

## The Write to Heal: *Let our Angels Sing* (Episode 6)

### Interview with the podcast co-producers June Guralnick and Tamara Kissane

[00:00:00] **Tamara Kissane:** Are you compelled to write, whether it be journaling, poetry, or stories to help make sense of your life and 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 sixth and culminating episode for The Write to Heal series, you'll hear more from June about her journey teaching expressive writing. We also reflect on important themes that continue to surface with podcast guests. As always, check out our show notes for more information and links.

Please stay to the end because we have a provocative writing prompt we're inviting you, our listener, to sink your teeth into.

June, almost exactly five months ago, I received an email from you about the work that you've been doing and about connecting for a series of podcast episodes, and in the email you wrote: "The work has been life-changing for me and I believe has had a significant impact on the people I've been blessed to work with." Can you talk about five months ago, what inspired you to reach out, you know, through this process of working with veterans, active duty and family?

[00:01:29] **June Guralnick:** I've been doing it close to three years, and over the last six months, the work had become so rich and deep and I could see change. I mean, it's an amazing thing when you can watch and see change in a human being, and I saw that in the people I was working with.

I wanted to have a conversation with at least a smattering of the people that I've worked with, because I feel like there's so much that we all can learn from this. People know this is an extraordinary moment in time when everything seems to be shifting. And in this moment we have the opportunity to look at what I think are positive roads forward.

And to me, the connection between art and healing is, most definitely, a way forward for a lot of people, and so that's why I reached out to you.

[00:02:27] **Tamara Kissane:** How did you first become involved in teaching writing to veterans and active duty soldiers in North Carolina?

[00:02:34] **June Guralnick:** We'd have to go back in time, maybe a little less than a decade ago. I wrote a play called Across the Holy Tell, and it was about a female veteran and her experiences serving in the Iraq War and then coming home. To write the play, I spent at least a year of research talking with veterans and their family members and therapists and I can't tell you how mind blowing it was.

Most of the stuff you heard and saw onTV, it really didn't give you the full picture of what was happening for people. Now we hear a lot more about PTSD and all of that, but way back when people were not talking about this stuff. I was so moved and gripped in my heart by the people I had the opportunity to talk with. It stayed with me. Even after the play was done, it stayed with me and it haunted me. And then interestingly, right before Covid struck, somebody sent me a posting from The Joel Fund - an ad to teach creative writing to veterans, you know, and then Covid struck. And so I didn't think I would be doing it. And then I received the call -hey, you know, thinking about using Zoom. So that's how it started.

[00:03:51] **Tamara Kissane:** What did you discover both about veterans and about yourself when you started working there with that population?

[00:04:00] **June Guralnick:** I decided to pretty much throw out everything I knew. Yeah. It just seemed as if it wasn't going to work in the same way. It wasn't going to work for me and for them. I just cleared the plate and I thought to myself, you know what, I think I need a very different approach here. I've done a lot of community art. I took some of those skill sets, like what I noticed that building community was as important as making art, and I started with that as my principle, as my sort of guiding light.

You cannot tell your story unless you're connecting. Or it becomes a very isolating experience. And that was not what I wanted to have happen. I didn't want it to be an isolating experience, I wanted it to be an uplifting experience, where people would share and tell things that maybe they hadn't been able to tell before.

And you can only do that if you have the support around you and we feel like people are going to listen and hear you.

[00:04:56] **Tamara Kissane:** And did you have a similar experience when you started working with Walter Reed Hospital's Arts and Health program?

[00:05:02] **June Guralnick:** Oh, yes. Oh my goodness, yes. Walter Reed's a very, very unique place with a very, very long history. Yes. Basically the same approach that this is about community. You've got to have that feeling that if I fall, somebody's going to be there to pick me up or at least understand why I'm falling.

[00:05:20] **Tamara Kissane:** And how did you do that June? That's, I mean, you're talking about it in a way that is like, oh, well you just form community. But it takes a lot of thoughtfulness and skill to be able to create that space, especially a ritual space, which is what you've primarily been working in, right, over these last couple of years. So. What's your magic?

[00:05:40] **June Guralnick:** Well, no, I have no magic. Lord, no, no, no, but you're right when you say ritual, because that's exactly what I did in a way, I used my theater training. You know, theater is a ritual. I tried to institute a pattern of drawing people together and then helping guide people down their individual paths and then bringing it back together. So from the group to the individual, back to the group, there was an instinct that I followed inside myself. I would say the most important skill was listening.

I really, really, really tried to listen to what people were saying. I have a lesson plan. It's very structured, but I also know if something else is happening in that virtual room, I'll let go of it because I'm listening and something else seems to be needed. So it's a flexibility built into the structure.

[00:06:37] **Tamara Kissane:** I think a lot of folks who don't write regularly have this idea of writers just writing all day, but what you offer to the people in your class are these short writing sprints, five minutes of writing, so it's a relatively low investment of time that can yield a lot of richness and kind of ripples over the next few days or sometimes throughout the rest of our lives. But I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about the value and power of writing prompts and about those short term writing sprints.

[00:07:13] **June Guralnick:** Right. So first let me talk about time. There's this misnomer that for people to write, oh, I've got to sit down for the next 10 hours. That's myth number one. Let's just shoot that right down. No, you can sit down for two minutes, right? Two minutes. So I call 'em my two minute eggs. They're very raw. They're very raw, but tasty, and it's a way to get people into the habit.

Well, heck, I don't need an hour here. I can write over my morning coffee or my evening tea, right?

So it's about setting up the ritual, let's use that word again. The ritual, the daily practice of writing without that horrible expectation that scares everybody off. Well, hell, I don't have an hour. I got to get my kids' lunches made and I've got to look at the homework and well, heck, I've got some work of my own I have to do.

I mean, who the hell thinks they have an hour just lying spare around? Nobody, you know? Right? Not going to happen for most people. But you have two minutes. If you think about swimming and how many levels of the ocean there are - you know, you can just tread water for a minute. So that's what we do. We kind of tread water with a two minute prompt and then, oh geez, you know, that's interesting what you wrote there. Hey, how about we just swim under water for a few minutes? And then the final prompts I do in the course of a lesson are what I call the deep dives. Let's go down. Let's see how far down we're going to go here. So I integrate that approach in my writing prompts.

[00:08:44] **Tamara Kissane:** I'm just speaking for myself, but sometimes the only way I can get myself to write is by telling myself it's only two minutes. It's only five minutes, because whatever it is that I need to put on the piece of paper, I don't want to. There's some resistance. I think it's going to be hard, like there are a million different reasons that I don't want to do it. And sometimes it is. So for me it's emotionally fraught - and that two minutes is all I've got.

So making that a possibility for people, just expanding the definition of what it means to be a writer. There isn't a time limit. It doesn't look a certain way. It's variable. There's a spectrum and it all counts and it's all useful depending on what you need. I think that's wonderfully liberating.

[00:09:32] **June Guralnick:** And so let me talk about prompts. This is going to sound like a very strange thing to say because I use them. I think they can be very wonderful. Oftentimes, they're taught without a sense of story in them. How you build from prompt A to prompt B to prompt C doesn't often go anywhere, but there's a way to utilize the idea of a prompt, again in a progressively interesting journey.

And that's what I've been trying to do with every lesson plan and each lesson plan is different and builds on the last. And I've been doing this for three years, and I have three years of weekly lesson plans that are never repeats because

they are markers in a journey, and as you move on the journey, the markers hopefully keep deepening and deepening and deepening.

[00:10:23] **Tamara Kissane:** A lot of the people in your classes would consider themselves at least to be non-writers. How do you approach teaching writing to those folks?

[00:10:36] **June Guralnick:** Well, first, let me say, I'm going to challenge you when you say non-writers; if you breathe, you can write. Now that doesn't mean everyone's going to be a Stephen King or Maya Angelou, you know, that's, that's not what I'm saying, but everyone has the ability and the imagination and the creativity to write something meaningful, at least for them. That is my starting point in every class I teach.

[00:11:01] **Tamara Kissane:** You mentioned that you've seen profound change or noticeable change. What does that look like?

[00:11:09] **June Guralnick:** It looks like a soldier who used to love to write poetry as a kid who hadn't been able to write for 25 years starting to write wonderful poems and writing all the time, or it looks like a soldier lying in a hospital bed, reading to me a letter she wrote to her mother, A letter of very, very deep proportions recounting the soldier's journey. This is what it looks like to me, and you can see change happening as these stories and poems are read.

[00:11:51] **Tamara Kissane:** Do you think it has to do with an identity shift?

[00:11:55] **June Guralnick:** Yeah, absolutely. There are many, many studies of the brain and how the act of writing, of writing stories about your life frees up cognitive resources and indeed can change somebody. But of course you have to be willing to go on that journey. You can't force somebody to go on that journey, you know? They have to be ready.

[00:12:18] **Tamara Kissane:** Speaking for myself and what I've observed, whenever I've written down something that feels to me very heavy, complicated, and taking a lot of my brain space, my emotional energy, when I can put that down on a piece of paper, not as a grand masterpiece but just as something on a piece of paper, I feel such relief. And I have seen people put things down on a piece of paper and exhale because they're not carrying it by themselves anymore. And especially when you're doing that in a community and you're sharing that with other people, that load is distributed. It's diffused. We don't talk enough about the burdens that people carry silently and how much it can help to put them down.

[00:13:08] **June Guralnick:** Absolutely. That's right! There is the key. And to take a personal story and write it down, you are becoming a witness. It's not that you're stepping away, but you're getting that perspective that you speak of. You're moving that camera lens where you can see it in a different way. And that sharing that you talk about, oh my goodness gracious, is the most important part of it.

**Tamara Kissane:** Can you talk a little bit about that?

**June Guralnick:** I think it's the most important thing of all right. We are not alone. The more specific your story is, the more it gets into the nitty gritty of your own life, and then you share that story and people say, wow, I know, I've been there. I understand. I had that experience. Maybe it wasn't exactly the same, but I understand I had something similar happen. I am not alone in this experience. Isn't that why we create art? I mean, I'm sorry, but isn't that it? And that's what I've seen happen.

[00:14:10] **Tamara Kissane:** I know a lot of your work revolves around this digital storytelling idea. What is digital storytelling for people who are not familiar? I was not familiar with it before we started having a conversation. So what's an easy definition?

[00:14:26] **June Guralnick:** Well, there's a lot more intellectual definitions, but you know what? I think they're home movies. But they're home movies that start with narrative rather than pictures, typically, right?

You write a short story, very short, and then you throw stuff in it. You throw photographs in it. You can throw sound in it. Music, you can sing to it, right? You throw memorabilia into it. It's been a really powerful tool for veterans to share a story that's both narrative and visual at the same time - in a way that you can share it through media.

[00:15:04] **Tamara Kissane:** I want to shift our conversation just a little bit back to you. I know that this has been life-changing for the students that you've worked with, but I know it's also been life-changing for you. So how has your work changed and how have you changed as an artist and teacher over these past few years considering the people that you've connected with?

[00:15:28] **June Guralnick:** You know, I've been working in the arts virtually all my life and I don't think I really always enjoyed my artistic process. Oftentimes it felt quite torturous, quite onerous. You know, sometimes it was

fun, but a lot of times it felt like this 24/7 burn, burn, burn, create till you drop. And I did that for half a century.

So in a sense, teaching in this way, working with people in this way made me stop and say, wait a minute, wait a minute. Maybe there's a different way to create, not just for them, but for me. So, I'm now seeking what that might mean for myself. So to me, this is part of my journey now to learn how to incorporate a mindful approach.

Again, nice buzzword. Let's see what that really means, you know, for me personally - and how to approach a different way to create art in a way that feels holistic and non-destructive. So, I don't have answers to your question other than I feel like I'm searching to experiment with different ways to work for myself and then hopefully, you know, the skill sets that I've been trying to really learn over the last three or so years - how to work with others using that.

[00:16:51] **Tamara Kissane:** You mentioned that you'd lost your words, you lost your voice, which I know that is a huge part of your identity. At that time, you were also teaching these classes. What was it like to be in a space with writers, teaching writing, and also being cut off from that yourself?

[00:17:11] **June Guralnick:** When Covid first struck, I taped the words, 'Survive the Pandemic' to my printer. I didn't know then, in addition to the gut wrenching loss of friends and a beloved family member, that my pandemic would also include the end of a 30-year marriage, the collapse of my theater career, a crippling accident I'm still recovering from, and a depression so bottomless I wasn't sure I'd survive it.

Drowning in this tsunami of darkness, I tried to write - mostly in nightmarish fits - and then just stopped. I could no longer find my words or hear my voice. So I would like to offer gratitude, and yes, heartfelt apology, long overdue, addressed to the soldiers, veterans and family members I've been honored to work with these past few years.

[00:18:03] **Tamara Kissane:** June, what would you like to apologize for?

[00:18:06] **June Guralnick:** I've sometimes felt like a charlatan praising the cathartic power of the written word when my own pen had run dry.

**Tamara Kissane:** Is there anything directly you'd like to say to all the veterans that you worked with?

**June Guralnick:** My dear friends. Brave, bold, honest, funny, heart-wrenching are just a few of the words that describe your incredible writings spilling out from your oceans of courage.

I hope you can forgive me for not always being honest about my own doubts. Your no holds barred, from the gut writings gave me hope that a path to my own healing could be found. One of my favorite playwrights, August Wilson. said: “Your willingness to wrestle with your demons will cause your angels to sing.”

My friends, if you can wrestle with your demons and set them so powerfully free on paper, then at the very least I can muster a smidgen of courage to begin to find truthful words reflecting the person and writer I am becoming. I am so grateful to you all for embracing our journey together of healing words and for opening the gates so we can hear our angels sing.

[00:19:17] **Tamara Kissane:** Thank you, June, for reading that and for writing that. I appreciate it so much.

[00:19:22] **June Guralnick:** I mean, I was uplifted by my students, just their grace of spirit and sharing, and they modeled for me ultimately a different way of creating. So I'm still thinking about it and I think sitting with those questions is a good beginning.

[00:19:41] **Tamara Kissane:** June, in the episode with Barbara and Pedro, you mentioned the digital story that you created, and we will include a link to that in the show notes so that listeners can enjoy it as well. Could you talk about that a little bit?

[00:19:54] **June Guralnick:** That was the hardest thing I've ever written. It was about my mother's death, and then I followed it up with another story.

That was the second digital story that I ever wrote. What I'd like to link to this program is the second one I did called *What I Didn't See*, which is a kind of meditation on the people most important in my life. It was an emotional journey and I realized I had to go on that journey and embrace it no matter how painful to tell those stories. It's good I went through that. How can I even ask people to make that journey if I don't know what the heck they're going through?

[00:20:32] **Tamara Kissane:** It sounds like you modeled courage for each other. I mean, you modeled courage as a facilitator and they modeled courage as a student in your workshop.



[00:20:43] **June Guralnick:** Absolutely. Absolutely. I think that's a theme that runs through this river we've created. But other folks have had that experience and this idea of telling story in community is a theme that will continue to resonate for the rest of my life. Didn't you hear that too in all the narratives that we've heard?

[00:21:09] **Tamara Kissane:** They certainly did. They all touched on it. And Sarah, in her episode quoted somebody saying, "Trauma occurs in relationship and healing occurs in relationship." I found that to be very powerful. The opportunity to undo harm caused by other people. The answer, the solution is other people.

[00:21:30] **June Guralnick:** Yeah, I think so too. And all these things we heard, to me they have not just relevance for the veteran community. I believe that writing to heal, using writing as a tool in one's wellness toolbox, my hope is that someday this will become something a lot of people can integrate into their lives. Let me ask you this. You are a working mother and playwright, so you have a somewhat different lens than I do on what we've been hearing. Has this changed your approach to writing at all, what we've been listening to?

[00:22:07] **Tamara Kissane:** Something I heard a lot and something that I think about a lot is product versus process. And I think that as a culture, we are so focused on product. Something that came up for me, having these conversations is really a reminder that process is so valuable and in many cases might even be more valuable than the final product. So I was really challenged to kind of rethink how I approach my own work and checking in with my own values, just reminding myself that the writing will always be there for me. It's always there when I'm ready to do it.

I guess overall, I'm trying to take an approach of gentleness to my writing, to both of my children, to myself, because I think that is what is most helpful, really, is that sense of gentleness and kindness and forgiveness. And that even came up in our conversations during the series, this idea of writing to forgive, and I think that's important.

[00:23:16] **June Guralnick:** That makes so much sense to me. I mean, it comes back to the idea of catharsis and unburdening and writing to release your demons.

[00:23:26] **Tamara Kissane:** Well, I think that in addition to the power of community, I've also been reminded about the power of the individual to make change and to have those ripple effects. And that came up in several

conversations to take that deep journey into sometimes discomfort. All of those things work together to really make profound change across wide swaths of people, and I love that. I find that very compelling and also encouraging.

[00:23:57] **June Guralnick:** Hell yes. Right.

[00:24:00] **Tamara Kissane:** I think something that has come up many times in this series is this idea of claiming one's own story. Having control over the narrative and making or remaking meaning of an experience by choosing what to write down or to rewrite over and over again. And I think that is so important in many ways, forming your own identity or reforming your own self-identity.

[00:24:30] **June Guralnick:** Exactly. At least on this piece of paper, I'm claiming this story because this is who I am. That's the 'write' to heal. And the right to claim who you are, and we've got to do that as human beings or we suffer.

[00:24:45] **Tamara Kissane:** Something else that we've asked some of the guests has to do with the toll that it might take to hold space for others who are revisiting difficult experiences. As a person who does that, how do you continue to show up to be available and go deep with them without burning yourself out?

[00:25:09] **June Guralnick:** That's a great question. Yeah, that's a great question. So, you know, at least before my accident, I danced all my life since I was a little girl. And for me, how I always handled my release was through the body, through dance. So in a sense it was in form without words that I could release all the other stuff.

I understand the irony of it, and yet I've also come to understand that writing is a physical act as well. Now it's a different type of physical act. I see them more now as part of a greater whole. And then when my accident happened and I couldn't walk for quite some time, I just started getting out in nature. And that has become this place where I can be silent and feel absolutely present and feel like I'm surrounded with something that's lifting me up. And so now I do both. Now that I'm able to at least walk some, I walk a lot in nature.

[00:26:16] **Tamara Kissane:** For many people, writing can be a grounding experience. And what you are expressing to me at least, are different types of grounding experiences, whether it's moving your body or being out in nature and putting your feet on the ground.

Sometimes, at least for me, when I get frazzled, overwhelmed, I feel myself flying away and I need to be tethered, not in a way that feels constrictive, but in a way that feels grounded. Nature is an absolutely wonderful place for me to find it as well. June, what advice would you give to folks who want to start writing?

[00:26:55] **June Guralnick:** So, you know, when people say, what advice do you have for folks who want to capture their lives on paper, I just say, start writing. And every time you hear the little, what I call the little demon snake inside your head, just tell 'em to shut up at least for a few minutes. Make a bargain, say, shut up for 10 minutes so I can write something.

And then usually they'll shut up. And you know all it takes is two minutes, five minutes, ten minutes, and just see what happens. That's my advice and thank you and Artist Soapbox.

[00:27:23] **Tamara Kissane:** Thank you, June. I'm so grateful for our time together, for the work that you do, for the conversation and for your big heart and passion. It's just really inspiring. So thank you so much.

[00:27:35] **June Guralnick:** Let me just say we have gone on this really fascinating, heart-warming journey through listening to people talk about how they have been impacted by the 'write' to heal. And I don't know about you, but all this stuff people have said still sort of churns in my mind and I hope that it will do at least the same or at least a little bit for people listening because there's a lot we all can take away from this.

[00:28:09] **Tamara Kissane:** I totally agree one hundred percent! I will include transcripts for each one of these episodes so that if people would like to read them, sometimes that's people's preferred way of engaging or reviewing, that will be available as well in the show notes.

[00:28:25] **June Guralnick:** Thank you for, wow, going on this trip. The power of the pen to heal.

[00:28:32] **Tamara Kissane:** Thank you, June.

You heard our reflections. What are yours? What did you take away from this conversation that's still turning in your mind? And in the spirit of this series, The Write to Heal, we invite you to respond to this prompt: ***How has writing helped you on your journey to healing?***

Take a moment to jot down whatever comes to mind. No need to edit yourself. Just let it flow, 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. As always, check out our show notes and [artistsoapbox.org](http://artistsoapbox.org) for information about our guests, production, and artistic teams.

We are so grateful for their generous participation in this series, and thank you for listening.

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: [artistsoapbox.org](http://artistsoapbox.org) and [juneguralnick.com](http://juneguralnick.com).