

It's About Time: The Book I Didn't Want To Write

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Hi, I'm Jana Panter and I'm a naturopathic doctor. I specialize in an alternative therapy called Craniosacral therapy. I am writing a book about cranial, and my relationship to it. The working title is *What If You Could? Diving Deep Into Healing Waters*. Craniosacral therapy is a hands-on, gentle and profoundly effective therapy, similar to acupuncture but without the needles.

I've told you who I am, now I'd like to ask a favor. Would you please take a minute and think about who you are? Can you think of three terms that you would use to describe yourself?... How many of you included the term writer or author? I am not a writer—I am a reluctant evangelical proselytizing zealot. More accurately—I am zealous about Craniosacral therapy, but a reluctant writer.

So, as a reluctant writer, what can I hope to offer you? I'd like to offer the perspective of the naïve. When I started writing had no idea what I was getting into, and all the glorious things I have learned from it.

Who knew that writing a book would be so hard? Ok, I realize that this probably isn't the group that I should confess this to, but really, you sit on your butt all day and don't have to talk to anyone — how tough can it be? And, like everything else worthwhile in life, I never saw the challenges coming.

When I began practicing cranial therapy, I saw my clients healing and having amazing experiences. They were getting better, but they were a bit bewildered by it. How could something so gentle be so effective? I looked for books that described and explained these experiences, to share with my clients. There were technical books for practitioners, historical books about the founders, books that felt too critical or not critical enough, but there was nothing that felt right to me. So I began to hope someone, someone else, some other cranial therapist would write about their clients' amazing experiences and I could

just work with my clients, hang out with my family and take the dogs for walks. But when I had a few minutes between clients and I found the session particularly intriguing, I began to take notes.

After about 10 years of collecting notecards and waiting for someone else's craniosacral exposé to come on the market, I got impatient. I slowly started organizing the notes I had been keeping for all those years. I began to take a few minutes here and there to flush out the stories: working at home, then taking little writing retreats once or twice a year. One night the title came to me in a dream. The title, *What If You Could?* is from an experience I had in an early cranial class and is a key element in the book. I love the title. There was no escape after that.

Writing the sessions notes was kind of fun and I thought turning them into a book would be more of the same. I hit my first snag immediately. I was surprised to discover that, after practicing cranial for many years, I couldn't succinctly describe it. Slowly I realized I couldn't succinctly describe it because I had never clearly defined the process and its boundaries. How can a person do something, and do it well, for over ten years and not have the words for it? I had to go through the arduous extraction of pulling the definition, my definition, of how I experienced cranial, from the depths of my inner self.

I have learned that writing the first draft can be worse than having teeth pulled while filling out tax forms in line at the DMV. Then there's the editing which is where the work really starts. When I am feeling resentful about this I remember something a friend said she does every time she sits down to write. She takes a moment "to feel grateful for the privilege of having the time and resources to be able to write."

Of course, there's the tedious stuff – finding the right words and the grammar, but the most frustrating is the Catch-22 of it. That as you write you evolve. You realize that you need to rewrite it again since now you really understand that thing that you thought you were figuring out when you wrote it down the first time.

My process for seeking support for the writing could politely be called inconsistent, though chaotic is probably more accurate. I kept looking at the community college writing classes but the only one that felt close was called Good Writing. And pardon me, but shouldn't it be Writing Well? Then I ran into an old friend who invited me to a coaching group. I went once and it felt like too much of a time commitment. At about the 15-year mark a colleague mentioned taking a writing class at Hugo House.

Remember the “not-a-writer”? I had never heard of Hugo House. I went to an open house for Theo Nestor's Memoir class. Afterwards I talked to her and described my project — she said the class probably wouldn't help for this book but would help *when* I wrote a second book. Second book? I didn't even want to write this one. So imagine her surprise when on the first day of her memoir class there I sat, pencil held upright in my fist. I went from being unwilling to commit to a monthly writing group to signing up for a nine-month weekly writing class with homework.

Now I have two articles published in a trade magazine (circulation 85,000), I am waiting for feedback from the developmental editor's review of the rough draft and, after an excursion to the Pacific Northwest Writer's Conference, I have ten editors and agents' business cards asking for a book proposal. Don't worry, I realize this is still a long way from seeing my name on the New York Times Best seller list. But now I'm on the path that my book might be there someday. Oh, and that coaching group? I work with the coach privately about twice a month.

I have found that writing a book is like learning a foreign language — I am learning to think differently. For example, I have to be very literal — everything has to be spelled out — no “it's” or “he said.” Who said? And was he happy, sad, frustrated or drunk when he said it. Whoops, not “it” when he said, well, whatever it was that he said.

I didn't come into the writer's world to make friends — but I have. From reconnecting with old acquaintances, like the naturopath I ran into at Sky nursery who has written several books and shared with words of encouragement, to my new writing critique

group; two women I introduced myself to at the writers' conference. And even better than the new people I have met are the new dynamics and deepening relationships with my friends and family. On those dog walks, friends, true and patient friends, listened to me work through ideas and fears over and over and over again. My sons read and reread sections, explaining again why it didn't make sense. My husband continues to support me, both the time and the expense. And he stopped whatever he was doing to fix the computer each time it (randomly and without provocation) acted like a rebellious teenager.

I have discovered universal things about myself that were first revealed by writing. When every one of my mild-mannered and supportive Beta readers asserted that the book's formatting stunk I began to look around at my life and realized I have organizational issues. From my desk to my bookkeeping to my kitchen spices. My solution? I have half-heartedly started to organize my cupboards, and whole-heartedly accepted the offer from one of those lovely Beta readers to format the book. I'm may be a messy thinker but I'm not stupid.

From the memoir class, I have learned lots about writing. But I am even more excited that I learned how to workshop, a process for accepting constructive criticism gracefully, and being able to really listen to what a person is saying.

If you have picked up on my subtle clues about my reluctance to write the book, you can imagine my joy when, preparing for my first writer's conference, I learned the steps involved in getting a book published. In a cranial session, my role is to set aside my ego and opinions, and focus on supporting the client's process — in other words the antithesis of pitching, where the task is to use my personality to entice the agent. It felt absurd; the skills involved in the first step of getting the book published were exactly the opposite of the skills I have spent my career developing. So, on more dog walks I practiced pitching. I practiced and practiced and practiced, just like I did for this talk.

I do feel like I have a secret advantage. The ace up my sleeve? My story, or really the story of cranial therapy, is so unique and valuable that good writing or writing well, is just a bonus. Late at night when I am feeling overwhelmed I snuggle with this thought. On the other hand — let's be honest, cranial is about as unconventional, as woo-woo as it gets. Should this book be successful, the alternative health care critics will not be gentle. I have already heard harsh judgments about cranial, and know I must brace for the disparaging remarks that will come.

Who knew that writing a book would be so hard?

Writing this book, and all that has and will come from the process, has shown me that perhaps I have more persistence, more backbone, than I realized. It is also an opportunity to practice one of my Eternal, Infernal goals: to face life's challenges with humor and grace. A chance to practice accepting my shortcomings with self-compassion and to move forward through them.

For years I kept hoping someone else would write this book, now I claim it. *What If You Could? Diving Deep Into Healing Waters* is about bringing craniosacral therapy, a gentle and effective health care option into the light. I'm standing up for something I believe in. I feel that writing and pursuing publication of this book is a brave thing. It may never reach many people; and it may not help the ones it does reach. But I am trying to make the world a better place. It feels brave and I'm proud of that.

Thank you.

Jana Panter