

Published in **Riding the Waves**, Newsmagazine of the Women's Inter-Church Council of Canada, Winter, 2011, p. 12.

**THE WRITTEN WORD:
JOURNALING
AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE**

I began keeping a journal when recovering from a car accident. Double vision and vertigo limited my ability to work and left me feeling without an anchor. I felt especially cut off because I found myself physically uncomfortable in church and could not do spiritual reading.

**It is looking at things
for a long time that ripens you
and gives you a deeper
understanding.
~ V Van Gogh**

A friend introduced me to Julia Cameron's morning pages – write three pages each morning on any topics, just keep the pen moving. At first I wrote with big coloured markers on every other line. Later my eyes allowed me to write more normally with a fine tip marker in a spiral notebook. Soon I was writing through my morning coffee breaks, quite a change from my longtime habit of reading at this time. Importantly, writing in the journal became my anchor as I adjusted to life at a slower pace.

**Journal -- the friend
at the end of the pen
~ K Adams**

Writing regularly in a journal can help us find our inner voice. This practice, assisted by asking questions, enhances many spiritual practices: paying attention, seeking truth, showing compassion, saying thanks, cultivating silence, reviewing life, and identifying purpose. Writing about the highs and lows of our lives – past, present, and possible futures – gives us perspective, offers strategies to solve problems, reveals our feelings and sometimes their sources, and moves us from 'Why me' to 'Why not me'.

In addition to writing on one's own, many people join or create a writing group to write and share together. Participating in a group can enhance creativity, support regular writing, challenge assumptions, stimulate further ideas – in general, support growth in writing and spirituality.

**Keeping a journal thins my skin.
I feel open to everything, aware,
charged by the acquisition of intensity.
~ Doris Grumbach**

Journaling usually combines reflection and decisions for action – in the domain of writing and beyond. Once the inner voice is developed, an individual might wish to express her social voice. This can start with more thoughtful letters to family and friends, might extend to letters to the editor or newsletter/website contributions. Journal writers often progress to writing memoirs or family stories, poetry, or essays. Occasionally, writers move into publication of nonfiction, poetry or fiction.

Personal experiences with illness, caregiving, grief, discrimination, political turmoil, and other losses often serve as the impetus for the social voice. Writers are propelled by lessons learned, empathy for others, and a sense of injustice to chronicle life with loss, to educate fellow sufferers or those who could help, and to advocate for necessary policy changes.

**Once life's story
has been discovered, told and retold
with everything in its proper place,
there is then time to greet
the true reasons for living.
~ Henri Nouwen**

Ellen B. Ryan is Professor Emeritus of Gerontology and Psychology at McMaster University. She lives in Hamilton, ON. For more information on journaling, visit her website at www.writingdownouryears.ca.