

Dear Guru, You Suck

Writing letters as a healing practice in cult recovery

By Alexandra Amor

Anger is not my friend. I don't "do" anger very well. I find that I am slow to anger and then when I am finally angry about something, I'm *so* angry at that point that I can't express my rage because I begin crying. Not a gentle, delicate, feminine cry either. With anger I get the throat-closed-over-can't-talk-because-my-chest-is-heaving cry.

This was a pretty significant problem when I was deep in the darkest places of my cult recovery. I *needed* to be angry and I needed to be able to express that anger.

So I instinctively took to the page. I wrote letters to the cult leader I had been with that were angrier and more vitriolic than anything I could have said out loud. And it was great. I didn't send the letters to my guru – that seemed to be beside the point. What I was trying to achieve was the release that came with expressing myself in a way that I never had when I was trapped in mind control. Psychological experts might say that it isn't enough to express what we feel in writing and not share it with anyone, but for me the process worked.

Once I recognized that far from harming me, it was actually helping me to write these "Dear Guru, You Suck" letters, I used this technique repeatedly for several years. Any time I felt anger building up inside me toward the coercive guru who had controlled my life and my thoughts for so long, I would take to the page, writing as quickly and as messily as I needed to. I poured out my grief, rage, hurt, and sadness through my pen and always felt measurably better once I'd done so. I wrote the things I was always afraid to say to my guru, and that I was afraid to even feel. The best part was that she couldn't punish me for what I said.

I remember that initially I felt pretty timid about doing this; I was breaking so many rules that I'd held for so long by writing what I actually thought and felt. But gradually as I used the practice of writing these letters more often, I got better at not censoring myself. I began to claim my feelings, which I think was tremendously important for my recovery; I learned that my feelings were valid simply because they were mine.

I never read the letters to anyone or mailed them to my guru, or did anything else with them. I'm not even sure where they are. Some of them might be in journals from the time I was writing them, but others may have gotten thrown out once they were written. What happened to them once the words were on the page was not the point. The point was to vent and to champion myself after a decade of censoring myself and being censored.

A few tips for writing a Dear Guru, You Suck letter:

1. Set aside time and space where you will not be interrupted and where you have privacy. (This is not an exercise to do in a coffee shop or other public location.)
2. Use whatever writing apparatus you are most comfortable with. If that's a computer, fine. Some writing teachers are purists and want us to only ever use a pen and paper, but if a laptop is going to get you writing, well then I say, that's better than not writing at all.
3. Keep your fingers (on the pen or on the keyboard) moving. This is not a time to censor yourself for poor grammar or punctuation. Let it rip. You may not be able to read your own scrawl when you're done but that's ok.
4. Be as petty and mean as you want. I believe that this is a time to fight dirty.
5. When you're done, you're done (as my yoga teacher says). Take a few deep breaths, stretch and give yourself a pat on the back for a job well done. You've taken one more step on the healing road.

Remember to take care of yourself during this or any healing writing exercise. Get the support you need from friends and family and treat yourself very gently. If this type of writing exercise doesn't feel right to you or feels like too much, don't do it. It will only be healing for you if you're ready for it and feel comfortable with it.

Take care of yourself,
Alexandra

Alexandra Amor is a cult survivor and the author of the memoir *Cult, A Love Story*. She teaches other cult survivors to use writing to aid their healing and recovery. Download free copies of all her articles about writing and healing, and join the discussion about cult recovery, at www.cultalovestory.com.