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## The Amherst Writers and Artists Method

*By Sophie Braccini*

The method used in Hummingwords Writing Workshops - the Amherst Writers and Artists method (AWA) - was developed to liberate the creative spirit of participants, letting them tap into the source of their inspiration and let it flow freely.

Every so often, Hummingwords leader Cynthia Leslie-Bole holds a free class at the Orinda Bookstore. About a half dozen adults from all backgrounds gathered recently, interested in seeing how they could develop their writing potential. Leslie-Bole gathered everyone around a large round table and started short, timed exercises where form was not emphasized. Participants were given prompts - a sentence, a place, or a quote - and permission to write whatever came to their minds.

The writers were then invited to share their work. Writing is not something new to these men and women, age 50 to around 80. They shared stories they had created in an instant: structured, funny and interesting, sometimes poignant and poetic, and very different from one another. Some texts were fiction, some were not. The first rule of the AWA method is that no questions are asked about the reality of the story.

The second rule? No negative comments are allowed; only positive comments are welcome. No one red-marks text, challenges style or makes a writer feel non-conforming. The positive nature of the workshop hopes to guide writers toward their strengths and to developing their own voices.

Originally the Amherst method was developed to give a voice to those who did not have a formal education.

"Amherst Writers & Artists is about revolution," wrote AWA workshop leader Pat Schneider. "It is about changing the ways we define art, until 'art' no longer is almost exclusively the expression of those of us with privileged formal education. It is about giving voice to the voiceless, valuing art that is a continuous artesian well, a never-ending stream in the kitchen, the workplace, the intimate conversation."

While Leslie-Bole uses the method to empower local residents and ignite their most spontaneous creativity, Lafayette resident Mary Tuchscherer uses the AWA method in a very different way. She founded VoiceFlame, a nonprofit dedicated to bringing self-expression through writing to the women of Malawi to increase literacy, empowerment and leadership.

Leslie-Bole discovered AWA through VoiceFlame. "I first met Mary Tuchscherer years ago when I attended a writing workshop in her home," she remembers. "During that first introduction, I was blown wide open by the Amherst Writers and Artists Method and by Mary's grace, clarity, and wisdom as a facilitator of women's exploration and expression. I was so inspired that I joined an ongoing AWA writing group, and later became certified to lead my own groups."

The AWA has some therapeutic aspects as well. Protected by the confidential nature of what is shared there, and enabled by the absence of judgment or necessity to conform to a specific format, the participants expressed very deep emotions, from either real or symbolic elements of their lives, often reflecting a moment of peace and sometimes of true compassion.

Founded on the conviction that writing is an art form for everyone, Lamorindans have the opportunity to experience the method, and if so inclined, to bring it to others.

For more information about the program, visit [cynthialesliebole.com](http://cynthialesliebole.com) or [www.voiceflame.org](http://www.voiceflame.org).

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