



# JOURNEY TO THE SACRED

*Writing*  
TO AWAKEN



## LESSON 5: THE LANGUAGE OF EMOTIONS

Language can be a double-edged sword when it comes to describing the inner life. Writers are faced with a paradox each time we sit down to record our experience: how can we possibly find the words to describe ineffable things? How can language possibly be used to capture feelings, hunches, and intuitions? And, how can we hope to approximate the kaleidoscope of felt experience with clunky, black-and-white syllables, or approach the magnificence of our quantum existence with consonants, vowels, and grammar?

This challenge is so basic to the human condition that we fail to appreciate its importance. Like our capacity for mathematics and art, our gift for language is hard-wired in us. Language is used to create story, which enables us to explain, navigate, gauge, and remember primitive experience. Indeed, you might define story as *explained experience*, or the mind's clever way of encapsulating what happens to us, giving it meaning. This is true whether our experience is negative or positive, mellow or intense. We bond and remain intimately connected with life through how we articulate it, using metaphor and created character, beginning with our own.

When describing the inner life, it is important to remember that language can be used in two ways: to cover up or to reveal. This is critical if we are aimed toward insight where the truth requires a lack of varnish, shamelessness, dropping of mores and care for reputation. The whole point of keeping a journal is to be able to be fully yourself *somewhere*. Yet we often keep up appearances even to ourselves. This may not be intentional, but rather the result of unquestioned conditioning and repeated clichés, a failure to think and see for ourselves, or view

complex wonder (for example: ‘I am happy-exhausted-scared-optimistic as I write this’). This exercise will help you learn to pay your emotions their complex due and plumb beyond cliché descriptions into the root of felt experience.

Next, consider a recent incident that caused intensely positive or negative feelings. Describe this incident in four sentences or less, in a way that agrees with how you felt at the time (for example: a happy memory can be described as such, or a challenge can be framed as a difficulty). Now rewrite these experiences with the opposite slant, using euphemism if necessary. How can you change the impression created by your original description? If you do this correctly, you will almost have yourself convinced that the second description is as accurate as the first. This is the power of confusing language.

ourselves full-on in the mirror of our pages. Language is too easily our conspirator in the habit of whitewashing our own motivations.

Think of how many times a day you euphemize for reasons ranging from politeness to laziness to cowardice. As our primary tool for lending meaning to experience, language is mostly used to bamboozle us into believing that things are not what they appear to be. “We tell ourselves stories in order to live,” as Joan Didion wrote, famously. But when you begin to notice *how* this story-making mind operates in you, you gain profound insight into the workings of your own psyche; the places where you’re too hard on yourself and those where you’re too soft, and how we all can repeat damaging experiences by tailoring how we explain them.

We come to see that language can be friend or foe on the path of self-realization. A guru once described himself to an adoring devotee as nothing more than a monkey pointing at the moon. All that language can do at best is point us to what will always lie beyond it. In doing so, it helps us excavate truth from feeling and opinion, and lets us see beyond the opaqueness of our own created stories. We begin to do this by looking at how we use language, the words we choose, and how we capture emotion. When we see that words are the building blocks of personal reality, we learn to appreciate their power and use them with more delicacy. This sharpens our attention and our writing.

**Please try these exercises:** Emotions are not simple. They are hyphenate creatures, collections of opposing impressions, admixtures of positive and negative, changing at every moment. How are you at this very moment? Describe your emotional state as you sit reading this sentence, in all of its