



Roundtable: Surviving and Writing the Pandemic in a Community Writing Group for Veterans

ROUNDTABLE

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ABSTRACT

Across the United States veterans' writing groups have provided spaces for veterans to write about war and military service, reflect, heal, release stress, and create work that they share with family, fellow veterans, and sometimes larger audiences, in the form of public readings, literary journals, and book publications. In this roundtable, a multivoiced narrative that includes two civilian writing group leader voices and three veterans' voices, we describe how our long-standing veterans' writing group adjusted to the realities of the pandemic and continued to encourage our members to write and stay connected to each other. Our goal in this piece is to consider how writing and community have been possible (or not) during the pandemic and to explore the variables that enabled and limited us as writers. What emerges from these narratives is the struggle to continue writing and reflecting amid the collective trauma and material change of the pandemic, but also how specific life circumstances, professional and familial obligations, and health conditions dictated how pandemic isolation and threats functioned differently in our lives.

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The Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group (SVWG) at Syracuse University is an intergenerational writing group of veterans and military family members who write nonfiction and poetry about their lives in and out of the military. The SVWG, founded by Dr. Eileen E. Schell with colleague Ivy Kleinbart, has held Saturday morning writing workshops in the university's Writing Center once a month since March of 2010. The group also features meditation sessions prior to the Saturday meetings with Dr. Diane Grimes, a Professor in the Department of Communication and Rhetorical Studies at Syracuse University.

Across the United States, veterans' writing groups have provided spaces for veterans to write about war and military service, reflect, heal, release stress, and create work that they share with family, fellow veterans, and sometimes larger audiences, in the form of public readings, literary journals, and book publications. Some veterans' writing groups take the form of national nonprofits such as Warrior Writers (<https://www.warriorwriters.org/>), the Veterans Writing Project (<https://www.veteranswriting.org/>), and the Writers Guild Foundation Veterans Writing Project (<https://www.wgfoundation.org/programs/the-veterans-writing-project>), while other groups are more locally and regionally focused, such as the SVWG and Maxine Hong Kingston's long-running Bay Area Writing Group, which is described at length in her edited anthology *Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace* (2016). While individual community writing groups vary in content, scope, genres, instructional techniques, and motivations, the chief goal is usually to encourage veterans to write about and reflect on their military and war-time experiences and potentially go public with those experiences if they choose to do so (Schell 2013).

As a writing group, we have had many powerful experiences together, with members writing and publishing their creative nonfiction work, sharing writing at public readings on Veterans Day or at other community events, and holding writing retreats and other get-togethers. Members have also won national awards in the Veteran Affairs (VA) Creative Arts competitions. In 2017, our group published a literary anthology *The Weight of My Armor* with Parlor and New City Presses. When the pandemic hit in March of 2020, the SVWG had just finished enthusiastically celebrating our 10th anniversary as a group. We had no idea that our 10th anniversary event would be the last time many of us would see each other in-person for the next 2.5 years.

As we have continued to operate as a group on Zoom through the pandemic, we have done our best to carry on and stay digitally connected. The Syracuse University campus quickly became a hot-spot for COVID cases in the Fall of 2020, as the university brought many students back to campus for a mix of in-person, hybrid, and virtual

course options. Masking and social distancing regulations were put in place on campus to minimize COVID cases, but without vaccination becoming more widely available until early in 2021, there was no chance for our group to gather in-person. Even with reduced COVID-19 infection rates on campus by the fall of 2021, we did not feel safe bringing members back to campus to meet in-person. There were too many variables: medical vulnerabilities among the group members and other factors such as verifying the vaccination status of group members and enforcing masking rules, a potentially contentious issue for some. Thus, we continued meeting on Zoom, even though many of us were beyond tired of looking at screens. From time to time, we thought about returning to in-person meetings only to have another COVID spike fracture those plans.

In the spring of 2022, Leah Falk, Director of the Community Writer's house at Rutgers University invited members of our group and other military service members and their families to speak at a virtual Zoom panel about how veterans were coping during the pandemic. Members of our group were honored to participate in the panel on March 14, 2022, taking up questions posed by Falk and listening to the remarks of other featured panelists: Simone Gorrido, a military spouse, and Nick Morgan, a veteran from the organization Warrior Writers, a national veterans' writing project. The questions Falk posed to panelists via email before the panel were:

- How has the isolation of the pandemic been different for veterans and military families than for the general public? How does it feel related to isolation service members and families might have experienced during deployment or in other situations?
- What stories have the media missed about the military community's experience of COVID-19—positive or negative?
- How have service members and families participated in the swells of mutual and community aid that arose during the crisis? What were some feelings that came out of that participation, if relevant?
- How has it felt to write about the pandemic from a military perspective? Does the crisis feel too new for meaningful writing on the subject (from your personal or facilitator's perspective, depending) or has there been enough time to allow for reflection? How has writing about the pandemic changed for you over time? Or how has the writing you typically do about your role in the military community (even if not generally pandemic related) changed over the course of the pandemic?
- What have been some sources of community and comfort for you as someone connected to the military

community? How does it feel to exchange stories with others with those connections? (L. Falk, handout for Veterans and the Pandemic Panel, March 9, 2022)

Listening to and taking part in the panel was enlightening for members of the SVWG, as it gave us an opportunity to reflect on how we had been coping with the pandemic, how we sought community during an isolating and unprecedented time, and how to articulate what we had in common—and also what we didn’t—as we navigated our radically altered lives. As we listened to remarks by the panelists, we realized that this was a much wider conversation we wanted to continue exploring. We wanted to pursue some of the questions posed by the panel along with others that arose within our group, stemming in part from the panel conversation. We decided to compose this roundtable by focusing on an additional set of questions:

- How did we and how are we getting through the pandemic?
- How is writing and the veterans’ writing group part of that structure of getting through (or not)?
- How are we thinking about our lives, about writing, managing our health, connecting with others, and other situations? What has shifted for us over the course of the pandemic?
- How has (or hasn’t) writing been part of connecting with other vets/the group (via zoom) or in other ways?
- How have our experiences been shaped by our health situations, family situations, jobs/professions, and daily lives?

Early in the pandemic, many of us saw newspaper articles urging the public to keep track of the unusual events and life stories that unfolded in 2020 and beyond, to keep “living witness” accounts that might prove interesting in retrospect. We offer up this roundtable out of desire to “witness” our lives, to process what we all went through and continue to go through with the long tail of a continuing pandemic, and to offer up an array of experiences and perspectives that may resonate with others and help them to approach their own pandemic narratives.

Our goal in the roundtable is not to create a list of lessons about how to keep a community project going or to boast of resilience, but to consider how writing and community have been possible (or not) during the pandemic and to explore the variables that enabled and limited us as writers. What emerges from these narratives is the struggle to continue writing and reflecting amid the collective trauma and material change of the pandemic,

but also how specific life circumstances, professional and familial obligations, and health conditions dictated how pandemic isolation and threats functioned differently in our lives.

Running across these pieces are personal stories about how we have all experienced the pandemic from different locations and positions: as civilian academics leading a veterans’ writing group and as veterans with different occupations in different phases of life, including our respective financial, health, and familial situations. Eileen E. Schell writes about how the leadership of the group navigated an online transition and the narratives group members produced about the experience of going through COVID-19 isolation and lock-down. Ivy Kleinbart writes about how the group expanded its offerings over the last year, starting a new writing workshop for group members seeking to publish. Dr. Bill Cross, a Viet Nam veteran and practicing psychotherapist who supports veterans in his practice, writes about how his professional life changed and how writing continued to be a tool for reflection about his life and losses. Jennifer Jeffery, a Coast Guard veteran, addresses the challenges of being an academic librarian supporting students and learning during the pandemic while also caring for an elderly father and seeking to maintain a creative self. Pete McShane, a Viet Nam veteran, reflects on the isolation and life changes he and his wife experienced as they sought to avoid becoming infected with COVID-19. We end the roundtable with a series of reflective writing prompts we used during the last three years to respond to the changing public health situation and its effects on our lives.

WRITING OUR WAY THROUGH THE PANDEMIC IN A COMMUNITY WRITING GROUP FOR VETERANS: DR. EILEEN E. SCHELL SVWG FOUNDER AND CO-LEADER

On March 7th, 2020, the Veterans’ Writing Group celebrated its 10th anniversary with a monthly meeting and ample buffet luncheon at a local hotel. Crowded cheek to jowl in a small banquet room, listening to members give reflective speeches, hugging, and laughing, we celebrated our decade of successful operation. During the luncheon, some of us wondered aloud about the news reports we were hearing about the COVID-19 pandemic and its potential effects on our daily lives. At the same time, we were still in a state of innocence and naivete about how dangerous and traumatic COVID would soon become for New York state, the country, and the world. New York state went into lock-down on March 20, 2020, and many of us wondered if we had caught COVID at the luncheon.

At Syracuse University where our group had met in the Writing Center for the past 10 years, our students went away in mid-March of 2020 to spring break and did not return to campus as the university went into lockdown. Some students returned to their homes with COVID cases from spring break pleasure travel while others took full-time jobs as essential workers to survive economically when their work-study jobs dried up. They worked as delivery drivers, clerks, cashiers, and store stockers. Some students reported that their parents were laid off from work, and they suddenly had to support themselves and their families. My own 18-year-old daughter had to return from her high school study abroad program in Spain and finish her senior year online from her bedroom, graduating on Zoom. During all of this, we also figured out our next steps with the SVWG, transferring our operations online to Zoom.

My co-leaders and I canceled the April 2020 SVWG meeting as we didn't know how long New York state's lockdown was going to last, and the university campus where we held our meetings was closed and transitioning to an online environment. My co-leaders and I had to radically restructure our college courses, moving them online since our university mandated that we do so. Veterans in our group were also transitioning to work from home arrangements, as Dr. Bill Cross and Jennifer Jeffery describe in their pieces. The world was suddenly a different place, and we all wondered how COVID-19 was going to change our lives and how long-lasting that change would be. As we were also 5 hours north of where people were dying of COVID-19 at high rates in New York City, we found ourselves assessing and coming to terms with our own health situations and probable risks for mortality. My co-leaders and I agreed that we should keep the SVWG functioning online to support our group members.

By May 2020, we had gone from in-person SVWG monthly meetings with hugs and laughs, coffee and food, and pens scratching across the pages or lap-top keys clacking, to transitioning fully to the Zoom environment. Most of our members had never heard of Zoom and were not fans of video conferencing, but they understood we had no choice but to pivot to online meetings. It took some experimentation and coaxing to get people to log-on, and our meetings were smaller for the first year of the pandemic. Some veterans who normally attended our group were too overwhelmed or stressed out to attend group meetings or would disappear for a while and then resurface, as Pete McShane indicates in his roundtable piece. We spent more time than usual checking in before and after meetings to see how everyone was doing.

We held monthly Zoom writing workshops, annual Veterans Day readings on Zoom, and some members

participated in webinars connected to veterans' mental health and wellbeing during the pandemic. No one debated anyone's vaccination status or COVID's severity in our online meetings, although we could see from group members' individual Facebook posts that some planned to avoid being vaccinated for COVID-19 and questioned the pandemic's veracity and urgency. By the second year of the pandemic, more members returned to attending the writing group on Zoom. Ivy founded a new writing workshop to support those in our group seeking to publish, which she discusses at length in her piece.

The writing topics our group pursued during the pandemic, which we address further in the conclusion of this piece, have mirrored, to some degree, the circumstances we were all facing in going through a time of upheaval during a global pandemic. We generated many writing prompts that dealt directly or obliquely with issues of adjusting/coping to the pandemic or other challenges in military life. These prompts were important in eliciting group members' collective experiences about how they were adjusting to pandemic protocols. I would group the types of writing we received about the pandemic as follows: narratives of loss, narratives of stress and isolation, narratives about medical access, narratives connected to military service, and narratives of opening up new possibilities.

NARRATIVES OF LOSS

In response to one of our writing assignments about the pandemic, one member wrote about how everything he built with poetry and stand-up comedy performance was lost, along with the income and opportunities he had to pursue his public performance career. This loss of opportunities for creativity and employment was echoed by others as well. SVWG participants also wrote about the loss of opportunities to see friends and family and be there for significant life events such as birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays.

At one of our meetings, a long-time veteran participant held up a cell-phone image of his newborn grandchild to share the good news. At the same time, he expressed sadness that, due to the pandemic, he could not be there at the hospital to meet this new member of the family. Other group members shared the loss of friends and family who died of COVID or other diseases, citing their sense of sadness about having to attend memorial services over Zoom and not being able to comfort their loved ones with hugs. Many members expressed disappointment over their loss of freedom of movement and connection. Often, we remarked that we were just little disembodied black boxes on Zoom screens. We tried to compensate by commenting on SVWG members' hats or clothing choices and pets that inevitably barked or meowed or jumped at our keyboards.

Our meetings became an important social space for people who were otherwise incredibly isolated, especially those who live alone.

NARRATIVES OF STRESS AND ISOLATION

Dealing with the aforementioned losses on our own without the usual in-person social networks made many of us feel more stressed out. Many of our members wrote about their fear of getting COVID-19 and how that fear was adversely affecting their mental and physical health. Most of our members are Viet Nam era veterans, some already dealing with health effects from Agent Orange exposure, and all of them more vulnerable to COVID because of age. Some veterans mentioned how the pandemic made their symptoms associated with PTSD worse; Pete McShane addresses that challenge in his roundtable piece. Others in our group wrote of job stress or being too busy or scattered to make time for writing or reflection. One member, an Iraq war veteran, emailed me that he could not attend meetings because his job in furniture assembly became so busy and stressful that he was too exhausted to write. This theme of being exhausted and burned out is echoed in Jennifer Jeffery's piece in this roundtable.

NARRATIVES OF MEDICAL ACCESS AND PANDEMIC FEARS/STRUGGLES

The theme of accessing medical care came up frequently and is also mentioned in Pete McShane's piece in this roundtable. Members wrote of driving up to the VA parking lot to be vaccinated or take COVID tests or logging into telehealth appts with therapists or doctors. Some liked the ease of telehealth and others were worried about not getting quality care and having consequences for put-off medical procedures due to backlog. One of our members had to deal with short-term hospitalization for non-COVID health issues and worried about his susceptibility to COVID while he was in treatment. Others expressed fears of becoming ill or dying of COVID. Others wrote in despair of family members who didn't believe the pandemic was real and didn't get vaccinated, endangering themselves and their loved ones. One group member lost his father to COVID, and many of our group members fell ill with COVID and recovered. Writing about and sharing these stories in the group created space for us to collectively process the unexpected and unprecedented situations we were facing and the resulting uncertainty and trauma that resulted.

NARRATIVES CONNECTED TO MILITARY SERVICE

Several members wrote about health epidemics that happened during their time serving, such as the Hong Kong flu epidemic of 1968. Supply chain issues and grocery store

shortages brought up conversations about rationing and supply shortages in the military and creative improvisation. The hospital crisis and overwhelming stories about refrigerated trucks storing the dead in New York brought up conversations about how much experience the military has in dealing with these types of logistical challenges through mortuary affairs units. A few times, members mentioned being more accustomed to masking because there were situations in the military when they had to wear surgical masks or even gas masks. Some noted that military training had uniquely prepared them to get through the pandemic as they were used to thinking about supplies, logistics, and survival techniques and that the pandemic was more bearable for them than for their loved ones given that training.

NARRATIVES OF OPENING UP NEW POSSIBILITIES

Some members relished aspects of the pandemic such as having time for old and new hobbies and more singular pursuits. Some group members went hiking and walking more, and read more—we had some good discussions about pandemic reading and book recommendations. Some group members became Zoom savvy consumers and enjoyed logging on for publicly accessible seminars, workshops, and lectures. One SVWG member recounted a line-up of his daily Zoom webinars in the way that one recounts a line-up of favorite TV shows. As we were to learn later in the pandemic, some group members, even those who had initially disliked Zoom, became so accustomed to the ease and accessibility of it that they wanted to maintain an online meeting option even when the opportunity to return in-person meetings became possible.

As we now approach the three-year mark of the pandemic, we are in yet another transition phase. The pandemic is still very much alive, with a triple-demic of COVID-19, influenza, and RSV in the winter of 2022–23, even as people remove their masks and cease social distancing, crowding into bars, restaurants, and family gatherings. After frequent discussion about returning to in-person meetings, the SVWG gathered in-person for a Veterans Day reading in November 2022 and an in-person/hybrid zoom meeting later that same month. Participation in-person, though, was uneven as we had more members online in Zoom than in-person at the November meeting. We imagine our future meetings being a mix of Zoom and hybrid formats at least for awhile.

If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that coping with uncertainty and unpredictability is where we now must live; our group members perhaps know that better than most civilians do as those who have endured displacement through military service and frequent deployments to war zones. We have survived the last three years, and we are

still standing, albeit a little tattered and wondering about the future, but committed to remaining together as a writing group as we go into our thirteenth year of operation.

CONTAGIOUS COURAGE: REFLECTIONS ON STARTING A VETERANS' WRITING WORKSHOP DURING A PANDEMIC, IVY KLEINBART, SVWG CO-LEADER

A few months before the onset of COVID, I lost my partner of 17 years to suicide. His death was a cataclysm; I don't know how I could have gotten through it without a handful of exceptionally supportive friends, among them SVWG co-leaders, Eileen and Diane, and our group members. Diane dropped by my apartment repeatedly with homemade food and stayed to talk as long as she could. Eileen took me out for long walks and helped me initiate the process of applying for medical leave. Several of our SVWG members sent heartfelt letters expressing their condolences. A few of them had taken poetry classes with my partner at a community writing center and were, themselves, rattled by his death. One SVWG member texted me periodically for about a year: *Check, check?* he'd write, just to make sure I was ok. At the lowest time in my life, the SVWG embraced me and made me feel that I was a necessary part of this community.

Those of us who've lost loved ones to suicide are often referred to as "survivors," but that is not at all how I felt. The word "survivor" connotes courage and triumph; what I felt was total wreckage and paralyzing guilt. I was certain there was no way back to any kind of "normal" life for me. "You know," Eileen said, "of all people, this group gets it." I clung to her words in the coming months as I struggled with my own slow and clumsy process of "reintegration."

Then the pandemic ambushed us all, and I didn't even know what kind of world I was supposed to be reacclimating to anymore. On the one hand, I was as jolted as everyone else by the prospect of a "new normal," which implied an even more extreme form of isolation than I was already straining to adjust to and heightened my fears of losing more people I loved. And yet, as scary as the pandemic was, its surreal, apocalyptic proportions seemed to align with my own personal sense of devastation. It exposed the fact that the people and institutions that structure our daily lives are much more vulnerable to collapse than many of us tend to realize. As isolated as I felt, the "at-home" directive came as a relief on some level, because it meant I didn't have to "fake it" in public. There were even times when I was grateful for the masking mandate. Invisibility was a balm. And there was the odd way in which the whole world had joined me in a kind of global grieving process. Everyone

I knew was suddenly dealing with profound thoughts of mortality. The pandemic held up a great mirror and prompted us all to consider whether we were really paying enough attention to what was important in our lives.

The SVWG was one of the few things I felt an urgency to return to after my partner died. I missed only one of our monthly meetings during the fall of 2019, but it took some time before I was able to function again as the kind of co-leader I wanted to be. When the pandemic hit, Eileen and Diane took the lead in managing our group's transition to an online environment, while I adopted a more functional/supportive role. Having been an early adopter of Zoom, I was glad to be able to assist with minor technical issues from time to time. Eileen started a tradition of asking everyone to "check in," which I later came to see as a crucial ritual, especially for members who may have been struggling (as I was) but trying to hide it on camera. Answering simple questions like "How are you?" and "What's going on with you?" was sometimes very hard for me to do without tearing up, especially because the SVWG has always been a "no bullshit" space. Gradually, I came to see my ability to "check in" with honesty and composure as a measure of my own improving mental health.

During the spring of 2021, at one of our SVWG meetings, one of our members expressed a desire for more publication support from the group. After giving it some thought, I told Eileen I was interested in starting a second monthly meeting dedicated exclusively to workshopping longer manuscripts for publication. I was finally ready and able to do more for the group, and I felt that a revision workshop would be a nice complement to the work already being done at our SVWG meetings, which typically focus on the production of new writing. Diane offered to co-lead the workshop, and with that, the Veterans' Writing Workshop (VWW) was born.

We held an orientation meeting in May 2021 so our workshop participants could get to know each other a little better, share descriptions of their writing projects, and collectively establish workshopping guidelines. We agreed to meet via Zoom on the first Tuesday evening of each month and to workshop three essays at each session. Our participants voted to set up a closed listserv for sharing drafts, and we outlined a schedule for circulating writing. Initially, I had low expectations for the VWW's survival because I knew what a strong commitment our members would need to make to sustain the group. But thanks to the steady contributions of its six core participants, the VWW has thrived. In addition to offering each other honest, carefully considered feedback, we've worked on developing a shared workshopping vocabulary to help us comment more expansively and holistically on each other's writing. While our conversations sometimes touch upon sentence-

level details or craft choices, we try to take a wide view of each piece, mirroring back larger themes, points of interest, and connections within the work, asking questions, and suggesting opportunities for additional context or layers of complexity that could enrich the writing.

While none of our VWW participants have chosen to workshop writing about the pandemic, there's no doubt that the pandemic established some of the conditions necessary to the formation and continuation of this group. Had it not been for the pandemic, it's unlikely that Zoom would have been adopted so universally, and while I had some initial doubts about the logistics of conducting a workshop like this via Zoom, I think it's fair to say that despite a slight learning curve and sporadic connection problems, this technology has been key to the group's success. Some of our members live far from campus and have only been able to participate regularly because of the online format. In this sense, Zoom has enabled broader inclusivity than an in-person workshop could have.

The pandemic also established some of the conditions necessary to members' productivity as writers: solitude, slow time, the suspension of normal routines, a heightened sensitivity to our mortality, and thus a heightened level of urgency and motivation to write. One of our members, Robert Brewer, who writes about his Cold War-era service as a Navy linguist and who has had success publishing his work over the past year (he was recently nominated for a Pushcart prize), commented in an email back in January of 2022 on how the pandemic had impacted his motivation to write during the Christmas season:

I wanted to close out what had been a miserable year, what with Covid and everything else, with a positive accomplishment ... [so] I wrote with [a] kind of breakneck immediacy. I wrote, in other words, to salvage something out of what was a pretty bad year. (R. Brewer, personal communication, January 5, 2022)

While the pandemic could easily have produced a kind of "shut down" for us as writers, in fact, the opposite seems to have occurred.

Perhaps the most surprising outcome of our monthly meetings is the way in which every writer in the group has raised their standards and ambitions in defining their own writing projects. At our initial meeting in May 2021, two of our writers announced plans to work on book-length projects. These projects quickly proved to be an exhilarating part of our workshopping experience, as we all became invested in the development of these writers' plots and characters and found ourselves eagerly awaiting their next

installments and drawing connections to earlier chapters. What I could not have foreseen was that within a year, two more members would start working on book-length texts. One of them, Shannon Kennedy, a relatively new writer but a naturally gifted storyteller, is now working on a memoir about his experiences as a Navy Corpsman during the Viet Nam War. He began with three riveting chapters that he did not initially intend to develop into a longer project; however, the work generated so much praise and curiosity from the workshop that he decided to keep going with it. In a recent email, he writes,

I look forward to continuing this piece. Each submission is an essential step to revisiting a very meaningful (and sometimes painful) part of my life. ... This probably comes as no surprise to you, but every time I write and revisit the past, it opens up doors and feelings. Many have been repressed for decades. It's like a cleansing. (S. Kennedy, December 7, 2022)

The other writer undertaking a book-length project, Rudyard Edick, an Air Force veteran, has begun producing a remarkable series of lyric essays that trace his family history back to his ancestors' immigration to colonial New York in the 1600s; he explores the impact of war and conflict on multiple generations of his family lineage, leading up to his father's WWII service and the psychic wounds he struggled with throughout Rudyard's childhood. In a recent email, Rudyard reflected on how writing (and the space of the workshop) has brought him a sense of redemption in an otherwise dismal period of his life:

It ... has been a rough fall with my dog dying ... and then my 17 year old son stopped seeing me. In fact, I won't see him over the holidays, which is rather heart breaking. As I stayed single for over a decade to focus on being a good father, it hit me very hard. I have tried to focus on writing so as to add some meaning to my life. I feel as if I can [leave] some sort of legacy for my son by writing, it is a way of staying in touch on one level—at least perhaps he may read it someday. (R. Edick, personal communication, December 22, 2022)

While it may be impossible to calculate the influence the pandemic has had on the social bonds these writers have developed through the exchange of their creative work, it's clear that the workshop has begun to play a meaningful role in their lives during what has been, for many, a difficult period of isolation and change. They've learned from and inspired each other as writers, found community in the

workshop, grown as readers of each other's work, and deepened their sense of commitment to their own writing projects.

And just as the VWW has afforded its members a source of connectedness and purpose during this pandemic, it's done the same for me. While I'm still struggling to write about the events that have shaped my life over the past few years, I find myself inspired and encouraged by the work our members have produced and the vulnerability, passion, and tenacity they've shown as writers. In fact, this may be the most important thing I'm learning from the VWW: that courage—maybe even more so than any virus—is contagious. Once modeled within a writing community, it spreads, limitless. The productivity and relationships formed within the VWW have borne this out, and no pandemic is going to stop us from the important work that lies ahead.

SVWG: BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER THE PANDEMIC, DR. BILL CROSS, US ARMY VETERAN, VIET NAM

I joined the SVWG in March 2014 after some prodding from other vets. I had counseled veterans as a licensed mental health therapist for over 40 years to find ways of healthily discharging their trauma other than booze, drugs, and brawling. I had written poetry on and off since my military days but not directly expressing my pain. As Rilke (1975/1994) once wrote in "Letters on Love," "artistic power is great, it breaks out as out of mountains" (p. 36), and so it did in untutored ways for me though one might not call it art. Finally, and most effectively for me it broke out in the caring crucible of our writing group. There encouraged by the SVWG co-leaders' guidance and other vets' support for the past 6 years, some of the pain more productively emerged. And, in addition, vets I was counseling heard my encouragement to also write.

Then in the already cold grey gloomy first months of 2020, along came COVID-19. No longer would we be able to meet in our familiar circle, first on meditation cushions followed by writing desks in our campus classroom. And all the familiar life was changed as well. No longer could I see vets and other clients in my office in a small barn behind our home—that became phone and Zoom calls. No longer could we have friends over by the fire in our family room—that also became phone and Zoom calls and an occasional bonfire outside. The exchange of pleasantries with store clerks morphed into phone calls with Instacart shoppers and mail orders. Writing took a back seat at first—eclipsed by the novelty of, the required creativity of, and the

imposed anxiety and later isolation of quarantine. My days were spent responding to clients' fears and losses—often their family members—and to adjusting to the changing conditions of lockdowns, watching the Governor's daily news briefs, and searching for new supper recipes. My wife, Sheila and I spent many evenings cuddled on the sofa binge-watching TV. We found ourselves closer in this quarantined existence and were grateful for our health during the gloom of the pandemic illness.

Toward the fall, my former wife, Ann, gradually succumbed to intestinal cancer. My three daughters came in tandem to care for her at her home, and we supported them with meals and respite in our home. COVID restrictions at the hospital allowed only one visitor at a time and while she was there, Ann and I had several long conversations at a depth unusual since before our divorce. We spoke of our long history with one another, that began when we were 13 years old. We married the year I graduated from West Point, and I remained in the Army for the first 10 years of our 23-year marriage. Those 10 years were exciting and traumatic. We spoke of how we moved 13 times in those 10 years, the joy of our raising our three daughters, friends we knew, how each of us experienced the trauma of my year in Viet Nam, and how the war's impact on us gradually pulled us apart. Those conversations with Ann, her illness and eventual death, led me to resume my writing. I found what had remained from our shared experiences differed, and I heard anew the joy and pain Ann had experienced. That all compelled me to explore this broader picture in my own writing. Subsequently my writing became more full bodied, layered, and compassionate. I realized how Ann and my three daughters, though not veterans in the traditional sense, like all members of veterans' families should be honored on Veterans Day. They went through war with us, and they also had traumas and joys because of my military service.

Ann's funeral was by necessity held outside on a cold November day, warmed by an open fire and a small, mostly family gathering. Ann's spouse and our daughters each spoke, supported by Ann's sister, our niece and nephew, my wife Sheila, and me. Others observed via Zoom. Talk was close and touching and, in this way, our gathering, though diminished in numbers, was embraced by the cocoon of COVID.

The shock of the COVID lockdown, the loss of lives and the significant alterations of the trajectory of our lives become more vivid for me upon writing about them. People have died, friends have moved to different occupations and homes, our daily interactions are more virtual, making the connections with family more intimate and visceral in response. A hug is more powerful now.

STEEL PLATES, JENNIFER JEFFERY, US COAST GUARD VETERAN

The SVWG has been a constant in my life over the past 9 years. It remained so during the pandemic, though I did not consistently attend our monthly meetings like I did before. The thought of signing on to a Zoom meeting on a Saturday after a week of Zoom meetings at work was excruciating. When I did force myself to show up, I was rewarded with the feeling of connection I experienced with the group before the lockdown. Sometimes I failed to sign on to our monthly meetings because I was so exhausted from my roles as an academic librarian and caregiver for my aging father that I couldn't face the screen or being with other people. In those times, I always felt like part of me was slipping away.

Going through the first 2 years of the pandemic felt like being pressed down by steel plates while more are continuously added. There is a strong expectation in my professional and personal lives that I must put on a brave and happy face no matter what and with every apocalyptic train that comes down the track. I am a librarian and educator at a state school in a rural town near the Canadian border. Since we pivoted to online learning in March 2020, we have been continually asked to do more with less resources and make sure we are engaging students and committing to the university at the same time. Our campus has also had some tragic events occur during the pandemic with the sudden death in November 2021 of our interim president, 3 months after he started with us, and the murder of one of our music students in February 2022.

I moved up here in 2018 for work. Before that I had lived in Syracuse, New York, for 13 years, so my social support network and creative life is still there. I had a tenuous connection to that life still in 2020, but the pandemic has frayed that connection further. I live closest to my 80-year-old father in a town of 352 people, so I am the person who helps him navigate his life as his dementia progresses. We don't have a diagnosis yet because the cognitive testing he was getting was cut short in March of 2022 by the pandemic. The doctor we originally were seeing retired because he didn't want to get the vaccine. I started over again in the spring of 2022 to get my father reestablished with a primary care doctor, so we could have him referred for cognitive testing. I had to go through three health systems until I could find an appointment that wasn't 6 months out because people had delayed care during the previous year.

When I got him into the primary care doctor and got the referral to the medical center 2 hours away that could do the testing, they were booking out to spring 2023 because they had lost a doctor over the past 2 years. My dad's

dementia has progressed more rapidly in the past year and is now in a place where he doesn't think he has any memory problems and can't/won't discuss his care because he has no short-term memory. I am still working on getting him cognitive testing and must go farther out to Albany, New York, which is a 3-hour drive. I am not sure I can get him there and back and how he will do on a cognitive test after 3 hours in the car. My work and my father's care are areas that I mostly feel confident managing a piece at a time.

The weight that has made this period unbearable for me is the lack of care that I see from our political leaders and for each other. I have a strong sense of civic duty from my upbringing and military service, and I naively thought we would all band together and fight the spread of the disease by following Centers for Disease Control (CDC) guidance and, even if it was uncomfortable, we would do it collectively. It seems now that our government and many in our society have decided 400 or more people dying a day is a low enough number to live with, so no one is inconvenienced and the economy still runs. There is seemingly no concern about the long-term consequences of the virus on peoples' bodies or for people who suffer with long-term COVID.

I am worried about getting sick and not being able to work and the consequences of that. When people ignore the science of epidemiology it makes my brain burst into flames. I teach people how to understand and do research for a living and when I see people fundamentally ignoring truth and established science, it creates a dissonance in what I feel is my life's purpose. I have been going along just surviving with brief moments of joy like last summer when the waves of virus died down, and I went out and danced to live music for the first time in a year and a half with a friend. Even that was layered with a weight of sadness because it was a celebration of the life of one of our musician friends who had died during the first year of the pandemic. I realized that I haven't been out dancing since then. My friend won't go to live events anymore because she is over 70 and feels it is too great a risk.

I became conscious last fall that all the burdens were crushing my ability to write creatively. It was the first time that I could not turn around a new piece for our Veterans Day reading. It was upsetting to lose that ability. I am still struggling with being able to connect with my creative self. That was when I realized I had emptied out all my energy on supporting others and had lost my creative self while persevering and serving. I have used writing to try to find where I am creatively now. Some days I can only draw some symbols and write down words or phrases. I ask myself questions and try to find deeper answers than survival. I have begun to let myself envision the future again. Showing up to the SVWG meetings, writing, listening to other veterans reading their writing, and hearing the

good-natured banter of the group feels like at least one of the steel plates gets lifted off me even if it is just for a little while. It reminds me that I am still creative and that I can still write and that I do have people out there who care for me and my creative life, that I am more than surviving and obligations.

Being in a group with other veterans and military connected people is an essential part of not only my survival but also my creative journey. To be in a group of people who are working with their creative selves to extract the narratives of their lives is inspiring. Though I am not a fan of virtual meetings, they are better than being totally disconnected from the SVWG writers and group leaders. I really miss talking after the meetings with people about their writing or catching up on their lives. I also miss the hugs or hands on your shoulder after reading a particularly difficult piece. There is loss, but the writers and our group leaders have kept the ember of what made our group powerful and enduring burning over the last two years. Knowing that there is support and structure to come to once a month gives me hope and keeps my faith that I will make it through this journey to my new creative self.

PANDEMICS, VACCINES, AND THE STRUGGLE FOR HERD IMMUNITY, PETE MCSHANE, US ARMY, SPECIAL FORCES GREEN BERET MEDIC, VIET NAM VETERAN

I remember standing in line for the Falk polio vaccine in 1954 with the rest of my fourth-grade classmates. Films of children stricken with the disease filled television screens. Parents back then believed that the risks of the disease outweighed that of inoculation and didn't want their children to be stricken with polio. There wasn't a peep of denial or argument over whether to get vaccinated. No one questioned the necessity.

My wife and I are the first-born children in our families. Never let it be said that we don't follow the rules. We get flu shots every year. I get the one for shingles. Embracing the COVID vaccine was a no brainer. The rationale is to vaccinate enough of the population to achieve herd immunity, which makes perfect sense. Until then, we're all at risk; worrying about becoming infected is a nightmare for some of us, especially those of us who are immunocompromised.

My wife and I are in our seventies and were early adopters of the mask. We have underlying medical issues, so the risks of exposure to COVID are frightening. For the first 4 months of the pandemic, we didn't leave our home,

fearful that we might make contact with the virus. My son and his wife did all our food shopping, although they live 30 minutes away, something for which we will always be grateful. We all wore masks when they came to deliver our goods in the driveway. Invariably, our orders would get screwed up, but we didn't dare complain.

My healthcare needs are provided by the Veterans Administration (VA) Medical Center, Dental Clinic, and Behavioral Health Clinic located in Syracuse, New York. There have been significant changes in protocol and in the delivery of services since COVID. All my appointments were essentially cancelled and rescheduled out over a longer time period in an effort to reduce headcount in all facilities. I was scheduled for cataract surgery, but the original timeframe was pushed out a year. Appointments that didn't require my physical presence were rescheduled and held via telehealth.

When I did have to appear at the Medical Center, the first major change was a gauntlet of VA personnel stationed at portable computer stations just inside the main entrance. Masks were mandatory. It was here that I had my temperature taken, was asked several questions regarding symptoms that might indicate exposure to COVID. Later on, during the pandemic, I was required to show proof that I had been vaccinated, and I verified that I had an appointment in the building, otherwise I would not be allowed to enter the facility. The hallways were eerily quiet that first day and there was no one in the large waiting rooms on the first floor. Vets would often socialize for hours in those rooms, and the same could be said about the cafeteria.

Securing two early reservations for the vaccine was a major coup for us, as it wasn't readily available to the general population until early 2021. I signed up with our local county government to be notified when their vaccine registration portal opened. I happened to be on the computer early one morning when the email announcing the portal arrived. Within 4 minutes, we had our reservations: January 31! I was ready to pop a celebratory beer, but realized it was only 7:30 in the morning! A strange peace of mind came over us even before we received the vaccine. We received the second vaccine on 2/21/21 and the first booster on 10/21/21.

Our isolation continued even after getting the booster. Early on, I quit the YMCA (Y) after over 40 years of membership and purchased a home gym. There was no way that the Y could keep the exercise equipment, mats, and the locker rooms clean enough. Members are slob, myself included, and even a concerted cleaning effort wasn't worth the risk for me, especially remembering how often I suffered upper respiratory infections. Interestingly, I have not had one since quitting the gym. Unfortunately,

I underestimated how important the social aspects of the Y were for me. I miss seeing my friends. I miss the camaraderie.

Sometimes I feel like my wife and I are trying to single-handedly stop the pandemic! We're still isolating to stay safe. Holidays aren't the same: It has been 2 years since we've had our usual family get together over Christmas where we see our children and grandchildren. Family birthdays are celebrated in absentia. Zoom meetings aren't a good substitute. Up until recently, we hadn't been to a restaurant since the pandemic started. We gave up our season tickets to the theater and the symphony simply isn't the same over Zoom.

I've withdrawn from life as I knew it. My frame of mind has changed, and many of the things I used to enjoy are a distant memory. I'm not as active in the veterans writing group because I've lost motivation. We've been Zooming since 2020, but I'm not working with other vets to help them achieve their writing goals. I wake up in the morning with far less to look forward to.

PTSD flares regularly, and I can attest that there is a definite link between stress and memory loss. I'm more forgetful than usual. My wife and I both feel confined. We spend time with the news media, sharing the pain and suffering of people in other countries, their stories memorialized in television reporting, print news, and pictorial essays. We watch PBS and movies on Netflix and Hulu, but it's no substitute for face-to-face communication, and hugging those you love.

We have a group of friends that we used to see regularly before the pandemic, but our get togethers ground to a screeching halt in early 2020. We met last summer once at one of our friend's place for a bonfire. We were all masked. By December we had all been vaccinated and boosted once, and we agreed to meet for dinner at one friend's home, this time without masks. My wife and I had great trepidation before agreeing to meet, imagining that maybe one or two of them might have been lying about vaccination, but we agreed to go. I'd have to say that I felt strange sitting around a table with people we've known for years under the risk of COVID. I felt a tension I hadn't experienced before. Some experts suggest it is may be time for all of us to consider this to be the new normal.

Front and center now are the vaccine deniers. Some of these people believe that vaccines simply don't work, despite scientific evidence to the contrary. There are myths being spread through social media, warning that something is in the vaccine that controls the mind and takes away freedoms, or that we're being microchipped. Really! Fewer vaccinated people means reaching herd immunity becomes more difficult.

My wife and I are still concerned about exposure. I feel rage against those people who taunt the experts, besmirching the dedicated medical doctors, virologists, and researchers. I'm embarrassed for Dr. Fauci; they threaten him and his family! *What's become of our country?*

When the mask mandates were lifted in our state, we thought it might be time for us to consider going out to a restaurant and use one of the many gift certificates we've collected over the past two years, assuming they haven't expired. Our first trip out was to our favorite restaurant on Cape Cod. We were careful to ask for a seat on the enclosed porch, where there are few tables and no through traffic.

My wife and I received the second booster this past spring, and throughout we had been masking diligently, but I had apparently been exposed to COVID at the barbershop because I tested positive for COVID. My symptoms were mild, lasting about five days. My wife was exposed to me and so also tested positive, but her symptoms lasted only a day and a half.

The fight for herd immunity has had a negative impact on our emotional and physical wellbeing. *How do we know when we're there? Are we safe to mingle maskless with other people when we don't know whether they're carrying the virus? Will we ever have the comfort of knowing? Can we really be sure?* I'm sorry to say the answer is no, and, as a result, it will temper our activity and we'll continue to be vigilant.

CONCLUSION: WRITING OUR WAY THROUGH THE PANDEMIC

It may be impossible to sum up the ways in which the pandemic impacted veterans differently than civilians, as Leah Falk asked us to consider for our panel presentation. The three veteran reflections provide some interesting insights into this question. Pete McShane explores how his own heightened vulnerability as someone who is immunocompromised led to such an abundance of caution that it affected him socially and took a serious toll on his mental health, triggering his PTSD. Similarly, Jennifer Jeffery reflects on the loss of face-to-face contact with other SVWG members, and the importance of continuing to write on her own, as well as with an online community of veterans, despite the limitations of Zoom and the problem of screen fatigue. She also reflects on the difficulty she had assisting her elderly father in getting the health care and medical testing needed to deal with his growing dementia. Dr. Bill Cross underscores the needs of many of his veteran patients and the urgency he felt to provide them with the support they needed during the pandemic as he processed

his own loss of his ex-wife, who died of intestinal cancer during this time.

While many of our members have expressed disappointment with the prolonged necessity of online SVWG gatherings, it's clear how vital it has been to keep this group running throughout the pandemic and to allow time and space for members to interact with one another in these online forums. As co-leaders, we've always known that one of the most important facets of the SVWG is the principle of veterans helping other veterans. This help typically comes in the form of veterans serving as a safe and uniquely understanding audience for early drafts of other veterans' stories about the military. Perhaps there's no way to fully replicate the kinds of intimacy, connection, and spontaneous support members would routinely show each other during and after our face-to-face meetings (whether it be through a knowing glance across the room, informal conversations after the meetings, or, as Jennifer Jeffery points out, a caring hand on one's shoulder after reading an emotional piece of writing). Still, taken together, these reflections attest to how important it was that the SVWG kept going through all the difficulties of the pandemic. Our members have also risen to the occasion in terms of their uses of technology. The pandemic has prompted them to acquire new technological literacies, including navigating their way around Zoom.

One of the primary ways we coped through the pandemic was through writing as a tool for self-reflection, understanding, and ongoing conversation, often about the connections between the pandemic and aspects of military service. At our first virtual meeting in May 2020 we assigned a writing prompt that addressed the changes that all of us were experiencing in real time as we transitioned into lock-down in New York State:

The past few months have brought about enormous change, and we're all reacting and adjusting to that in different ways. Explore some of the things that have come up for you during this pandemic that may be linked to your experiences of the military. You could think about themes of confinement/restricted movement, a heightened sense of vulnerability, hypervigilance, distorted sleep patterns, hoarding, or, on the flip side, the role of friendship, music, exercise, meditation, or creativity in coping with the difficulties of the moment—or anything else that feels authentic to your experience.

The second prompt we tackled a month later in June of 2020 dealt with the challenges of managing and being

vigilant about the status of our health, adjusting to temperature checks, masking, quarantine, and isolation when infected or exposed to COVID-19:

Since the start of this pandemic, we've become more conscious of our health and are required to monitor it with more vigilance than before. We're asked to take our temperature before going into work, cover our faces in public, and stay home if we're not feeling well. Think back to a time in the military where your health was at issue. For example, did you worry about passing the physical to get into the military? How was your health monitored, protected, endangered, or disregarded while you were serving? Did you ever fall ill or fear you'd catch a disease or illness from someone else, or from the chemicals you encountered, or from contact with the local population or the environment? If so, how did this affect you? Some people in our group have written about Agent Orange exposure or exposure to burn pits in Iraq, so those are just a few examples that have come up before.

As the pandemic rounded into another year, we began to address the hope that was coming in the form of a widespread COVID-19 vaccine by the early months of 2021. We wrote this prompt to explore the advent of the vaccines:

Many of us are in the process of either being vaccinated for COVID-19, actively working to procure a vaccination appointment, or in a wait-and-see mode about the process. For those of you who have received the vaccine, write about what you experienced with the vaccination process. Also, allow this musing on vaccinations to prompt any recollections of your experiences of being vaccinated while serving in the military.

The final prompt entitled "Back to Normal?" in April 2021 prompted group members to think about what that question means in their lives, and to some extent, this is a question we explored in the roundtable session at Rutgers University:

Now that many of us have been vaccinated and have developed some protection against to COVID-19, the idea of "getting back to normal" is floating around in our culture. But, at the same time, we're cautioned to continue socially distancing and wearing masks. Are there any aspects of pre-pandemic life that you're starting to reclaim?

What habits or routines did you develop during the pandemic that you're finding it hard to shed? How are you adjusting to the idea of a post-pandemic culture? Is there any way in which the impact of the military on your life is playing a role in helping and hindering you in making this adjustment?

As Pete McShane asks in his piece about herd immunity: "How do we know when we're there? Are we safe to mingle maskless with other people when we don't know whether they're carrying the virus? Will we ever have the comfort of knowing? Can we really be sure?" The question of what "back to normal" means, for many of us, is a moving target that we must adjust according to reported COVID-19 case and hospitalization numbers, surges of infection, access to booster shots, and our own calibration of risks according to our specific health and personal situations and that of those we love and interact with regularly. We also recognize that there may not be a way "back," per se—that the technologies and cultural customs we took up improvisationally during the pandemic in order to survive socially have changed our very conceptions of human connectivity and community. Part of the challenge for us as co-leaders has been (and will likely be for some time to come, maybe indefinitely) navigating our members' divided interests and complex needs at this point in the pandemic.

Writing our way through the pandemic in the SVWG has allowed us to process our struggles and losses, small pleasures and joys, ways of coping with change, loss, and isolation, and big questions of identity and mortality during this time. Our continuous online presence has allowed us to stay bonded as a community, and the group's collective Zoom ennui has nudged its co-leaders to try new things to spice up the meetings, such as offering a second monthly meeting dedicated to revision work, bringing in published authors as guest speakers, utilizing the breakout groups in Zoom, and inviting members to use the chat window in Zoom to respond to each other's writing. While many of us "don't feel back to normal yet," we are, nevertheless, grateful that we could draw upon our writing and the communal online space of the group for solace, laughter, and the opportunity to reflect together during an unprecedented time. We also are comforted by the fact that we can return to this space of the group to process

the long arc of the pandemic. As our group knows from writing about the trauma of war and its aftermath, it often takes a long time to process traumatic and unprecedented experiences. Having a writing community to do that work with is empowering and restorative.

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