



The meaning of life is to  
find your gift. The purpose  
of life is to give it away. –

Pablo Picasso

# AGING WITH SPIRIT THROUGH WRITING

Ellen B. Ryan

The website and blog “Writing Down Our Years”, nicknamed Writing Aging & Spirit, emerged seven years ago as my creative retirement project.

After a series of meaningfulness exercises to discover my life passions, I identified my primary spiritual goal for early retirement years: Through writing, I will discover, touch, and teach.

My commitment to a monthly blog (how old-fashioned!) has been a practice in writing for educated older adults about resilience in later life and how creativity and spirituality contribute to that resilience. Originally, my aim was to emphasize creative writing in the broader context of Aging with Spirit. Since then, I have added two newer passions: Photography and Aging in Community.

The website provides a host for the blog and a home for resources relevant to Writing Aging and Spirit (see box). Users can access my publications – research on resilient aging, articles for practitioners and older adults, and my poetry. They can also find information about upcoming conferences on aging and publishing opportunities. The information about Workshops I offer is especially valuable when trying to find a match between what I know and what a community group might need.

The Resources section of the website is close to my heart – as a lifelong collector of inspirational quotations and evaluated book lists. As community organizational work in Aging in Community takes more and more of my energy, I have created a link here for aging boomers and policy makers to access information on mutual support strategies and housing alternatives (cohousing, co-op, shared housing).

A special reason for the website is to promote my series of ten books Writing Down Our Years. These books highlight the creative writing of older adults – memoir, poetry, letters to grandchildren, writing with dementia, caregiving lessons, etc. We intend to encourage seniors to write – for their own pleasure and that of their families, individually and in groups, and to share their best work with the world. Some of these books are available for download. The order form enables users to purchase books from McMaster University.

An inter-linked sister website features one of these projects – Celebrating Poets over 70, with poems and biographies from lifelong poets and postretirement poets, ranging in age from 70-103 years. The oldest writer

## Sample Blog Topics

Create Your Vintage Years  
 Joy of Writing  
 How the Light Gets In Art of Memoir  
 In Praise of Slow  
 Legacy Matters  
 Mentoring  
 This I Believe  
 We All Become Stories  
 Aging with Humour  
 Volunteer to Love, Serve and Belong  
 Write to Bless Grandchildren

## Sample Writing Exercise

1. Remember or imagine an old family photograph, write about what you remember and what you don't know.
2. Choose a younger family member to direct a letter about this photograph.
3. Write the letter, extracting a life lesson from the story of the photograph for the recipient.

founded a writing group 30 years earlier, and still attended monthly meetings.

The poets offered reasons for writing – they have much to say about meaning-making in later life:

“I write poetry to stay alive! Writing is my passion. I am 83 and write every day. poetry: the power to fly. avenue to celebrations of life. writing poetry comes naturally. explore the colors and shapes of words. mysteries of the written word in verse. capturing strong emotional moments. Writing a poem helps me to live gratefully. still writing in [my] 104th year.”

The monthly blog Writing Aging & Spirit usually includes an inspirational quotation, perhaps the profile of a creative older adult, a few paragraphs on the topic of the month, a writing exercise, and a book review (see boxes). Blogs also include links to current resources on Aging in Community, Aging with Spirit, Aging and Creativity and upcoming conferences.

My monthly commitment to the blog contributes to shaping a meaningful life in my retirement. I read new books for review, explore a broader set of ideas in greater depth, write essays from a personal point of view, and stretch myself with memoir and poetry. All of this writing boosts aging with spirit.

Writing opens me up to creativity, mindfulness, and gratitude. My new interest in photography grows out of that opening to imagination and the longing to pay more attention. With the camera, I have come to see with different eyes just as with the pen. Posting one of my photographs on every blog has become another discipline – to review and reflect upon my pictures.

And now, I have begun writing memories for my photographs and taking photographs for my poems and stories. All such discoveries lead to material for the Writing Aging & Spirit blog.

Like each blog, I will end now with a selfie shadow photograph.



**Ellen B. Ryan** is professor emerita at McMaster University, member of Tower Poetry Society and The Ontario Poetry Society, co-editor of Celebrating Poets over 70, and host of the Writing, Aging and Spirit website. Along with talented colleagues, she fosters writing of life stories and poetry among older adults.

The website referenced in this essay can be reached at: [www.writingdownouryears.ca](http://www.writingdownouryears.ca)

[Writing Aging & Spirit website](#)

Access to Ellen Ryan publications

Information about Ellen Ryan Workshops and Presentations

Conferences and Writing Submission Opportunities

**Writing Down Our Years** Series (10 books)

[Resources](#) - Bibliography, Internet Links, and Quotations

[Writing & Life Stories/Memoir](#)

[Aging with Spirit](#)

[Communication & Aging](#)

[Aging in Community](#)