

# WRITING AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

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# Plunging Inward for the Giving Words

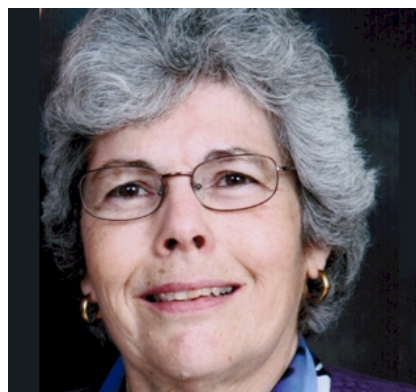
by Ellen B. Ryan

OLD AGE BRINGS CHANGE, more losses than gains, and an increasing awareness of death. Older adults can follow a path of growth in wisdom and compassion, or we can stagnate in isolation and despair.

One spiritual call in later life is to review our lives, seeking wisdom and a sense of wholeness. Another is to contribute to our world, especially to younger and future generations.

Writing can help us to clarify and meet these challenges. Writing is a spiritual practice through which we can contemplate, listen for quiet insights, be drawn to a sense of purpose, and engage in mindful service.

Current models of vital aging focus on healthy eating, physical exercise, mental exercise, adapting to losses, incorporating gains related to life experience, and engaging with life. The inner work of spirituality deepens our motivation to take on these responsibilities. Studies of centenarians highlight characteristics such as faith, hard work, family values, resilience, sidestepping adversity, and a sense of humor. We can develop motivation to live all the days of our lives by creating meaning at various life stages from active postretirement to frailty and finally to dying.



Journaling, writing for ourselves, can be central to spiritual practice in later life, a vehicle for reflection and prayer. In addition, some men and women may choose to write as part of their service to others. Here I will tell my own story to illustrate the importance of writing in later life, both for personal development and for contributing to society. The possibilities are endless, unique for each person responding to the invitation to write regularly.

## Writing and Inner Work

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

*You need only claim the events of your life to make yourself yours.* — Florida Scott-Maxwell

I BEGAN KEEPING A JOURNAL while recovering from a car accident some years ago. Double vision and vertigo limited my ability to work and left me adrift. I could read for only brief periods, usually with enlarged font and text-to-speech computer adaptations. For pleasure reading I learned to listen to talking books. I felt especially cut off because I found myself physically uncomfortable in church for liturgy and could not do my accustomed spiritual reading.

My academic writing projects stalled. I was plagued by a recurring nightmare in which I searched madly for words while getting lost in a huge field of sunflowers. I could no longer spread papers out to consult while I wrote. Now I had to delegate reading and writing tasks to colleagues and students.

A friend introduced me to Julia Cameron's morning pages from *The Artist's Way* — write three pages each morning on any topic, just keep the pen moving. At first I wrote with big colored markers on every other line. Later my eyes allowed me to write more normally with a fine-tip marker in a spiral notebook. Soon writing and thinking with the journal became my way of organizing each day as well as contemplating my life.

At first the pages filled with all sorts of complaints. Gradually, some perspective emerged. I began to write about how my situation could be worse, about all the supports I enjoyed, and the potential for learning valuable lessons through these experiences. Unable to pray much at the time, I began to listen during my writing sessions for spiritual insights — and the more I listened the calmer and more trusting I became. My enforced solitude and quiet non-reading life became a gift of time for my journal — paying more and more attention to the moment, nature, myself, and other people.

After a while I could read a couple of pages a day. These were selected from books increasingly well-chosen for their readable fonts and stimulus for contemplation. I scribbled away, reflecting on the few printed words I had managed to absorb and their applications to my current life, to my life as part of humanity, to all life on earth. I learned later that reading in small doses followed by reflection has a long spiritual tradition — “lectio divina.” Through this process, I faced my feelings, counted my blessings daily, and asked myself more and more fundamental questions. As Doris Gumbach wrote in her late-life memoir, “Keeping a journal thins my skin. I feel open to everything, aware, charged by the acquisition of intensity.”

Since then, journaling about other spiritual practices after each episode — prayer, liturgy, long walks, physical exercise, church groups,

meditation, volunteer work — has deepened and supported these disciplines over the long term.

Life review is central to personal growth in later life. Writing regularly about the highs and lows of our lives — past, present, and possible futures — can lead us through the inner work needed to claim that life, that evolving self. Looking at ourselves in this manner gives us a foundation for reaching out to others. As I continued to dig for memory treasure in my life story, I became more aware of the Author of life.

Through Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way* and Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones*, I discovered that writing exercises would take me repeatedly into life review. Stirring my imagination and heart, these starters move my pen ahead of my thinking mind. I started to incorporate sensory details, metaphor, and word play. Kathleen Adams' *Journal to the Self* offered enticing suggestions about making lists (e.g., where I would like to travel, my favorite celebrations), writing letters (to be sent or not), and composing dialogues between myself and another (e.g., mentor/parent, God, nature, a specific author or an inanimate object).

After months of journaling and using writing exercises, a half-waking dream made clear to me that I should learn to write poetry. During the dream I realized how well poetry would fit with my ongoing reading and writing impairments — just a few words, with plenty of white space. I awoke from the dream calmly confident that I would be able to say what I needed to say through this unfamiliar medium.

Not knowing how to proceed, I wrote about the dream in my journal, and realized it would be wise to take a course. Ironically, the course I chose did not involve the anticipated lectures. Participants were expected to bring 15 copies of their poem to a workshop for critiques by group

## The Road Now

Retiring from paid work  
I stop to see where I am

follow the echoes  
of projects heralded  
for grit and wit

touch the ribbed weave  
of disciplines colourful  
in their crossing

sniff the ricochet  
of novel thoughts  
tearing through  
tough peels  
of assumptions

taste the chocolate cherry  
joy  
of collaborations where  
three minds surpass  
possibility

What road now  
worth the pilgrimage

— Ellen B. Ryan

members and by the leader/poet. Instead of learning about iambic pentameter and poetry of the ages, I was soon writing for the group's gentle critique. My entry into creative expression with the mutual support of a writing group was exhilarating.

My experience of writing poetry has been spiritual. I write in my journal, participate in a writing group, use writing exercises, pay close attention to nature and people, make lists of images and startling words, and listen for the muse. Creating a small database of colorful verbs (e.g., juxtapose, catapult, scrounge, trumpet) has been a special delight. Yet, when a poem begins to emerge, it comes as a gift of words from God. For me, creativity is both listening prayer and expressive prayer. Once I have the initial skeleton of a poem, I am learning strategies to craft ever better final versions. Stretching myself in this new creativity is nourishing. Some of my poems appear in this book.

Writing is an act of discovery. The regular discipline of journaling stretches the spirit and opens my mind, reduces my fears to mere words, and highlights my blessings. Through journaling, I return repeatedly to basic questions of identity and to basic values, especially awe, gratitude, and love.

*I wanted to choose words that even you would  
have to be changed by.* — Adrienne Rich

*Words lead to deeds ... They prepare the soul,  
make it ready, and move it to tenderness.*  
— St. Teresa of Avila

### Writing As Service

WRITING CAN BECOME A CALLING, central to how we choose to age with spirit. Journaling usually combines inner reflection with decisions for action — in the domain of writing and beyond.

Once the inner work progresses, we may wish to express our social voices. This can start with more thoughtful letters to family and friends, may extend to letters to the editor or newsletter/Web site contributions. Personal writing can progress into memoir, history, essay, poetry, and fiction to share with friends and relatives or to publish in magazines, Web sites, and books.

When I took early retirement, I deliberated at length in the journal about my postretirement calling. Over time, I developed the goal to learn

new kinds of writing. I had already begun to address storytelling and storywriting of elders in my academic research, partly because I could no longer focus on my usual complex analyses. Partly, however, this was a natural late-career shift from the theory underlying problematic communication with frail elders to application: how to facilitate mutually rewarding communication.

Eventually, I identified my passion for these years: “writing to learn, teach, and inspire others.” I am committed to improving my poetic skills and to submitting poems regularly, if sparingly, for publication. I edit the *Writing Down Our Years* series of inexpensive publications highlighting the writing of older adults, especially memoirs, grandparent–grandchild stories, caregiving stories, and poetry. I offer writing workshops and initiate writing groups.

With colleagues and students, I continue to explore creative ways to elicit and write down the stories and poems of elders who are physically and/or cognitively frail. My writing for professionals fosters enthusiasm for hearing, reading, and eliciting such stories. Finally, I host a Web site on *Writing, Aging and Spirit* for a broad audience of older adults and aging professionals to foster hope and connections through story.

When we write as service, we can be entertainer, chronicler, historian, social commentator, educator, advocate, and/or activist.

In conclusion, writing is working as a spiritual practice when it enriches our sense of self in community and invigorates our service to others.

Like life, aging is a choice, a series of choices. On reaching 70, the acclaimed spiritual writer and social activist Joan Chittister reflects on these choices in *The Gift of Years: Growing Old Gracefully*. Brief, engaging essays address expected topics such as meaning, adjustment, relationships, letting go, memories, forgiveness, and wisdom. Importantly, she also examines topics less often linked to old age, such as accomplishment, possibility, dreams, agelessness, and the future.



**Ellen B. Ryan**

What I like best about this book is how Chittister outlines the choices so clearly — each essay concludes with a statement of “the burden of these years” and “the blessing of these years.” The gift of these years is the invitation to become fully alive, to grow deeply, and to finally know what really matters. If we don’t give in to our limitations, we can reach out to others in ways the world so desperately needs. This final affirmation — that the world awaits the legacy of those burnished by old age — strikes me as her most significant message. We need to grow spiritually in old age, not only for ourselves but for the sake of the world.

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