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NASPA Military Symposium

[Veteran] Writing Workshop Prompts

Historical Hands:

Tell a story from the perspective of your hands or someone else's hands. What have these hands done? What have they touched, felt, and experienced? What is their state now? How did they get here, now?

Play the Fool

Describe a moment when you made a fool of yourself. What did you say, think, hear, feel? What was going on when this happened? And what did it cost you?

Stuck:

Tell me about a time you felt stuck. This can be taken literally or metaphorically, mentally or physically.

Learning takes Time

What is a lesson you learned later in life that you wish you'd learned earlier? What was the experience that caused you to learn this lesson? And why might you wish you could spare your younger self from it?

Compare and Contrast: Love and Loneliness

Write about a time when you felt the most alone. Compare and contrast this with the time in your life you felt the most love. What kind of gap exists between these moments? What person exists on each side of this chasm?

Lost

Write about a time when you were lost or felt lost. This can be literal, in a city or jungle or dense fog. Maybe relocating or moving. Or, it could be metaphorical or psychological: in war or returning home; some existential moment.

Extremes

Write about extremes you experienced in military life: weather, emotions, locations, terrain, personalities, physical challenges, food, sleep. It could be funny or serious or anything in

between.

A Change in Perspective

How has your perspective or view of the military changed or deepened over time? Write about a concrete experience, conversation, or encounter that led to that change. Or write a scene from that younger perspective, maybe adding moments of reflection from the wiser writer today.

Religion or Spirituality

Any experiences with how military life or war changed your spiritual views? A deepening of religious conviction, or a distancing. Any struggles or white-light moments?

Letter Writing

- **Option A**

Write a letter to a former [military] team member, or to an enemy [combatant]. Tell this person whatever feels important or relevant to say in this space. Tell them how much of an impact they've had on your life. Or any lessons learned. Or reminisce about old times. Whatever feels right.

- **Option B**

Write a letter to an important person in your life, past or present. This can be someone you know personally or from a distance. Share with this person how they've impacted your life. Or any other pressing thoughts or feelings.

- **Option C**

Write a letter of apology. This can be heartfelt or satirical, real or fake, toward a person or object or idea—to the enemy perhaps. Maybe you feel the need to tell someone you are sorry, but it is not your place to reach out. Maybe you feel the need to apologize for a situation you caused. Or just maybe you feel the need to apologize for someone else's incompetence in wonderful ironic detail. Whatever it is, be sure to say you're sorry.

Pulled in Different Directions:

Write about a time when you felt pulled in multiple different directions. Maybe you had a job offer and a love interest in another location, or perhaps an order conflicted with your moral code. How did you respond?

Yelling and Screaming:

Write about a time you had to yell—maybe you are at a bar and can't easily be heard, or perhaps your ears are ringing from firing a weapon without earpro. Why did you have to yell, and what was the outcome?

Funny or not?:

Write about a time when something may have seemed frightening in the moment, but now you

find funny. This can be ‘haha’ funny, or satirically funny.

Labels

Write about your experience with being labeled, whether in military, in civilian life, as a veteran, even medical diagnosis. Explore how it felt or feels to be labeled. What would you want people to know about you or your duty or your condition? Any specific scenes?

Opposite Perspective

Write a story or scene from the perspective of someone on the other side, perhaps a so-called enemy, or adversary. Try to get inside their head for a few moments and describe how they might see the world or the events unfolding.

Injury

Write a story about a time when you overplayed or underplayed an injury you sustained. This can be psychological or physiological. Were you ever a soccer player rolling around, gripping a shin in faux pain for a penalty kick, or perhaps you were fighting back the truth of physical anguish during a ruck march?

Witnessing Truth

Write a story about a time when you witnessed an act that completely characterized a trait or label. Did you witness a moment of true *vulnerability* that left you speechless? Or did you witness an act so unimaginable, it is now how you define the concept of *bravery*? Were you an observer of something so heinous that it made you understand what a *monster* really is?

Betrayal

Write about a betrayal you experienced. This could be a secular or spiritual betrayal. A betrayal of trust by a friend or family, or religion, or perhaps you betray yourself

K-12 Experience

Write a story about a K-12 experience that shaped who you are today. This could be an interaction with a teacher or peer, a homework assignment or detention, or perhaps a choice you made that forever shaped your future trajectory.

I know what you mean.

Write a story about a time when you were found out pretending to know something or someone that you actually didn’t know. This could be in a working or social environment. It could be a conversation between you and a colleague discussing a technical challenge, or perhaps you were asked about a famous celebrity and nodded your head as if you knew all about them. What was the outcome?

Words and Impact

Write about a time when someone’s words or actions, without them knowing, have a big impact

on who you are as a person. They could be friends, parents, coaches, teammates, etc.

Change in Belief

What is a prejudice or assumption you held that has changed? What was the catalyst for that change, and what do you believe now?

Time Travel Tips

Imagine you've encountered a time travelling younger version of yourself. What tips, advice, reassurances, or grief would you give them?

Fighting

Fighting. Write in detail about your first ever fight—this could be physical, emotional, anything. What happened, what were you feeling, and what did you learn?

Serendipity

Write about a moment of universal serendipity in your life. It could be a single event or a series of events that seemed to come together for your benefit. Were you late to a party and on your way ran into the love of your life? Did you get put on a shit detail to end up meeting the president?

Tripped and Fell

Write about a time you tripped and fell. This could be metaphorical--a bad decision or mistake that kept you down--or literal—a stubbed toe and a broken collarbone, what happened?

List it

Compose a list. This can be a list of significant dates, times, places; it can be a list of people you knew, things you've done; it can be themed or random, patterned or not; and it can be woven into a narrative or standing alone.

I told you so

Write about a time when a best friend or partner made a big mistake that you saw coming, an “I told you so” moment. What happened? How did you react?

Two truths and a lie

Compose a story that is completely true, except for a single key detail or point. Make the lie big enough to be noticed, but real enough to be believed. Can the group identify it?

Slow Motion

Share a story about a time in your life that seemed to go in slow motion.

Inside your Mind

Pick a significant moment or time in your life—maybe this is the birth of your child, the death of a friend or loved one, a marriage, or an experience in boot camp/overseas—and imagine in that moment your mind is a tangible, physical place, what would it be like to be there? What would the landscape, sky, ground, air, and weather look like, smell like, feel like, etc.? Are there

inhabitants? Etc.

Begin a story with

“So there I was...” or “The stage was set...”

From Mundane to Insane

Compose a story about a mundane event or experience—eating dinner with family, going on a morning walk with your dog, cleaning your boots, etc.—goes completely awry.

From the Perspective of a Higher Power

Whether you are religious or spiritual, agnostic or an atheist, we can all appreciate a top-down perspective on an interesting situation. This prompt asks you to write from the perspective of a god or the universe or the stars above. This figure can be omniscient or omnipotent, or maybe they are weak and frail. Are they jealous of you or laughing at you floundering your way through a sticky situation? What are you doing in this significant moment, and what does it look like from god’s perspective?

Whole Life Story

Try to recount your whole life story in one writing session. Start from the moment you were born, focus on key moments throughout your life and write them down. Don’t linger on any single moment too long. The moments and memories do not have to transition effectively. Just name and describe them and move on. See what moments arise as significant enough to fit your life’s narrative.

Fuck off

Write about a time when you told someone to fuck off. Maybe those exact words came out of your mouth, or maybe they were spoken through an action or behavior, or through some other words. What happened that caused you to tell this person or thing to just ‘fuck off’?

Existential Rendezvous

Describe your relationship with or contemplations on some existential concept— grief, anger, love, pain, dread, courage, life, or perhaps death. How have you grappled or come to terms with this concept? What experiences have helped you understand it better? Or perhaps less?

Ask and Answer

Start the story with a question. Ask a question and answer it or analyze it or rant about it— whatever feels right. Perhaps it is a rhetorical question with an obvious answer or no answer at all: *where else would you go besides Paris to see the Eiffel Tower?* Maybe it is something you have been asking yourself your whole life: *why am I so scattered?* Perhaps you do not understand some societal fad: *Why do people wear crocs?* Dig in.

Rant:

Rant about something bothering you. This can be personal, public, at work or home or school; it

can be about someone or something; a challenge or compromise or acquiescence. Let it out.

Military Language:

Tell me a story using the most military jargon you can muster—acronyms, labels, sayings, analogies, rhetoric—don't be shy. We all know what the military sounds like.

Winning and Triumph:

Have you ever won something? A competition, event, promotion, a large sum of money? Perhaps you won someone's hand in marriage. Tell me a story of personal triumph—a story of winning.

It's a Process:

Describe a systematic process you are an expert at. Break it down, step by step, and tie it into a larger life meaning. What did you learn from the process of cleaning a rifle, or the process of changing your name after marriage, of becoming a service member, or the process of building a new computer—anything really. You can list these steps and expound upon them: step 1: speak to a recruiter... I remember walking into the office...; step 2: raise my right hand... etc. Or you can choose to compose this in prose, whatever comes naturally.

Powerless to Change:

Tell me about a time when your world started to change, and you were powerless to stop it. This could be a parental divorce, command change, death, policy change or an impending transition of some sort—leaving the service, starting school, etc. What did you do? How did you handle yourself?

Have Nothing Left:

Write about a time when you felt like you had nothing left to give. Nothing left in the tank—a time you were running on empty.