when talking about my life with friends. Soon, the assignment's confessional process had me hooked.

In the second and third parts, I took a personality quiz and wrote about my virtues and faults (the faults inventory, you're warned, should be done while you're in a good mood). Next, I was instructed to devise a narrative of my life in three to five years—a realistic best-case scenario of what could happen if I were to give full rein to all my positive traits and intentions.



Then it was time to flip the Tarot cards and detail what might happen if my worst impulses took over. What emerged was a tragic tale: drifting apart from my husband ("letting imagined slights snowball into festering resentments"); ruining my daughter ("transferring my anxiety to her"); professional foundering ("ending up a bitter has-been"). My emotions flared as I wrote the nightmarish what-ifs, and I was tempted to delete the whole thing. But I let it stand as a reminder of what I had to lose.

Finally, I translated my ideal life into seven goals. Detailing the ways that distractions hurt me—both in my work and in my parenting—gave me a reason to

stick with a nightly meditation practice (not perfectly, but for longer than usual). Pouring out thousands of words extolling my marriage as the core of my happiness put more oomph behind my resolve to set aside special time for my husband.

But the greatest payoff was my realization, with the forehead-smack insight of a good therapy session, that my disquiet with the life of a working mother wasn't a matter of day-to-day stress. It was connected to a buried trauma I hadn't fully explored until I wrote about my early life.

I was 4 years old when my brother died just hours after he was born. For years my mother battled the grief, spending afternoons napping in her bedroom, shades drawn. She became wrapped up in the loss of my brother and irrationally afraid of losing me, too. From that young age, I equated having a child with fear and anguish. When I had trouble conceiving, going through two years of fertility treatments, my fears intensified. But now that I had set forth—in black and white—my best understanding of how the death of my brother contributed to my feelings today, the emotions of my 4-year-old self lost some of their power. I began to approach my

roles as both mother and daughter with more compassion and less anxiety.

A few weeks after I finished Self Authoring, my 92-year-old grandfather, weakened by dementia, had his final health crisis. I flew to North Carolina to be with my mother at his deathbed. I held their hands and sang "Amazing Grace" and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," the songs my mother once sang to me. "You let me cry, honey," my mom said as I sang. "I haven't been able to cry yet." I felt no fear or hesitation, just deep gratitude—and an eagerness to write the next chapter. **Q**

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Anya Kamenetz writes about education for The Hechinger Report.



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