

The Journal Ladder:

A Developmental Continuum of Journal Therapy

Kathleen Adams LPC

Kathleen Adams LPC, Director
3798 Marshall St #5, Wheat Ridge CO 80033
www.TWInstitute.net
info@journaltherapy.com
303-986-6460

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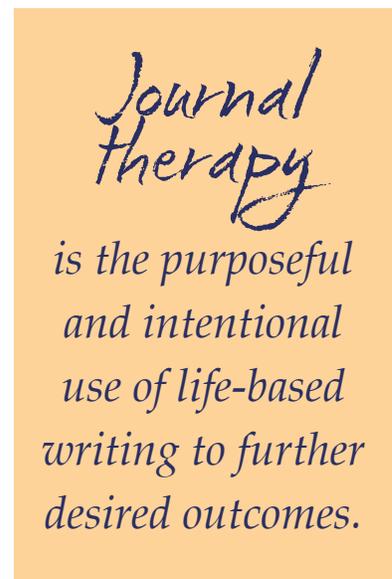
The Journal Ladder: A Developmental Continuum of Journal Therapy

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I am a psychotherapist who specializes in helping people use personal writing — journals, diaries, poetry, memoirs, and stories — as a pathway to deeper self-understanding. I call this work *journal therapy*. In the 25 years that I have been practicing it, I have watched it evolve from the seed of a concept into a vigorous tree bearing fruits of healing and change for so many who pick up the pen and write.

My working definition of journal therapy is “the purposeful and intentional use of life-based writing to further [desired] outcomes” (Adams, 1999). The words “purposeful” and “intentional” are key. It is not enough to simply put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard. There must also be an intelligent plan. When a writer knows from the outset what he or she hopes to gain, whether it is increased awareness, emotional soothing, or exploration of an internal or external conflict, that writer can purposefully select a journal technique that can be reliably expected to further the desired outcome.



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Structures of Therapeutic Writing Programs

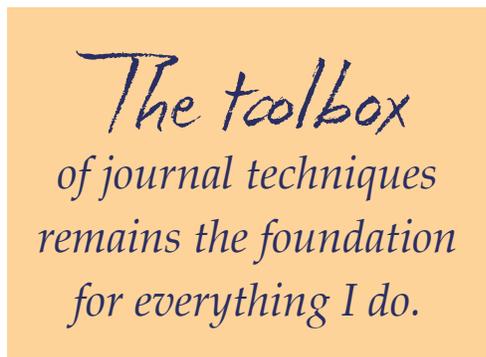
I began my work with therapeutic writing in 1985. It was the same year my colleague Dr. James Pennebaker began conducting and publishing research that correlates the relationship between emotional release writing and improved physiological and psychological functioning (Pennebaker, 1989, 2004) ¹. Thanks to the inquiry begun by Dr. Pennebaker’s landmark studies, social scientists around the world have concluded that writing about

¹ Also see Dr. Pennebaker’s website at the University of Texas at Austin: <http://www.psy.utexas.edu/pennebaker>

stressful life experiences in a specific pattern or structure can be a health-promoting and stress-reducing activity (Smyth, 1998).

The structure of Dr. Pennebaker's method includes four separate writing sessions, each 15-20 minutes long, spread over consecutive or alternate days. Typically, the four sessions will occur within one week. On each of the four days, the writer explores emotionally difficult or troubling stories from his or her own life. The individual writing sessions can tell one story in four parts, or they can follow whatever spontaneous pattern emerges. (Pennebaker, 2004). The outcomes, as measured by scores of researchers over hundreds of published studies, lend statistically significant evidence that this particular structure of writing has positive effects (Smyth, 1998).

The first structure I developed to define my own work in journal therapy was the use of discrete journal techniques. My earliest teaching and practice revolved around a core set of writing devices that each have their own inherent properties, qualities and reasonably reliable outcomes². There were 21 of these techniques in the earliest days of my teaching, ranging from short writing sprints to a structured written conversation that might take two hours or more. I compared them to tools in a toolbox (Adams, 1990) and extended the metaphor to suggest that, just as a hammer is the right choice for placing



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a nail in the wall, so a particular journal technique or device might be exactly the right tool to use to achieve a particular desired outcome, such as expressing anger, or capturing moments of joy.

For example, a popular writing technique in the journal therapy circles of America is the unsent letter. This is a journal entry that follows the conventional form of a letter — a salutation to the addressee, followed by a message from the writer's point of view that may share news, express feelings or opinions, make requests or invite response. The difference is that an unsent letter is written with the knowledge and intention that it will not actually be sent or shared. Benefits include the ability to fully express without need for explanation or restraint, the opportunity to say things that have been unspoken, and an immediate sense of release and relief. It is often used when there are hurt feelings, misunderstandings or anger between the writer and someone else.

These techniques, Unsent Letters and 20 others, formed my beginning framework. The toolbox of journal techniques remains the foundation for everything I do.

My work's next structure was created when I began a full-time position as journal

² See Appendix

therapist for a psychiatric program. The patients were all diagnosed with severe post-traumatic stress disorder.

I started my new job by gathering data. I interviewed each patient and asked questions about whether the patient wrote a journal, and if so, what the benefits and difficulties were. My first big surprise was that 88% of the patients said they wrote a journal regularly (60%) or intermittently (28%). My second, even bigger, surprise was that 96% of the patients told me they sometimes experienced terrible outcomes when they wrote in their journals. They told me stories of falling into a deep pit of despair or pain and not being able to get out again. They shared with me the terrifying images that came to them as they relived the past on the page. They told me about nightmares and migraine headaches and depression. Sometimes, they said, it seemed connected to the writing (Adams, 1996). The stories they told me broke my heart. I wanted their writing to help them feel better. Instead, they felt worse than if they'd never written at all.

I began to look carefully at the composition of their writing. I asked the patients to tell me what was happening at the point where they fell into the abyss. It was soon evident that the common denominator was the journal technique of Free Writing, also known as Stream of Consciousness writing or Flow Writing. By its nature, this technique is free from any defined structure. It is also free from containment. There are no limits; it can take minutes or hours, paragraphs or pages. There is no organic or intentional pacing. It might skim along the surface, bright but shallow, or it might plunge into the darkest depths.

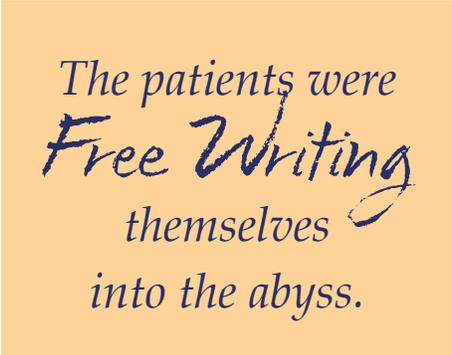
The patients were Free Writing themselves into the abyss, and once there, they had no reliable way to get out.

There is nothing wrong with Free Writing. It is a classic journal technique. It is the default technique of just about every journal writer. But because it has no defined structure, pacing or containment, it can lead to the sorts of difficulties my patients described.

If Free Writing was at one end of a continuum, what was at the other end? What was the most structured, paced, contained journal technique of all? I looked over the list and knew immediately: Sentence Stems. This technique requires only the completion of a partially constructed sentence. For example:

- *Right now I should* _____.
- *I feel* _____.
- *I wish I knew* _____.
- *My depression is* _____.

Everyone who reads and writes knows the structure of his or her own language.



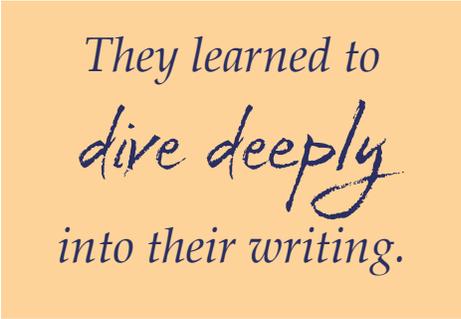
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The pacing of single sentences is straightforward. The container is limited; even complex sentences are only a line or two.

The Journal Ladder

With the filters of structure, pacing and containment in place, I looked freshly at my toolbox of journal techniques. I assigned them each a place on a continuum that ranged from Sentence Stems to Free Writing. The result is a model that I call the Journal Ladder (Adams, 1998), on page 6. It offers a continuum of journal therapy techniques, starting with the ones that have the most structure, pacing and containment, and ending with the ones that have the least.

When I taught this ladder to my patients, they responded with enthusiasm. They were relieved to have a new way of thinking about their journal writing. They said they no longer fell off the edge into the abyss because they know how to structure, pace and contain their writing. If they got close to the edge, they could move away by climbing down the journal ladder. The patients also discovered along the way that there were



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a few techniques that were especially helpful or interesting. They learned to dive deeply with their writing, but then come back to the surface for breath and sunlight.

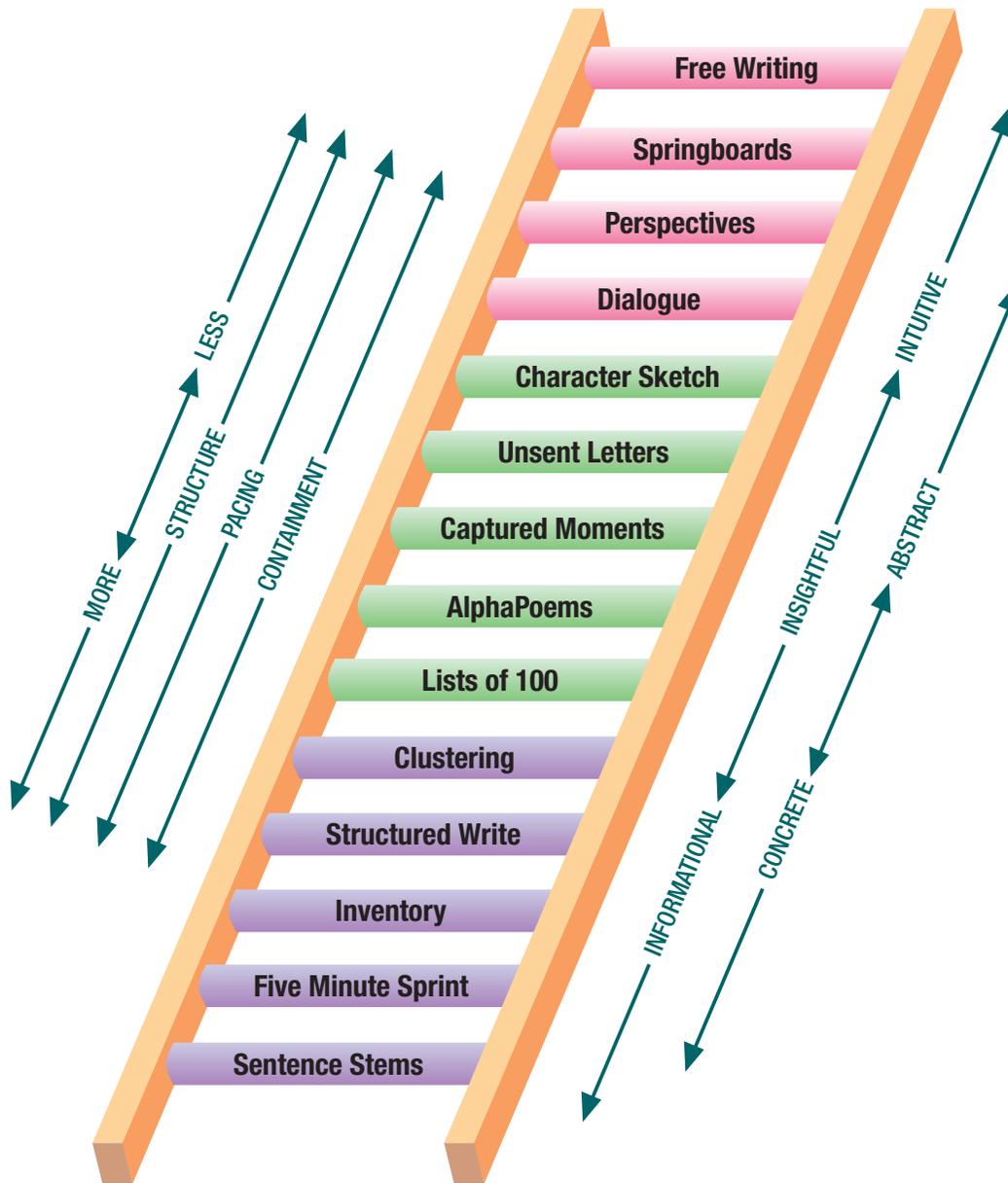
The patients usually stayed in our program about four months. When one graduated, the journal became a treasured symbol of the new life made by hand.

Three Sections

Although I originally conceptualized the journal ladder as a tool to measure relative structure, pacing, and containment in a journal technique, there are two other features worth noting. First, the techniques on the ladder move from the concrete to the abstract. Second, along the concrete/abstract pathway the techniques first offer information (conscious mind), then reveal insight (subconscious), and finally access intuitive understanding (unconscious mind).

I discovered that when I could discern my patients' emotional and cognitive processing styles, I could select a section of the ladder that would likely be most helpful, and I could then calibrate the techniques in that section to match the patients' presenting problems.

The Journal Ladder



Kathleen Adams LPC, Center for Journal Therapy, Inc.

Structure	Foundation, form, sequenced tasks, orderliness
Pacing	Rhythm, movement, timing
Containment	Boundaries, limits, shape
Concrete	Easy to understand and attempt, external, reality-based
Abstract	Symbolic, metaphoric, internal, imaginal
Informational	Practical, immediately useful
Insightful	Connections, patterns, awareness
Intuitive	Sudden knowing, internal wisdom, quiet voice within

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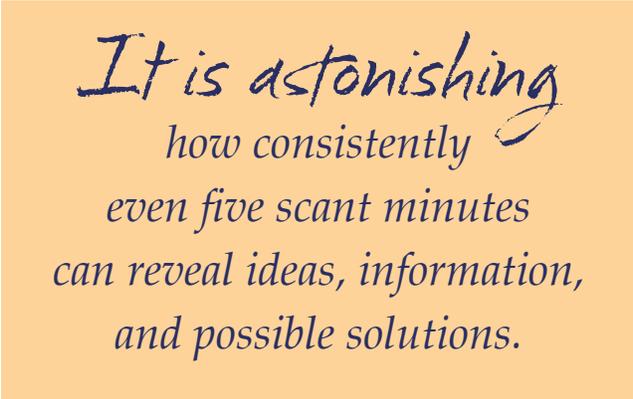
The Lower Rungs: Structure

The lower third of the ladder — the five techniques from Sentence Stems to Clustering — are by far the most accessible to the largest number of people, because they are short, simple and easy to learn. They each can be completed in no more than ten minutes, and their inherent structure appeals to those who are analytically minded, as well as those who have higher levels of reluctance, timidity, or resistance.

The techniques in the lower rungs of the ladder are quite disarming in their simplicity. The Five-Minute Sprint, for instance, is nothing more than a timed writing process, written quickly. The two structuring elements are the container of time and the crisp pacing of keeping the pen moving or the fingers flying across the keys.

Yet it is astonishing how consistently even five scant minutes can reveal ideas, information, and possible solutions. When I teach this technique, I ask participants to write quickly for five minutes about something that is dominant in their lives. When they have finished writing, they silently re-read

what they have written and give themselves a reflection statement, starting with the sentence stem, *As I read this, I notice....* Participants consistently report noticing greater clarity, connection between thoughts and feelings, and possibilities that had been hidden or ignored.



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The Middle Rungs: Insight

The techniques that stimulate insight — the revealed patterns, the causal relationships, the sudden flashes of awareness — live on the middle rungs of the journal ladder, from Lists of 100 to Character Sketches. These techniques are successfully used by those who are motivated to understand themselves or their life events, as well as those who are curious, interested in human relationships, and/or welcoming of change and growth. Of course, anyone whose emotional and cognitive processing styles match the middle rungs of the ladder can also make effective use of the techniques in the lower rungs.

The insight-oriented rungs are characterized by a sense of discovery. It is common for a List of 100 or an Alphapoeam to elicit information that is completely out of the realm of the known or expected. The surprise brings curiosity and lightness, and there is more balance in the journal.

Balance is a key component of therapeutic writing. Many people turn to their journals when life is difficult, when they are emotionally upset, or when there is a crisis or challenge to resolve right away. When the emergency passes, they toss the journal aside and don't write again until there is another difficulty. Certainly there is great benefit from the immediacy and cathartic release of crisis writing. There are also great benefits to adding balance both to the journal and to life by writing about joy, gratitude, harmony, and intimacy. When writers pay attention to small moments of beauty (the moon through clouds, a child's laughter, dinner with a friend) or make short lists (of gratitudes, pleasures, experiences) at day's end, they usually report that they feel better, even in the midst of difficulty.

The Upper Rungs: Intuition

By the time we reach the upper rungs of the ladder — from Dialogue to Free Writing — we are working with the techniques that create pathways to the intuitive mind. These techniques go deep. Perhaps they even access the same areas of the unconscious mind that are activated by dreamwork, meditation, and prayer. Like meditation and dreamwork, the techniques in the upper section often generate symbols, images, archetypes, and abstractions. People who are best suited for these techniques tend to be comfortable with the unseen universe. They often have deeply rooted spiritual pathways and can hold paradox and ambiguity without undue stress. They are cognitively capable of abstract

People who are best suited for these techniques tend to be comfortable with the unseen universe.

and metaphoric thinking, and they are able to write at depth for extended intervals of time without physical or emotional exhaustion.

Some of the techniques in the ladder's upper section involve the temporary suspension of rational states of consciousness. The Dialogue technique comes from the work of Dr. Ira Progoff (1992), a pioneering

psychologist in journal therapy, and involves a written conversation in which the writer speaks in his/her own voice, then takes on the role and voice of the Dialogue partner. The Dialogue partner can be anyone or anything at all: A person in the writer's life, an aspect of the self, an inanimate object, a state of health or disease, an abstraction or symbol, or the guidance of inner wisdom. "Man does indeed know intuitively more than he rationally understands," said Progoff, and the Dialogue technique was a pathway to the "knowledge beyond understanding ... that comes to us at depth." (Progoff, 1992).

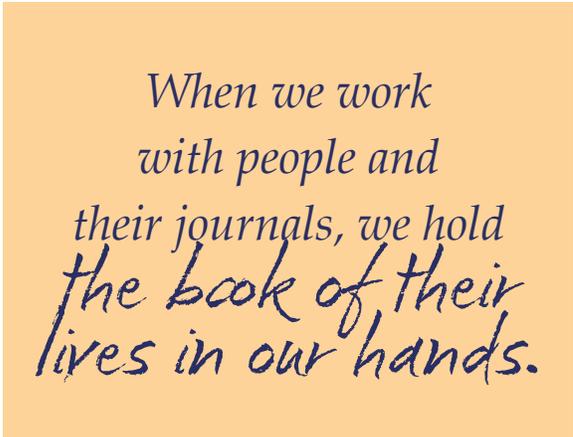
Although I initially developed the journal ladder to address the diagnostic issues of post-traumatic stress disorder, it has since become a simple and effective structure

for clinical journal therapy. It has been used to support the treatment goals of cancer survivors, the depressed and anxious, the frail elderly, recovering alcoholics, the grieving, and more. Readers of my workbook *The Way of the Journal*, based on the journal ladder, report the method is easy to learn and implement independently.

A Vision for the Future

Journal therapy is barely a bud on the tree of psychology and human potential. The field needs much more research to determine whether writing about our problems actually leads to resolution, and if so, how. The phenomenological evidence is consistent. Those who write journals frequently say that writing helped them break through to something better, and their changed lives bear witness. I have a vision that we will design and conduct research studies to measure this change and so much more.

When we work with people and their journals, we hold the book of their lives in our hands. With such honor comes profound responsibility. We must teach wisely, from a place of having learned wisely. I have a vision that we will develop strong, rigorous master's degree programs in therapeutic writing in American universities and in universities around the world. I have a vision for high standards for excellence in academic scholarship and professional conduct. Until we have university programs, I have visions of excellent training programs to teach the responsible and ethical facilitation of therapeutic writing groups or classes.



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Please join me in a vision that therapeutic writing will burst into profuse bloom around the world. In the words of the acclaimed journal keeper Anais Nin:

“And the day finally came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was greater than the risk it took to blossom.”

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Appendix

The Journal Toolbox³ (Adams, 1998)

14 Writing Techniques on the Journal Ladder

1. Sentence Stem. A sentence-completion process. Fill in the blank with a word or phrase. May be very universal (*Right now I feel _____*) or highly customized to an individual's immediate question, problem or interest.

2. Five-Minute Sprint. A timed writing process designed to bring focus and intensity in short bursts. Excellent for those who are resistant or aversive to journal writing, or who are uncertain about how to start, or who state they do not have time to write journals.

3. Inventory. An assessment of life balance in major areas of living (health, family, home, work, spiritual/religious, emotional well-being, etc.) Gives a quick picture of which life areas might need attention.

4. Structured Write. A series of Sentence Stems grouped and sequenced to reveal consistently deepening layers of information and awareness.

5. Clustering. Visual free-association from a central word or phrase. Lines and circles connect key thoughts and associations to the central core. Work quickly to maximize results. A brief writing to synthesize findings may follow.

6. Lists of 100. A list of 100 items, many of which will probably be repetitions, on a pre-determined theme or topic. Repetition is an important part of the process. Topics can be about any current issue (for example: 100 Things I'm Sad About; 100 Things I Need or Want to Do; 100 Places I Would Like to See). At the end of the list, group the responses into themes and synthesize the information.

7. AlphapoeM. Write the alphabet, A-Z, or any collection of letters, vertically down the side of a page. Then write a poem in which each successive line begins with the next letter. Excellent for groups as it promotes a high level of participation and sharing. Adolescents and reluctant writers respond well.

8. Captured Moments. Vignettes capturing the sensations of a particularly meaningful or emotional experience. Written from the senses with strong descriptors. Captured Moments of beauty, joy, blessing, calm can add balance, hope and perspective to a challenging time.

³ Adapted from *The Way of the Journal: A Journal Therapy Workbook for Healing*, 2nd Ed., Lutherville MD: Sidran Press, 1998. © Kathleen Adams. Used with permission.

9. Unsent Letters. A metaphoric communication to another that is written with the specific intention that it will not be shared.

10. Character Sketch. A written portrait of another person or of an aspect of the self. Can also be written about emotions by personifying an emotion and giving it a characterization — an appearance, a style of dress, a personality and temperament.

11. Dialogue. A metaphoric conversation written in two voices. Anyone or anything is an appropriate dialogue partner. There is no constriction by time, space, physical reality or literal voice.

12. Perspectives. An alteration in point of view that provides a different perspective on an event or situation.

13. Springboard. A free-write with a prompt. Starting a free-write with the smallest structure of a question, thought or topic can focus and frame the writing session.

14. Free Writing. Unboundaried, unstructured, unpaced narrative writing. Useful for creative flow or spontaneous writing sessions. Can be structured by adding a time limit or page limit.

About Kathleen Adams

Kathleen (Kay) Adams LPC is a licensed psychotherapist and pioneer in journal therapy. She is the founder/director of the Center for Journal Therapy and its professional training division, the Therapeutic Writing Institute, both of which are headquartered in Denver CO. Kay's six ground-breaking books include the best-selling classic *Journal to the Self*. She created her first training program, the Instructor Certification Training for the Journal to the Self® workshop, in 1989. She was appointed a mentor/supervisor for the National Federation for Biblio/Poetry Therapy, the credentialing agency in the field of therapeutic writing, in 2000. Kay created a cohort training model for the Federation's guided independent study program and helped create standards for professional training. In 2007 she returned her training focus to journal therapy and began creating curricula and protocols for the Therapeutic Writing Institute, a fully on-line credentials training program that opened cyberdoors in March 2008.

Kay has been an approved provider of continuing education (ACEP®) for the National Board of Certified Counselors (NBCC) since 1998. She holds monthly one-day *Basics of Journal Therapy* trainings in her Wheat Ridge, CO offices and travels extensively throughout the US to bring this training to therapists in their own communities. Since 2006 she taught this workshop to over 7000 therapists in over 100 US cities.

Kay is widely known as a trailblazer in the field of therapeutic writing for her innovations such as the TWInstitute and the two international journal conferences (1991 and 2008) that she has independently produced and directed. Together with research psychologist Dr. James Pennebaker and the late depth psychologist Dr. Ira Progoff, Kay Adams is considered a primary theorist in journal therapy.

