

## The Write to Heal: *Stories Save Us* (Episode 1)

**Interview with Joseph Bathanti, former NC Poet Laureate and Dr. Bruce Kelly, retired Assistant Chief of Primary Care at the Charles George VA Medical Center**

[00:00:00] **Tamara Kissane:** Are you compelled to write, whether it be journaling, poetry, or stories to help make sense of your life in the world? I'm Tamara Kissane, the founder of Artist Soapbox. In this limited audio series writer and teacher June Guralnick and I speak with life-changers - people who champion creative writing as a catalyst for healing and soldiers whose lives have been radically transformed through story. In this episode, you'll hear from former North Carolina poet Laureate Joseph Bathanti and Dr. Bruce Kelly, retired recently from his position as Assistant Chief of Primary Care at the Charles George VA Medical Center. Together they created an extraordinary writing program dedicated to Vietnam veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Check out our show notes for more information about Joseph and Bruce's backgrounds, along with a link to a short documentary about their program, *Brothers Like These*. We hope you enjoy this conversation about the power of storytelling to inspire connection and healing, and do stay to the end because we have a provocative writing prompt we're inviting you, our listener, to sink your teeth into.

[00:01:16] **June Guralnick:** Joseph, welcome. I just want to say for folks listening to this, that I've known you for a really, really long time. I'm not going to say how long cause that's going to age us both. But I'm just going to say I've known you a really long time and when I asked you to send me your bio in preparation for today's chat, what you sent me blew me away.

The amount of stuff you've done over the last 40 or so years, the incredible work with diverse populations around the country, the passion that you have for sharing your wonderful skill sets! I thank you so much. So we're going to just dive right in. I want you to share with us the why. Why have you spent 40 years working with populations as diverse as veterans, prisoners, domestic violence victims, AIDS patients, the homeless, the list goes on. Why Joseph? What compels you?

[00:02:22] **Joseph Bathanti:** So all of this really starts, I suppose, kind of early, you know, really in high school. I went to this very precocious all boys Catholic high school in Pittsburgh. I started writing then, and I will say this, I started

writing badly. So I like to say that I wrote badly, then I wrote less badly, then I wrote less badly, and I began to move up the chain that way.

So fast forward into graduate school, I'm still kind of piddling around with writing, but I haven't developed what Flannery O'Connor calls the habit of being. I'm still one of those people who has to wait for inspiration - like Newton's apple to conk you on the head. So, when I left graduate school at the University of Pittsburgh, in my hometown of Pittsburgh, I didn't know what I wanted to do, so I applied to be a Vista Volunteers in Service to America (domestic Peace Corps).

I had a Master's degree in English at the time, so I was a generalist, which meant I had no skills at all. I wasn't a carpenter, I wasn't a physician, a social worker, a plumber. Like a lot of other folks I was assigned to the North Carolina Department of Correction. So suddenly I've landed in a prison yard in Huntersville, North Carolina, 12 miles north of Charlotte in 1976, the bicentennial year. Huntersville has a Ford dealer, a Tasty Freeze, and a bunch of churches and a prison.

What happened when I got there is that I saw kind of what I thought were versions of me. You know, they were regular guys who had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Poor African Americans and poor white people. I've always been very tuned into class. My parents are the children of immigrants.

My dad was a steelworker, my mother was a seamstress. I had what I think is quite a charmed childhood, but I know that my parents were struggling quite a bit just to make ends meet, et cetera. So I show up and I suddenly realize by seeing these guys on the yard that they're not in there cause they're desperados.

Although a few of them have done really profoundly horrifying things, but most of them, there was a lot of B and E strong arm robbery, substance abuse, revolving door alcoholism. You know, guys that would come in and get 18 months for public drunkenness and do six months active, get out with no treatment, come back.

So that began to galvanize in me a kind of simmering anger and resentment at the hierarchy and the way it put certain people in harm's way, and who was vulnerable and who wasn't. I related to these guys. So, because I wanted to be a writer, I decided that one of the things that I would do as a Vista volunteer is I would teach a creative writing class.

[00:05:24] **Tamara Kissane:** How did you approach teaching creative writing in the prison?

[00:05:27] **Joseph Bathanti:** So here's what I found out right away in the creative writing classroom. I found out how to get out of the way because the students, those prisoners, were giving permission to one another to tell their stories. As soon as the first guy told his story about maybe going down his crime story, what had happened on the streets or drinking shoe polish or whatever it might have been, another guy raised his hand and said, man, I got a story like that too. So it was that idea of community, and I do believe we can only heal in community.

But each of them thought I'm the only one that has had this experience. I'm the only one that's been in this purgatory. I'm the only one that has messed up this way. Other guys were saying: "no, man, I did too, I did too." "Well, I did. Here's what happened to me." And out of that came a kind of really miraculous shimmering revelation to me that stories can save us, essentially. That they restore our humanity, that we find so much to not be at odds with, to be in communion with.

[00:06:40] **June Guralnick:** I had, it was different, but there were some similarities when I was working still in New York City. Ann Jones, the author of *Women Who Kill*, arranged for me and some of the folks from my theater company to go up to Bedford Hills Prison and interview the women there. And Joseph, it was the first time in my life that I had this palpable sensation that I could be there.

I could be one of them, because when I started to hear their stories and understood what put them there, or at least I had a glimpse of it (and of course I had researched some of the cases before I went in) - it was a thunderbolt for me, a thunderbolt of understanding that there but for the grace of God I could be and so could many other women.

It changed how I looked at the world in ways that I'm still trying to figure out today.

[00:07:33] **Joseph Bathanti:** I mean, Vista set the agenda for the rest of my life in terms of social and restorative justice. And again, I don't want to come off as like Mother Teresa and all that stuff, but it changed Joan and I profoundly, and we could never be the same.

I mean, one of the questions you ask is, you know, why do you continue in this? One of the reasons is because I know about it, it was revealed to me.

[00:07:59] **Tamara Kissane:** Joseph, it is amazing how something like Vista changed your life and led to your inspirational work with other populations as well. As you know, for this series, we are focusing on veterans and active duty folks.

Your work facilitating writing with veterans has been groundbreaking in our state, and it's been a decades long commitment for you. Can you talk about what led you to do this specifically with this population? How did you start? What were some of the hurdles and challenges you overcame?

[00:08:31] **Joseph Bathanti:** Okay. Okay, that's a great question, Tamara. So I was born in 1953 and I was in the next to the last, if not the last, Vietnam draft lottery, and I had a terrible number. If you had a number that low, that meant you were gonna get drafted for sure. I hesitate to say that I was politically astute or tuned in, but I was against the war. I didn't want to go to war, and of course I was scared to go to war.

What the heck's going to war? Through no advocacy of my own, essentially the draft was dropped and the war began to wane, and I was spared, but Vietnam was my war, if you will. And I believe that people who go to war, go to war so other people can stay home. And I was one of those people who got to stay home.

So I've always had that in the back of my head,, and I was in my office one day and the son of a colleague who had been deployed to Iraq had been a Navy corpsman. He came back a mess. He came into my office one day and he asked me if I would do an independent study with him. He wanted to write his wartime memoir.

I told him, of course I would do that, you know, but I never heard from him again. He disappeared. It turns out he was just fine. But I had this lodged in my head, his story. So I knew the struggles he was going through, and as a result, the kinds of struggles the families were going through because as Ron Caps, the guy that founded the Veterans' Writing Project says, no one goes to war alone.

Which means if a boy or girl is deployed, that's your kid, you're deployed with him, you don't have a moment of peace and you have to try and deal with their reentry when they come home, which is typically rocky in ways we can't imagine.

So, at the time I was a finalist to be the North Carolina poet Laureate. I get a call that the governor has appointed me to be the Poet Laureate, I mean the greatest, greatest honor of my life. And then I was asked to declare a signature project in the next couple days. So because I had had this conversation with this young man, I vowed to work with returning combat veterans and their families, all veterans.

I said I would harvest their wartime stories through poetry, memoir, short story, playwriting, you name it. And then because I made this lavish claim, I had to make good on it. So that's how I got into that and I asked for advice from a lot of people. Ron Caps, this fellow that I mentioned, I wrote to him out of the clear blue sky and said, "Hey man, I just said I'm gonna do this. Can I do this? What should I do? How should I do it?"

He wrote back and said, yes, you can do it, and here's how you do it, and hang in there and these are the things you're gonna face. And gosh, I think my very first encounter with that world was at Walter Reed, for God's sake. And then I just kept plunging into it further and further into it.

You know, going into large and small communities in North Carolina, in libraries and arts councils and churches, and just setting out my shingle, saying, you know, bring me your vets. We're gonna do a creative writing workshop. And they came and they came and they came. Often, they were led by their mothers.

Often they were led by their wives. Often they were led by people that said, this man (and they were pretty much exclusively male veterans, although I've worked with, with female veterans too), this man has been tortured since his deployment by his memories, nightmares, you know, hypervigilance anxiety.

They would write about their experiences, you know, and then, oh, I wrote something for Our State magazine called "They Are Everywhere." And from that article, a guy named Bruce Kelly, who was a primary care physician at Charles George VA Medical Center in Asheville, got in touch with me and Bruce and I cooked up this idea to start meeting with Vietnam veterans, exclusively with PTSD, who were his patients, who he basically recommended show up.

[00:13:10] **Tamara Kissane:** We're delighted to have a chance right now to speak with Dr. Kelly. Dr. Kelly, what compelled you to want to use creative and expressive writing with veterans?

[00:13:20] **Bruce Kelly:** It didn't take me long working with especially the Vietnam veterans, to realize just how many of them were still carrying the war with them, you know, some 50 years later.

As they were sitting there to my left during the routine medical visits, I just heard over and over from these men how much the war was still impacting their lives, and as they were kind of nearing the last decade or so of their lives, so many of them were needing to reconcile what they'd carried for a very long time.

Our VA mental health people do a remarkable job with what they are tasked. And yet so many of these men were still struggling. So I just felt like we needed to do something more and that they really did want to talk and they all had stories that they needed someone to hear. And so with that kind of background, I fortuitously happened to hear about Joseph Bathanti and the work that he did as our state Poet Laureate, traveling around North Carolina doing writing workshops with veterans.

It really proved to be a pretty remarkable partnership as we sort of started something from scratch, you know, and built what we did over these past eight years.

[00:14:36] **Joseph Bathanti:** And one day I walked into the VA, the first VA hospital I had ever been in my life, went downstairs, went into Classroom B, and faced about 16 Vietnam veterans from nine mountain counties surrounding Asheville.

Guys probably about five years older than me. Most of them had gone in fairly early in Vietnam before we even knew what the heck Vietnam was. A lot of them to a man would say the biggest thing that he had been on before he stepped off that plane in Ben Wa was a school bus. And I looked at them and they looked at me, and these were people who would probably rather wear lipstick than write poetry, to tell you the truth.

And I asked them to write and they started writing. And I wondered who would come back the next week and they all came back and they kept coming back. And it was like going to church. It was amazing. You could hear a pin drop. I couldn't believe the things that I was hearing. They couldn't believe the things that they were hearing. And it was also one of those instances where they gave permission to one another.

[00:15:49] **Bruce Kelly:** Joseph and I often use the word transformative to describe the experience that we had. I don't think I'd ever really seen anything quite happen like this. I mean, Joseph and I have used, you know, any number of words, you know, magical, mystical, transformative.

Joseph maybe, you know, said to you, we came to refer to it as the Church of Classroom B, which is where we met because of the work of the soul that we witnessed there and this deep reverence that we all felt for these veterans' service and sacrifice and stories. Because these men just came to life in ways that, you know, we might not have imagined and especially gratifying for me as their physician, you know, and kind of knowing what was behind the veil.

[00:16:39] **Joseph Bathanti:** They began to open up, they opened up to one another, and they realized that they weren't the only people on this earth who were dealing with that kind of ongoing misery. And so the anger and the vitriol and the bitterness and the shame that had been building all those years - they let it all out in their writing.

Paradoxically enough, it was the year in their life that completely broke them, but it was the most vibrant, important year ever in their life as well. So the most important thing they had ever done in their life that completely undid them ended up being also what gave them their voice.

[00:17:25] **Bruce Kelly:** It was just miraculous and so I think one of the ways that it changed me was sort of re-energized my faith in the human spirit and just what was possible when individuals are given a chance to express their full humanity.

[00:17:42] **Tamara Kissane:** As a physician, how do you categorize or conceive of expressive writing as a healing tool? Does it correlate to other medical treatments? Is it medicine? Is it occupational therapy? Does it make changes in our brains?

[00:18:00] **Bruce Kelly:** Yeah, very, very fair question. You know, and one we talked about a lot, ask ourselves frequently. We were very clear that this was not a therapy group; this was an expressive writing group. And all along we anticipated that healing, you know, would come for these men to some degree and it's what we found to be true. I think that's part of what was so remarkable is that Joseph and I didn't really do that much. I got the veterans there. Joseph kind of set the stage for the writing.



We gave them their weekly prompt and they just kind of took it from there. And you know, it was both the opportunity to tell their stories, but to do so with other veterans who understood what they'd been through. And so very quickly, this sense of community formed that I think was a very big part of how the healing was able to happen.

[00:18:59] **June Guralnick:** I have to ask you this question, Joseph. How did working with this population, with veterans, change you as a person and change your writing?

[00:19:11] **Joseph Bathanti:** More than anything, I'm not sure how it changed my writing as much as how it changed my spirit in the way I look at the world. It gave me another layer of belief that maybe I didn't have before because we toil often and never see the results of our work.

These guys, again, they literally began to heal. Their health improved, their relationships with their families just were enhanced. We know that writing about trauma helps you heal from trauma sooner, but the other thing about writing is when it's in your head, it's just chaos. When it's on the page, it's cosmos.

So we can actually see how we feel about things once we see it written down in an organized fashion. Because the chain of events, when things happen, never have the organization that they have once we order them on paper. In most of these guys, yes, they have PTSD, but they also equate PTSD with survivor's guilt.

Very often, 18 years old, they left behind so many boys and they came home. "Why me? Why me? Why me?" So one guy, he had a story in his head that he had caused the death of somebody. He was a corpsman. He wrote his story as he told me over and over and over until he could see what he had really done and that he wasn't the reason why this man died.

So they were really trying to get in there and narrate and curate memory and really sort out what had happened because they put these things in literal boxes, in metaphorical boxes, double padlocked them, chained them up, put them in the attic rafters, and never went back to them. But those things were humming and thrumming and calling to them like demons.

And it wasn't until they reopened that box and dealt with those demons through their writing that they were able to heal. I had no idea this thing would take on so many lives. I thought it was the right thing to do. Maybe that's why these things start. It just seems the right thing to do.



[00:21:29] **Bruce Kelly:** We've all become friends. You know, we continue to meet even at off times. We stay in touch with pretty much all the men by phone or email. As Joseph may have mentioned, some of the men started a nonprofit called the North Carolina Veterans Writing Alliance to keep the work going outside the VA lane. And they have just done some remarkable work continuing group readings.

They've brought in songwriters from Nashville to create songs around their stories. They've worked with a dance theater. We've had some community spinoff programs done by middle school children. You know, one of the most touching stories, one of our veterans drove a bus for a middle school, and somehow the children found out he was a Vietnam veteran.

They had some conversations about, you know, the way that these guys were treated when they came home, and these kids were just astonished to hear that, you know, Mr. Steve had been treated so poorly after serving our country. Well, these children told their parents. And one day Steven was going to his bus route, came up the stairs, turned into a hallway, and the hallway was filled with students and teachers all holding up a banner: "Thank you, Mr. Steve!"

They had cookies, you know, they applauded and as he went out on his bus route, there were parents out in their yards with: "Welcome Home, Mr. Steve" and holding up signs and it just, you know, you can't make that kind of thing up.

These children, a number of them, were involved in something called "Destination Imagination" which is an international project of students who do short plays as well. They used Stephen's story. They won the Torchbearer Award for the North Carolina project for shining a light on something that had been too long in the shadows. They ended up going to the national program in Kansas City, and I think 17,000 people or something saw them do this.

So, you know, I think that it is just reflective of the fact that we as a nation have kind of come to realize how poorly, you know, we treated these men on their return. And as I said to you, June, I think in maybe one of the emails, I'll also never forget the first time we did a staged reading at Asheville Community Theater.

And that these men - it took a little bit of work to get, you know, these guys to agree to stand up on a stage and read one of their pieces. But I will never forget these men just walking out on stage and getting a standing ovation, and it's happened every time they've ever read. They get a standing ovation because I think we really have a moral imperative for all of our combat veterans' healing,

and especially these men from Vietnam who were treated just so very poorly when they returned. So all of this work has been part of a welcome home they've never had a chance to get.

[00:24:37] **Tamara Kissane:** Let's listen to a short piece from *Brothers Like These* written and performed by veteran Kenneth Faustman.

[00:24:49] **Kenneth Faustman:** My name is Ken Faustman., and my title is *Remembering It*.

I went to Vietnam in 1967 as a 5'3" eighteen-year-old boy who didn't weigh 100 pounds. As an only son, I could have received a deferment, but declined. I wanted to help stop Communism from spreading. I ended up spending 361 days in the bush, guarding the perimeter for an artillery unit with one week of R&R while serving in country.

I returned home January, 1968. My parents threw a surprise Welcome Home party with friends and relatives. They were kind, but the last thing I wanted to do was talk about the war. I was in shock. The world seemed so unfamiliar. The nightmares started after getting married in July. I took as many courses in school as I could to help bury the past. I graduated in two years, but the nightmares were still there. Three years after returning to work, they retreated into my subconscious. It took 40 years of 10-15 hour work days to keep them there.

They came back several years ago. My VA counselor referred me to a group for Vietnam veterans with PTSD. That's where I met Tom. He too was having nightmares and couldn't sleep. We hit it off right away. Two weeks later, at the first meeting of another group for creative writing, I looked up to see him sitting on his walker across the table from me. I believe a power greater than ours put us together.

We started riding to both groups together. As he told me about his life, it was as if I was talking to myself. We talked about how we drank to forget the memories and nightmares. We both felt the pain so much and couldn't let it go. Tom and I had both gone to serve our country. He had wanted to stop Communism too. We went to war so our children would be free and safe. So much for what we had thought.

Being with Tom always brought me relief. It was easy to share our fears and regrets. Tom was able to say the words I couldn't say for so many years. My new friend put hope in my heart that I would someday be normal and happy

again. He came to need a power wheelchair because of his end-stage lung disease. He and Midge, his wife, went to Publix the first day he got it. Tom dozed off and woke to find himself in the middle of the melon display. When he woke up, he blurted out, “Melons for everyone!” Classic Tom.

It became harder for him to get to the writing group because of his breathing but he never missed a meeting. The night he wrote his first poem, everyone got up and cheered, some fighting back tears, some not even trying to. We were all so proud of him. I’d go to his home where we’d talk and laugh. Nothing was off limits. I could finally share with him my nightmares and get past the thick hard wall in my head that had trapped me for so long.

He turned for the worse and was admitted to the VA hospital. I tried to visit every day to cheer him up. The only tears were from laughing so hard. When Tom went into Hospice, he remained an inspiration to everyone he came in contact with. He remained the strongest person I’d ever seen, and a wonderful friend. Even as he was dying, he had Midge get me a black cap with “9th Infantry Division 3/5 CAV” on the front, my unit in Vietnam. That’s the kind of brother he was.

[00:28:52] **Tamara Kissane:** That's such a poignant piece. Even more so since Kenneth recently passed away. We will be sure to include the link to *Brothers Like These* in the show notes. Now, Joseph, could you talk a little bit more about the power of story to bridge the human divide?

[00:29:06] **Joseph Bathanti:** This idea of shared humanity has never been more important and we become jointly human when we share our stories. I mean, I think a way to restore one's humanity is through storytelling. It restores my faith in the notion of individual stories to unite us in humanity and restore human dignity - and for people to matter. For people to have a voice. And I always mention everyone has stories, which is no revelation, but sometimes we think only writers have them or the people that write them down have them, but that's not true at all.

[00:29:48] **June Guralnick:** I need to ask you this question cause I think people are going to want to know. If you could say one thing to folks who are afraid or hesitant to write about their pain, their joy, their lives, what would you tell them?

[00:30:01] **Joseph Bathanti:** That pain is often your strength and that yes, it breaks you, but it lifts you as well. Bruce Weigel talks about the great poet who wrote *Song of Napalm*, arguably the most famous book of poetry to come out of

Vietnam. Bruce said: “The paradox of my life is that Vietnam destroyed me, but it gave me my voice.” Etheridge Knight, the great African American poet who was in Korea and was terribly wounded and given morphine, became a drug addict and went to prison, said: “I died twice. Once in Korea, once in prison, but poetry resuscitated me.” So I think to go to that place of pain, if you can live through it and write about it, that it ultimately lifts you because you will find, you will find light in it, and you will see strength in the writing that you didn't see when the actual event occurred.

One time Danny Romine Powell, who was a great friend and the book editor of the Charlotte Observer, when papers actually still wrote about books, asked me, “Why do you write?” And I said, I write to be forgiven. And I think maybe that's why these guys have done so well with this because they have forgiven themselves for things that they thought they did or maybe even things they did.

We're all encouraged to forgive people, you know, to not carry the weight of hatred in vitriol, in vengeance towards ourselves, Often too, to forgive yourself. The writing gave those guys a new life, a new identity.

[00:31:51] **June Guralnick:** I think that's the key. People need to claim who they are through their writing. And -

[00:31:55] **Joseph Bathanti:** I should say too, y'all just kind of in closing, those guys learned how to love again. You know, that capacity was dead in them in a lot of ways. And they learned to love again. They're restored, not totally, they all have their demons. They're still fighting, but you know, they have hope.

[00:32:15] **June Guralnick:** Hope. Yes. I'd love to close on that. I just want to thank you for spending this time with us.

[00:32:22] **Bruce Kelly:** It was so worthwhile. And thank you for your pebble here, you know, to keep the ripples moving, both of you.

[00:32:32] **Tamara Kissane:** Wow. We heard a lot today about the healing power of telling your own story. What did you hear? What did you take away from this conversation that's still turning in your mind?

In the spirit of this series, The Write to Heal, we invite you to respond to this prompt: ***If your life were made into a movie, what experience would you insist be included?*** Describe the experience and why it was so important to you, and if you're willing, we'd love to hear your thoughts and writings. You can share them

by sending to [artistsoapbox@gmail.com](mailto:artistsoapbox@gmail.com) with the subject heading: The Write to Heal.

The Write to Heal: Soldiers Deep Dive into Storytelling is a production of Artist Soapbox in partnership with June Guralnick. This series is dedicated in memory of David Brave Heart, who's inspiring music graces our introduction and closing sections with additional music by Louis Wilkinson. The intro montage is sound engineered by Royce Froehlich with post-production by Jasmine Hunjan and Tamara Kissane.

For more information, including the list of writers who contributed to our opening montage, please see the show notes. Catch us on social media, or visit our websites at [artistsoapbox.org](http://artistsoapbox.org) and [juneguralnick.com](http://juneguralnick.com).