

## Writing Exercises from Blogs

### February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2012 – **Searching for Pittsburgh**

The exercise, known as Searching for Pittsburgh, involves two steps: first making a list of 4-8 places you might search for; second, writing for 10 minutes about searching for your chosen place. Write quickly, keeping your pen moving. Whenever your thought ends, begin again with the same 'searching for' phrase. Another time, you might write about one of the other places on your list

### March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2012 - **Haiku**

Haiku, an ancient Japanese poetic form, can make nature a spiritual path. Walking or sitting in nature in quiet contemplation is excellent preparation for writing three lines based on images from nature. Focused attention to the moment is holy; capturing the moment in words can take us deep.

Although there are many variations for haiku in English, common practices include: three lines, of up to 17 syllables; a season or nature word; a cut or kire (sometimes indicated by a punctuation mark) to compare two images implicitly. Note the use of nature images to allude to human aging in these translations of Japanese haiku by three of the most famous Japanese haiku masters.

### April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2012 - **Intergenerational Remembering**

Most of us have memories of spending time with grandparents. Even more of us remember tales told to us about our grandparents. Write about a special time with a grandparent – for example, describe an incident in which you learned values from one of your grandparents. Or, write down a story often repeated within the family of when your grandparents were your age or younger. Alternatively, you could write to a deceased grandparent asking the questions you wish you had asked earlier.

### May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2012 – **Proverbs**

Proverbs can serve as starters for fast writing. Here are some to start with:

*There are two sides to every question.*

*Honesty is the best policy.*

*Hope springs eternal.*

*Genius is an infinite capacity to take pains.*

*Live and learn.*

*Diligence is the mother of good luck.*

*A word to the wise is enough.*

*Experience is the best teacher.*

*The longest journey begins with a single step.*

### June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2012 – **Images of Walking**

Begin with an A-Z list, by writing down one brief phrase or image about walks and walking for each letter of the alphabet, such as (R) rippling water or (S) scramble over rocks. Then use some of the vocabulary and images to describe a spiritual journey.

### July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2012 - **Tip For July**

Summer is a time to relax (and work) in the garden, attending to the life cycle of emerging, blooming, ripening, and then decay. Often on a single rose or berry bush we see all the stages at once.

Make a list of 10 words or phrases about roses and a second list for berries. Don't repeat words but **do** take note of the many terms that fit on both lists.

Then write about summer joys, using some of the words from each list.

### August 7<sup>th</sup>, 2012 - **Tips for August**

In the classic *Writing the Natural Way*, Gabriele Rico presented numerous methods for drawing on the creativity of right brain processes. Clustering is one useful technique to generate words for prose or poetry writing.

For example, one could begin with the core word OUTDOORS – writing it in the middle of a page and circling it. Then one follows different paths of associations from the core word, circling each new word as you go. For example, I first thought of “trees-breeze-shade-picnic.” Then, a second path from the core was ‘run-wild-adventure-treasure’; another ‘dirt-seeds-plant-weed-pick-busking corn-yum’; another ‘play-friends-hide&seek-count-find’.

Often after a few minutes of seemingly random work, a particular path strikes as the one to write about. This is called the trial-web shift. My last path – such a shift – was ‘hike-Mt. Tom-scarlet maples-picnic-Mom’s molasses cookies’. Write on the topic which emerges, using as many of the words from the other paths as possible.

### September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2012 - **Savour Travel Experiences**

These exercises can be used to focus on your most recent trip, or a significant trip from long ago.

Describe your travel experiences in terms of colours — not only the greens of forest and metal grey of skyscrapers, but also the shades of your feelings. For example: pink cherry blossom feeling when you first saw your granddaughter; burst of primary colours when you finally reached the top of the long climb; flaming flag in your mind’s eye when you realized the tourist agent made a key mistake; palest blue of the winter sky for the ache of saying goodbye.

List 20 action verbs to describe your trip. Then write 10 minutes, including as many as possible.

Select 10 photos from your trip, then write a story of your trip working in the people, places, and activities displayed in the photos.

Write a letter to grandchildren after joint travels or traveling to visit them. These can be wonderful keepsakes for both young and old (and the generation in-between).

Finally, you can list surprises or lessons learned during your trip and write about one of them quickly in as much concrete, sensory and action detail as possible.

### November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2012 - Ray McGinnis 2005 Book of Writing Exercises, **Psalm of Wisdom**

to write a psalm of wisdom we might begin with a list of 25 wise actions and 25 unwise actions and then complete sentences such as:

“The first thing I notice about my wisdom list is...”, “The wisdom I practice in my life includes...”, and “I lose my way on the path to God when...”. Finally, we might consider opening a draft psalm with one of these lines: “Do not strive...”, “Unless...”, “Happy are you...”, “How good it is...”, or “With all my heart...”.

### January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2013 - **Group Writing**

Group exercises are valuable to pull the individuals of a writing group together. Here is an idea you might try. Each person begins with a piece of paper to pass along by writing down a question for which they would like answers. The question can be broad and open (e.g., How can we choose joy each day?) or concrete (e.g., How will I manage to converse with my difficult cousin during this weekend’s visit?). Then the paper is folded to hide the question and passed along to the person on the right. Participants each then write a descriptive sentence (using the senses) which could be the answer to a question. They fold over the paper and pass it along to the right again. Again participants write an answer to an unknown question. Finally, the papers are returned to the author of the

question.

Members of the group then take turns reading their 4-line 'poem': their question followed by the first answer, their question repeated, followed by the second answer.

### February 4<sup>th</sup> 2013 – **Dialogue**

Write a dialogue between you and someone in your life with illness or impairment. Write about your appreciation for your relationship and the uncertainty you experience about how to talk with them – whether you come across as uncaring or intrusive, whether you can speak frankly or should protect them, how sometimes you find yourself speaking for them and about them in their presence, why you don't visit as often as you'd like or why you think you need to distance yourself, etc. This could be a dialogue with a loved one no longer living.

### March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2013 – **Poem Response**

Select a poem you admire and enjoy rereading. Print it out double-spaced. Write your lines in between. You can either respond to each line at a time or link your responses across lines stanza by stanza. Afterwards, type out your responses only. You might just have the kernel of your own poem.

### April 3, 2013 – **Library**

Reminisce about your first library experiences, contrast these with current library experiences.

### April 3, 2013 – **Books**

Make these lists for a favourite book: setting (10 descriptive words), character (10 qualities of main characters), plot (10 verbs, including movement of time/place), and your response (10 feelings or metaphors).

Then write a book review using many of these words.

### May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2013 – **Memoir plus Creativity**

Consider your life between the approximate ages of 7 to 17. Describe a person who influenced you during this period – physical characteristics, setting(s) where you were together, specific anecdotes, how this person communicated and how you communicated back, and lessons learned.

After reading this over, you might create a story about an encounter you might have with this person at your current age. In keeping with the theme of humour, you can imagine some unusual features to this encounter, which elicit smiles or laughter.

### June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2013 – **Driving**

What has driving meant to you in different stages of your life? How do you imagine your life when you can no longer drive? How have you made use of public transportation in different stages of your life? How do you imagine using public transportation when you can no longer drive?

Write about these questions and also about the individual cars of your life and special car trips in these stages – childhood, raising kids, trundling grandchildren, 'cutting back' years.

### August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2013 – **Letters to Friends**

Make a list of 5 old friends from far away with whom you would like to connect. Choose one name and write a letter including shared memories and hopes. Send this letter as an email or with a greeting card by 'snail' mail. If you have lost contact, ask mutual friends who may have stayed in touch or use the search features on the Internet to track down an address.

Choose another name and repeat.

### September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013 – **Characters from Novels**

Choose a favourite character from novels you have read. Imagine meeting this person for lunch. Describe the scene — setting, meal, conversation, what is said and not said.

#### October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013 - **Hellos and Goodbyes**

Natalie Goldberg suggests compiling lists of first time encounters with people in our lives as well as goodbyes. The lists then become a resource for writing a story about one of these entries or a poem about the emotional experience of beginnings and endings.

#### December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2013 - **Small Beauties**

Make a list of descriptive phrases about the small beauties in your life – showing your connection to individuals in your life: to people with whom you have enjoyed the beauty of nature; to those whom you have helped, to those who have helped you, and to the broader communities of people with the same aspirations for a good life with feelings of mutual support.

Choose one phrase/image that strikes you and write about it for 10 minutes.

#### January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2014 – **Generosity**

Make a list of 10 occasions in which you behaved generously (or not). Choose one instance to describe in detail, including your feelings.

Try asking yourself questions about the meaning of this experience for yourself and for the other person(s) involved.

After a day or a week, write again about this experience and see if some answers to your initial questions come to mind.

#### February 11<sup>th</sup>, 2014 - **Poems**

*“Growing old is not like growing more like slowing, undergoing long agoing, touch-and-going and foregoing, knowing that what lies ahead will certainly need grace”*

Review Shepherd’s poem above. Write your version of what aging is not like and what it is like. Find some rhyming or alliterative words for expressing these comparisons.

#### March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2014 – **Timeline**

Create a timeline of a relationship – with a particular family member or with a longtime friend; or a working collaboration or even your relationship with an activity (e.g., writing, travel) or even some thing (e.g., family cottage, cars, food).

Write about the timeline to identify patterns, choices, and the energy for the future of the relationship.

#### June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014 – **Illness**

Recall a time of serious illness. Write about the situation, attending to appropriate friendly behaviours observed. Also describe inappropriate behaviours (including avoidance) by friends of the ill person. Imaging how specific alternative behaviours might have been more supportive in the circumstances and how you would be able to tell.

What lessons can you draw for your future role as a friend or caregiver (or ill person) during illness?

#### July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014 – **Boyd’s Wisdom Book**

Describe an aging dilemma, which you or loved ones have experienced. Then write three paragraphs responding to the dilemma, and then end with a positive affirmation in the first person.

In a writing group, the original person writes the aging dilemma, passes the sheet to the next person for the response, and a third person for the affirmation. Each page is read aloud by the person

originating the dilemma.

August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2014 – **Prose**

Take out a piece of writing from some time ago — a story or memory or work document, perhaps even a meaningful passage from an email message. Craft the prose by using editing tips included in this Blog. Read the two versions aloud to yourself. You can also ask a friend to describe the impact of the two different versions.

The writing tips in this blog post included:

- **Revising Prose** by Richard Lanham addresses the basic architecture of the English sentence. His **Paramedic Method** is emergency therapy for prose. Writers apply the method to increase awareness of sentence structure. They manage readers' attention by enhancing the rhythm both within and among piecesentences. Sentences become concise, more active, and more intentionally varied.
- Zinsser's classic **On Writing Well** adds the notion that often a troublesome sentence can be omitted altogether and the warning to avoid what he calls 'creeping nounism' (e.g., "the education development program project").
- The **Cumulative Sentence** is a specific type of intentionally long sentence — composed of a simple independent clause, followed by a number of dependent phrases and clauses which flow along building both rhythm and meaning. See [Wallace's recent blog](#) summarizing and illustrating the creation of such sentences.

October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014 – **This I Believe Statement**

Follow the writing tips listed at the end of the Book Review to draft a **This I Believe statement**. You might want to begin with a list of qualities you admire in others and seek for yourself as a way to recognize one which creates story energy to be developed.

When you are ready, you may submit your essay to the online collection of thousands to the website [This I Believe \(http://thisibelieve.org\)](http://thisibelieve.org)

The Book Review Said:

- An appendix outlines for potential writers how to write 300 words on This I Believe: Tell a story (Be specific); Be Brief; Name your Belief; Be Positive; Be personal (speak in the first person).

November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014 – **Legacy**

Write a brief ethical will (legacy) to be read when you are gone. In it list all the qualities you are giving to your loved ones, your children and grandchildren, your friends — what you want to be remembered for and what you hope of you will live on in them (from Joan Chittister).

For example:

I leave to my son Dennis and grandson Aleksander my joy in running and playing ball sports;  
For the earth I leave my love of sunlight through the trees at dawn, afternoon, and dusk;  
To my husband I leave the patience and calm (such as they are) which I have learned from him to cultivate.

December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014 – **Mentor**

Make a list of experiences when someone older took an interest in your life and served as a mentor.

Elaborate on one of these experiences: what specific behaviours and attitudes were significant?

Name specific ways in which the mentoring affected you in the short term and later on in life. Do you think your 'mentor' would be surprised by the impact of their time with you? Have you

passed along similar lessons to younger individuals?

### January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015 – **New Years Resolutions**

Make a list of your typical New Year's Resolutions. Then write about an unusual resolution which you kept or did not keep.

List five resolutions for 2015. Then create an affirming story about your successfully keeping one of them.

### February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015 – **Ten Years**

Select ten years – past or future (e.g., 1947, 1969, ....., 2015, ...2027) and write a few sentences about your life in each of these. For example:

I burst upon the world in the new year of 1947. I imagine my older brother Donnie marching toy trucks around the kitchen floor wondering when the new baby would join in. ...

Marrying in 1969, I was looking forward to new adventures – a bit apprehensive about how to build a family along with two careers. That year we walked on the beaches of Prince Edward Island and through the woods of northern Maine.

### April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015 – **Prompts**

Use each of these prompts to write a paragraph. Choose a time and a location or move from one time/location to another in your paragraph:

This morning I write, This twilight I write, This evening I write;

I write sitting in my favourite chair; I write in a coffee shop; I write with my favourite view.

### May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015 – **Pat Schneider**

In the book reviewed below, Pat Schneider presents one of her favourite writing exercises. First, we begin with the instruction to imagine a doorway, or a breakfast table, or a hallway. Second, we are asked to address three questions: "What is the quality of the light? Where is the light coming from?" And then, "Is anyone nearby or are we alone?" Finally, we are to write what we see and then follow where the writing leads.

### June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015 – **Walking**

Here are some walking-related prompts to stimulate individual or group writing.

1. Walking along the path, I ...
2. Memorable walks I have taken – List 3-7 walks and then elaborate on one of them.
3. The walk I would take with my grandchild ...

### August 25<sup>th</sup>, 2015 - **Fire**

Come sit by the fire and tell the story that appears in the flames while you sit in the circle – perhaps a story you heard from or about your grandparents or perhaps describe an important letter received by your family while you were growing up.

### September 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015 – **Seasonal Change**

We are leaving summer behind this month, and moving into autumn.

Think about this seasonal change as a metaphor for moving from middle age into old age. Write your response as a poem or as a memoir of a specific experience of transition.

### October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015 – **Letters to Grandchildren**

Think of one grandchild, or someone you think of as like a grandchild. Write about an experience in your youth from which you learned a life lesson, incorporating if possible one of your elders within the

story.

### November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015 – **Fly While You Still Have Wings**

Take the image “Fly while you still have wings”, and write about ‘flying’ in later life.

What gives you a feeling of lightness, soaring, taking the grand perspective? What do you do these days to make your dreams come true?

### December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015 – **Group Writing**

In a group, each person writes a word on a piece of paper. The papers are circulated to the write, with each participant adding a word to the growing lists. When participants have their own list back (their original word at the top), each person writes with his individualized list of words for 15 minutes.

### January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016 – **100<sup>th</sup> Celebration**

Imagine your 100th birthday celebration, or your 80th. What growth, contributions, service during later life will you be looking back on? What mentors will have been important?

### February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016 – **Posture**

Has anyone ever reminded you to sit up straight, to stand tall? What were their motives? Did their admonitions work? Are you aware of others’ posture? What feelings do certain postures in loved ones elicit?

### March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016 – **March**

Reflect on the month of March, anticipation of spring as the sunlight increases both in the mornings and the evenings. Take advantage of the multiple meanings of the words ‘March’ and ‘Spring’ in your writing.

### April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016 – **Spring**

Spring forward at the vernal equinox! Write down memories of walking, running, skipping, jumping as the weather warmed up and flowers began to colour the landscape. How has the increasing light and time in the fresh air made you feel? With whom have you enjoyed these changes?

### June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016 – **Serving**

Write about Dr. Remen’s quotation at the top of this blog – how you have experienced serving rather than helping or fixing; or how you have been served in a way that enabled you to be more. You might look around you for role models among people and among other living things.

- *When you help, you see life as weak; when you fix, you see life as broken; and when you serve, you see life as whole.* - Rachel Naomi Remen

### August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016 – **Date, Place, Person**

This exercise for writing about life memories is adapted from Alexandra Johnson’s book: *Leaving a Trace: On Keeping a Journal*.

Make three lists linked to your life: 10 dates (significant years in your life), 10 places, 10 people. Then review your list to reduce to 4 items in each list. Finally, choose one year, one place, and one person.

Write creatively about these three, seeking for connections among them.

When I did this exercise last week, I was led to consider for the first time how a longtime friend and I went through similar experiences – leaving our academic positions for elsewhere — though for different reasons and in different decades. The process of writing about those years led me to a deeper understanding about how our friendship stood both of us in good stead during our transitions.

### September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015 – **Collaborative Writing**

In a small group, use index cards or sheets of paper. Each person writes two lines to begin a haiku (focus on nature). Pass the cards to the right. Each adds a third line to the lines received. Read aloud the collaborative poems.

If you choose a specific theme (e.g., September or trees), then the individual poems might combine well into a longer, group reflection.

### October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016 – **Writing to Grandchildren**

Write a letter to a grandchild [or someone you consider as like a grandchild] about how one of their attributes reminds you of someone you knew when you were growing up.

### November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016 – **Legacy Letter**

In later life, before you get sick, it is a good idea to draft a legacy letter (or ethical will) conveying your life values to your loved ones. Once you have a draft you can take it out from time to time for revisions.

For this exercise, list 5 or 6 of your key values, then note a specific episode in your life exhibiting each value, and finally write a few paragraphs recounting the story for one value and why it is important to you. Linking with other generations is especially meaningful. For example, recounting an episode with a granddaughter that reminds you of what your grandfather used to do in similar circumstances.

### December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016 – **Old Letters**

Write about finding old letters in the attic or the basement -a family member's experience, your own experience, or your imagined experience. What do you learn about the writers and the recipients in reading these letters and what do you wish you could learn?

Also, in this season's holiday letters, try to include brief specific reminiscences with a few telling details.

### January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017 – **Civic Engagement & Writing**

Volunteer to help frail elders at home or in assisted living to send greeting cards for birthdays, anniversaries, holidays and also get well and sympathy cards. Discuss the type of messages/cards desired and create or select them for each individual, assist them with writing interesting messages and locating poems or photographs to send along.

### February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017 – **Timeline**

Create a timeline by calendar year/age of your life in the middle of the page. Place life events along the timeline, above for positive events, below for negative events. This timeline can help you begin writing your memoirs (perhaps with key events, turning points).

For now, write a paragraph about positive aspects of one of the negative events you have marked on the timeline.

### March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017 – **Memory Problems**

Write about your aging-related memory problems and fears for your future memory and that of your loved ones. Then write about an ideal visitor or friend, describe behaviours which would make you feel comfortable, included, competent, valued.

April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017 – **Intergenerational Activities**

Read over my poem Picking Grapes with Pepere above and then write about an activity you enjoyed with one of your grandparents and relate that to an activity you enjoy nowadays with young people. For example, I have gone from picking grapes and berries with my French-speaking grandparents to picking lingonberries with my Swedish grandchildren at their lakehouse. Across the generations, our fingers and faces turn bright with intergenerational happy juice.

In the crisp overripe air  
we pick blue-black grapes with Pèpère  
scrambling through brambles  
to lighten laden vines

Squirrels dart round us  
jaws clamped over acorns  
Robins chatter in high branches  
sing plans for travel south

Clusters plucked for two kitchens  
bunches overflow buckets  
not like last month's blueberries  
so tiny yet wild too

Plum splotches on old pants  
we pick blue-black grapes with Pèpère  
Sundays we drink his purple juice  
gather he'll live forever