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Why I Write

When I reflect on my 20 years of life, I realize I was pretty much primed to be a writer. With parents like mine, I had no choice. I grew up reading *Little House on the Prairie* every night before bed, riding my bike to the public library on the weekends, and scrambling to complete spelling worksheets before I was allowed to turn on the T.V. It took me quite some time to appreciate these mandatories. While I loved school, I hated when my parents forced me to engage academically at home. I wanted to be like my neighbor Kate, free to play outside and eat popsicles till way past sunset.

It wasn't until my junior year of high school, but I finally realized the importance of words at the same time I learned the fragility of life. When I endured two simultaneous tragedies the Christmas season of 2015, many people stayed silent. It felt like the "right words" didn't exist to soothe my situation. Truly, what are teenagers supposed to say to one another upon the unexplained death of a dearly loved dance teacher? And how were my high school friends, who barely knew how to drive, supposed to support me as my sister's hospital stay extended through Christmas and New Year's? And how could I, an overwhelmed 16-year-old, process my feelings and support those who so desperately needed me to be strong while my world was crumbling?

I spent many nights of that holiday season sleeping in my little sister's bedroom, alone in a house that should have been full as my parents moved more of their belongings to the children's hospital. When I couldn't sleep, I'd sneak downstairs to flip through family photo albums, wondering what had happened to the thriving, functional bunch we used to be. I alternated those isolating nights with many hours alone at the dance studio, my bare feet on the Marley flooring

where Ms. Stephanie once taught me pirouettes. I moved to solemn songs, the ones that sang the sadness I wasn't ready to articulate. I couldn't tell if the drops on my face were tears or sweat.

Winter 2015 was the first time I felt the weighty necessity of the right words, probably because they were so absent. Where there were sympathies I needed to say and to hear, I only gave and received silence. I knew words were the vehicle that could bring wholeness to the lives around me, but I couldn't string together the right sentences in the midst of unexpected tragedy. It didn't help that I was always surrounded by the constant chatter of New Year's Eve parties and first kisses, encouragement to fill the red solo cup instead of handling the heaviness surrounding me. I didn't know it then, but this season would sow in me a deep desire to write.

As the ice melted and my sister returned home from her month-long stay in the hospital, I watched my family and my dance friends stumble through the search for a new normal. Instead of going to volleyball practice, my sister's afternoons were spent in doctor's offices and pharmacy pickup lines. Every other sentence she spoke was in reference to the searing pain where her left lung once lived. I began teaching the ballet class that used to be Ms. Stephanie's, pretending not to hear the children's questions about their former teacher. All the while, a burning chasm inside of me cried out to be filled with something of real meaning. Something to overcome the exhaustion of acting like the previous winter did not completely shatter me.

Despite my parent's best efforts to incentivize a love of language in my childhood, nothing taught me the power of words like the winter of 2015. I remember a February afternoon, in the space between homework and a 6:30pm ballet class, when I cracked open the pages of a seventh-grade diary and finally began to write down what was happening inside of me. As I scrawled my emotions in loopy handwriting, I finally felt the tension inside of me began to release. From that evening on, my journal became my safest place. I could be transparent and fragile in a season

where everyone needed me to be unbreakable. I could be confused and worn out, mad at the world for what happened and sad that it all happened to me.

I share the story of my junior year winter not for pity, but to illustrate the winding path that lead me to become a writer. I didn't know it then, but each instance of silence – like the time I didn't know how to tell my sister “Merry Christmas” when tubes tied her down to the hospital bed, or when I couldn't find the words to comfort Ms. Steph's 12-year-old daughter at the funeral – pushed me toward a pattern of spilling my thoughts on paper. As that remarkably painful season grew blurrier with time, I continued to return to the pages of a journal for peace. And if I'm honest, I'm still returning to those pages, unpacking everything that my 16-year-old heart couldn't bear at the time.

I'm grateful for what that time taught me – that life is fragile and words are precious. Four years ago, there were words I needed to hear and read and say that I neglected to find. And while no one else will ever live my same experience, I now feel deeply called to create words that will matter to someone else who is struggling.

Because life is short, and words matter too much to go unsaid. Words mattered in my college essay, when I finally opened up about Stephanie's passing and the ways it changed me. Words mattered when I began to ask my sister about her surgeries and how they affected her, even if it took me years to start the conversation. Words mattered when I told my parents I'd like to attend a university far away from home, and when I whimpered my tear-filled goodbyes as my family's rental car drove away down Stadium Drive.

Since that first tiny step into the adult world, words have continued to shape my life. There was that Comic Sans font letter my mom tucked into my suitcase, full of heartfelt advice that held me through freshman homesickness. There was that book with the black and white cover, *You Are*

Free by Rebekah Lyons, that began my journey back to God. And then sophomore year, I poured over pages of the Bible, underlining words in hopes of combatting my crippling anxiety. Then a few months later, I typed that nerve-wracking email asking a counselor if she was available to meet on Tuesday afternoons.

There was that one night at dinner with a trusted friend when we discussed the beauty and power of writing, the way it walked us through the hardest times of our lives. I returned home that evening and purchased a domain name to create my own blog.

Starting my blog felt equally rebellious and safe. I couldn't bring myself to make the site public for weeks as I savored the intimacy of my own corner of the Internet. The blog became increasingly sacred to me with each essay. I lost track of time as I revised my whirlwind of thoughts late into the evenings. As I re-read my work I knew in my gut that these words were not meant for my eyes only.

I've been here too long to pretend there's not an abundance of hurting people in the world. Broken, hopeless people whom my words could help. While writing for my own ego is admittedly enjoyable, it limits my potential to encourage others. Writing for myself is a hobby, writing for others is a calling. And so, last January, I knew I had to surrender my comfort and make my blog public. To put my words in front of tired eyes and hurting hearts. Because there are so many in my midst who need to be guided through darkness and led into light. Desperate for the right words to comfort their weary souls, just as I was in winter 2015.

I believe it to my bones that words hold this kind of power, because of the lyrics and poems and phrases that have been my oxygen in seasons of struggle. Words held me when people couldn't, they spoke truth when I was surrounded with the wrong voices; they dried my tears and

heard my laughter and changed my purpose for existence. To think I have the ability to pen words that may do that for someone else sets my heart ablaze. I know it's what I'm meant to do.

And so I write. I write because the thoughts and questions bubbling up inside of me feel too precious to let die when I do. I write because I've struggled through the shadows, the sleepless nights and uncontrollable tears. I write because I've danced in the freedom on the other side of surrender. I write to celebrate progress. I write because it keeps me sane. I couldn't have survived my life's storms without the freedom to untangle my thoughts on paper. I write to uncover the mysteries hidden deep in my heart, the ones that can only be excavated via keyboard. I write to know who I am. I write to remember who I was. I write to dream about who I will be.

I write for the ones who've written before me, the ones who didn't know the impact their words would have on my desperate heart. I write for the younger me, once fumbling and aching, the one who clung to others' words before she could articulate her own. I write to tell her that there is more joy than she ever could have dreamed on the other side of heartache.

I write to acknowledge the details that too easily go unrecorded. I write to celebrate the people and places I encounter, to remember the tone of my best friend Iris' laugh or the taste of the new recipe my mom tried on Thanksgiving or the way the Rocky Mountains shimmer through my bedroom window at 7 a.m. I write to remember the depths of pain I've experienced – the loneliness of a crowded room, the racing thoughts that won't leave me alone, the fight to stay when I want to flee. I write moments, the victorious and the vicious, to honor my human experience.

I write unravel and to mend. To forget and to relive. To apologize. To theorize. I write for the fire inside of me that insists my words matter. I write because if I am not vulnerable, I am not

honest. I write because I believe life is made of stories. I write because I believe everybody has a story worth sharing.

I write and I write and I keep writing because there will always be hurting people, and there will always be more words.

And I write because I am made whole in the process.