

WRITE NOW:

MAINTAINING A CREATIVE SPIRIT
WHILE HOMEBOUND AND ILL

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I. Introduction

Yes, I have muddled through a long period of sickness. It hit unexpectedly at age thirty-five and radically cut me off from my previous high-energy healthy self and life. Illness robbed me of so much: my former identity, meaningful work, active social life, fun and play, sharp and alert intellect, strong body, confident and enthusiastic attitude, good income, and participation in many family joys and responsibilities. The onset severely limited my daily expectations: substituting sickness in place of health, disability in place of capability, and numerous restrictions in place of few boundaries. The going was very tough -- not only in facing symptoms and limits -- but in maintaining a positive outlook. Tapping a creative spirit was essential to persevering.

Regardless of how physically and intellectually depleted I was through years of illness, the ability to draw upon a creative spirit through writing helped me maintain a sense of hopefulness. Writing provided an outlet for the inevitable periods of depression, while affirming the worthiness of myself as a disabled, ill person. It allowed me to express a deep grief and anger over the limits and losses imposed by long-term illness. More importantly, perhaps, a creative spirit expressed through writing opened a door. It improved my overall sense of well-being, *despite* the painful and debilitating symptoms I was experiencing. On those days I was able to write, I felt better about my life, my abilities, my gifts, and, in fact, my illness and diminished capacities. I did not feel less sick, but my emotional life and connections to a larger world seemed richer. In this sense, writing improved my spirits.

Don't worry. I was not attempting, nor am I encouraging, the Great American Novel. Indeed, my efforts on many days rarely exceeded a few sentences in a letter or journal. Sometimes I merely captured some scattered thoughts as I reflected on a conversation, a piece of reading, or a film on the VCR. On other days, I was slightly more ambitious: a short poem, a start on an essay, or a fragmentary section of a history manuscript (which had been near completion when I first became sick). I tried on most days -- regardless of how drained and constrained -- to meet one "baby step" goal in writing. For many months, the step was limited to letters or journal entries. While considered easy and mundane by the standards of an energetic healthy person, the efforts were significant accomplishments for me. In truth, these basic avenues of writing helped sustain my mind

and spirit when I was most fragile. I was able to muster creativity against great odds.

This guide is the result of daily struggle. It was slowly pieced together in an attempt to provide a resource to others who are sick and limited for lengthy periods of time. The Puffin Foundation supported the project by awarding a grant to cover printing costs of a limited number. There is no monetary remuneration for me from this labor of love. My hope is that you will find suggestions here which make the art of writing accessible to you. My contention is that we are all artists in one way or another. Perhaps we haven't previously tapped the creativity, which lies dormant or fights for sun. Now is a crucial time to let our creative spirit play and grow. At the very time when we are faced with limits of pain, deterioration, and physical trauma, we must manage some small steps forward in our own creative development. Creativity is, ultimately, another element of life itself. By nourishing a creative spirit in the face of overwhelming difficulty, we can continue to *be*. We are an active part of life -- despite the isolation of sickness, the loss of other forms of meaningful work, and the restricted mobility of poor health.

The guide is set up to provide flexibility in your pursuits. It is not meant to be required work. Browse through the section headings. Read a little. Note some of the suggested exercises. Pick and choose. Build on materials you've previously been tackling. Try something you've never tried before. Do not feel obliged to be consistent in your habits. However, do try to write (or creatively think) for at least a few minutes on most days.

If you have difficulty manipulating either a pen or keyboard, an occupational therapist can provide solutions via assistive technology. In my case, large grippers over a roller-ball pen make handwriting easier. A lap board allows me to write even when confined to bed. An occupational therapist also counseled me on varied methods and devices to use with the computer keyboard. Amy Laub, a contributor, praises the PaperMate Power Point pen, which enables one to write from any position. If you cannot physically wield a pen or manage a keyboard, there are alternate pragmatic paths. Try a small tape recorder to hold your creative thoughts. A partner, friend, or child could act as scribe -- whether you're dictating a letter, journal entry, or poem. Many communities offer volunteer companion programs through social service organizations or churches. Do not hesitate to lean on such a companion as you explore your creative spirit.

Continue on. Don't hesitate. Jump in. Right now. The following section (II) offers more insights on sickness, creativity, and writing. If you feel like reading it at this point, go ahead. But, it's also okay to skip to another section. Perhaps you're intrigued by lists and curious about exercises in section IV. Move on. And, don't forget to write -- at least for a few minutes. Remember, a creative spirit is an alive spirit. Writing (thinking) is being.

Resources

Clearinghouse on Disability Information
U.S. Department of Education
Switzer Building, Room 3132
330 C Street SW
Washington, DC 20202-2524
202/205-8241
(Information; resource referrals.)

Job Accommodation Network
P.O. Box 6080
Morgantown, WV 26506
Toll-free 800/526-7234 or 800/232-9675
Web: www.jan.wvu.edu
(Provides help with adaptive assistance.)

National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped
Library of Congress
Washington, DC 20542
202/707-5100
Web: www.loc.gov/nls
(Provides free loans to persons unable to read standard printed items because of physical or visual problems. Linked to regional libraries.)

Office on the Americans with Disabilities Act
Civil Rights Division, U.S. Department of Justice
P.O. Box 66118
Washington, DC 20035-6118
Toll-free 800/514-0301 (voice)
Toll-free 800/514-0383 (TDD)
Web: www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/adahom1.htm
(Information on ADA requirements -- public services, telecommunications, transportation, public accommodations, and employment.)

II. Sickness and Creativity: Why Bother?

It seems impossible, doesn't it? Here you are, homebound and sick. Perhaps you face extreme and disruptive forms of pain. Your body has deteriorated in significant ways. Each day you fight multiple beasts at a point when your physical, emotional, financial, and spiritual resources are vastly diminished. Sickness is not for the weak. Ironically, your heart, mind, and body must fight the good fight from a precarious and vulnerable position. It is essential to not give up.

Creative thinking and writing contribute to better coping, thus helping us to live. Maintaining a spirit which creates is a potent force. Acclaimed science-fiction author Ray Bradbury states:

First and foremost, [writing] reminds us that we *are* alive and that it is a gift and a privilege, not a right. . . . Secondly, writing is survival. . . . You must stay drunk on writing so reality cannot destroy you.¹

Bradbury was not specifically reaching out to ill and homebound people, but his words have a remarkable message for us. Stay alive. Don't let reality destroy you.

My dentist has a delightful poster facing the dental chair. It shows an opossum precariously hanging from its tail -- not quite in sync. The words read: "Reality causes stress." No doubt about it, living with sickness is a hard reality. If everyday, ordinary reality causes stress and fragmentation, then long-term illness and disability magnify and exacerbate the storm of daily life. Mitigating the pressures through writing is a charm.

We must remember that life is a gift and a privilege. We must maintain an inner dialogue which constantly underscores our value, despite illness and disability. And, we must try to survive and not let the roughness of our current reality destroy our spirit. Indeed, as impossible and "Pollyanna-ish" as it seems, we need to grow from our experiences. Hmmm!

I, too, have wanted to bat people over the head when they said something in this vein. This is especially true for folks who know not of what they speak, having never been close to a long-term sickness. However, those in the know, do know it is true. After all, what are the other choices? To decay? To turn bitter? To turn into a whiner? For some related spiritual and philosophical insights, look at *When Bad Things Happen To Good People* by Rabbi Harold S. Kushner and *Living With Chronic Illness* by Cheri Register.²

Writing (creative thinking) is a life vest. Picture it in a most vivid orange as you put it on. It will provide buoyancy as you confront the waves of a rough sea. Writing is a singular lifeline because it carries the unique creative thought of your personhood. It is you. And, preserving you is important. These are simple but crucial thoughts in understanding the roles creative thinking and writing play in confronting your illness.

Writing is life affirming. It is an act of creation. Take a blank piece of paper. Write a few sentences describing your room -- or, jot a few lines to a friend, or family member, or even a stranger. Look at the finished product. You have created something. It is a fragment of your *self*. It is alive with you -- reflecting a mood, an action, a thought, a unique personhood. There is a part of you on that piece of paper. There is something that was not there prior to your thinking and writing. It communicates. It generates insights. It affirms your existence. (This last is true whether the sentences are optimistic and uplifting or grim and depressing.)

I think back to childhood. I was always surprised by the final outcome of a written project. It remained a puzzle to me. How did blank paper turn into a paragraph, a play, a research paper, a letter, or a story? I was dimly aware of a process -- thinking, reading, digesting, creating. Yet the completed written work always held a mysterious component. It was an "Ahhh" feeling. I had created a new entity through writing. And, as a child, the act of creation was a joy. I didn't concern myself with its overall merits. I didn't worry or fret. The immersion in creating through writing was a reward unto itself -- and one easily reachable. Of course, there are many other acts of creative expression we can and should engage in, depending on our specific interests and limits. A few examples will suffice: sketching, needlepointing, bread-making, soap-carving, singing, calligraphy, sewing, woodworking, gardening, painting, designing a miniature village or railroad line, and composing music.

Brenda Ueland describes the phenomenon of creativity in children. The child does not have a preconceived notion of good writing, profitable (for money) writing, style, or form. She or he writes simply for pleasure. It is a force of daily life. Ueland tried to recapture this life-affirming, spontaneous ability in her 1930s book *If You Want to Write*. This delightful and inspiring little book is well worth reading. Ueland urges adults to resurrect a childlike belief in the creative spirit. Her advice amounts to a philosophy of life grounded in creative thinking and writing. It is a treasure. A few of Ueland's chapter headings point to her positive spirit, goodwill, and

optimism. All hold special (albeit unintended) meaning to those facing the constraints and pain of long-term illness. Note the following chapter titles:

- Everybody is talented, original, and has something important to say
- The imagination works slowly and quietly
- "Know that there is often hidden in us a dormant poet, always young and alive" -- de Musset
- Be careless, reckless! Be a lion, be a pirate, when you write
- Art is infection
- Keep a slovenly, headlong, impulsive, honest diary
- You do not know what is in you -- an inexhaustible fountain of ideas
- Why women who do too much housework should neglect it for their writing
- Microscopic truthfulness³

It bears repeating that writing is life-affirming and therefore self-affirming. It provides tangible proof of our unique individualism. At a vulnerable time of diminished physical capacity and painful losses, writing *is* a lifeline. (Remember the vivid orange life vest?)

Writing offers you even more rewards, however. It has the potential to improve the "spirits" -- our inner emotional life. Indeed, this is guaranteed. The creative act of writing enhances our overall sense of well-being, at a time when we desperately need to develop a genuinely positive spirit. A rich emotional life and positive spirit are just deserts in themselves, as they make daily living easier. However, a positive spirit can also assist in reducing pain and promoting healing. The new field of psychoneuroimmunology identifies the interactions of the mind-body connection for us. New understandings regarding the immune system offer significant findings on the benefits of an optimistic attitude. Laughter, for example, soothes a troubled spirit, and has specific biochemical results in the human body. I am not making the claim that a positive spirit developed through writing will cure you, but it will aid you in numerous ways -- and for some, it will enhance the road to recovery. (I recommend that you do further reading in psychoneuroimmunology. One insightful book for the

layperson is Norman Cousins' *Head First: The Biology of Hope*.⁴⁾

Writing improves the spirits in a variety of ways. The process of putting the worst of ourselves and our negative emotions down on paper ultimately can free us. For example, most of us have experienced intense periods of focused or unfocused anger -- sometimes fair, sometimes not. We have every right to be angry. Not one of us deserved isolating pain, sickness, and disability. However, our anger has the potential to be exceedingly destructive -- to family, to friends, and to our own selves. We need to utilize every possible resource to get through the worst of it. Thus I urge you to talk it out with friends, family, clergy, and professionals. Your doctors should be concerned about the fragility of family life and connections during long-term illness. There are counselors (including psychologists and psychiatrists, social workers, and peer advocates) specifically devoted to aiding you through the psychological trauma of long-term illness. They recognize the complex pressures you and your intimate circle face. Use whatever it takes to find peace with your anger. Pray, read, watch humorous videos, think, and seek support. In addition, exorcise the meanness, hate, and anger through writing. Get it out and out and out until the rage no longer has the ability to overwhelm or control you. Expect it to reappear in the course of the sickness, but its intensity and longevity should be vastly subdued.

Do not contain anger. Anger unexpressed is a vicious internal poison. And it is highly communicable -- it spreads rapidly to those around you. Do know there are times you must cry and scream -- alone and with others. Recognize how easy (and normal) it is to find fault with everyone around us when we feel overwhelmed by sickness and a frustrating daily existence. However, we don't want to aim destructive anger at our partners, children, friends, and family. So we must draw from numerous resources to effectively deal with anger.

You can expend the anger by writing to yourself -- for no one else's eyes. Or, you may find it more beneficial to write to an understanding friend. In addition, you might try to write out your feelings in terribly bad periods of anger aimed unfairly at a loved one -- rather than scream, cry, fight, and destroy. For example, write a letter to your spouse identifying your pains, your sources of anger, and your perception of any misunderstandings. Be clear and fair. Always express your love *and* articulate your needs.

Writing through the anger -- writing right now -- can offer solace. It allows you to explore more clearly the depth of your anger. If you write through

the gut, an extraordinary transformation will occur from the time you start until the time you finish. Regardless of the way you spill out the anger -- through private journal, letter to spouse, letter to distant friend, long list of unstructured thoughts, a poem -- you will find a release from anger's grip.

In addition, writing will often help you sort out the true roots of your anger. For example, maybe the cause was not the fact your superstitious father-in-law failed to visit in the hospital; rather, it was that you were sick and in the hospital, resenting the unfairness of the entire situation. As you write, you sift and sort the varied factors contributing to your anger. You expunge anger from your heart. You move on. This is extremely important for you and your family.

Writing improves the spirits in similar ways with other expected moods and emotions engendered by a health crisis and long-term illness. For example, writing helps us cope with days of sadness and the inevitable periods of depression. It is sad to be sick. There is grief for multiple losses: a healthy body, mobility, an alert mind, regular choices, active social life, and competency in work, school, and daily routines. One often mourns the departure of friends and a loss of income. (These are two supreme ironies of poor health. Some friends (!) desert when you most need friendship. And, income is reduced or lost when bills are mounting because of the high price of medical care and related services.)

Writing does help with sadness, grief, and depression. Writing a few sentences in a journal or scribbling a brief letter to a friend can be crucial steps in hanging on. Difficult as it might be to start the process of creative thinking and writing when sick and sad, keep at it. Think small initially -- but, make an effort. It will help revive you and it will get easier over time. (A friend recently recounted the role writing played when ill and severely depressed. It proved to be a barometer of emotional health. As spirits improved, writing became easier. As the writing flowed, spirits gained. The two were inseparable.)

No man -- or woman -- is an island, albeit you may feel alone and isolated when sick -- and more so when sick, sad, and possibly depressed. Writing can help you connect in several ways. It fosters communication with your own self and with others. Similar to writing through the anger, writing through the sadness, grief, and depression can assist in understanding -- and gradually managing better. While sadness and depression are normal in the process of facing long-term physical sickness, you need to gradually overcome the worst part of it. The additional burden of poor emotional

health on top of a lousy physical state is a double-whammy. I can attest -- as can you -- that it is miserable to face the additional traumas of isolation, grief, sadness, anger, and depression. It hurts. It's extraordinarily painful. We need to express it, but we need to stare it down as well.

Utilize all resources available to combat sadness and depression. A doctor offers a bit of simple advice. If you feel extreme sadness, inability to cope, and a depressed mood, which you can't shake after four days, you're beyond a little case of the blues. You should get extra help and support. You wouldn't let a high fever run for four days without alerting your doctor. Please reach out. LEAN and LEARN. And, include writing as one of the tools at your disposal.

There are other negative emotions you'll experience in dealing with your specific illness, its prognosis, its treatment, and its constraints. And, as you experience peaks and valleys of physical changes and medical treatments, there will be concomitant changes in your emotional life. These include a wide variety of attitudes: denial, fear, guilt, anxiety, acceptance, a sense of failure, frustration, disappointment, mood swings, crabbiness, intolerance, irritability, and more. Unfortunately, they come back breathing new life under changed circumstances. For example, perhaps you've spent several months working through denial, anger, and sadness -- reaching a comfortable level of acceptance and positive attitude. However, a new treatment protocol is offered to you and instills some hope (and much fear). If it fails, you are likely to go through a hectic and unwanted whirl of negative emotions. Likewise, if you have a chronic debilitating illness, but experience a slightly "better" period, it may be emotionally devastating to go downhill yet again.

The "good" emotions can be odd, too, when facing physical illness. You are hopeful -- but hope often gets smashed or seems unrealistic. You love -- but feel deficient and guilty in your abilities to show it. You care about others -- but you worry and you fear helplessness. You are serene and calm -- then something throws you out to a tumultuous sea.

Think and write through all of these conflicting and complex emotions. Writing about them gives you an accessible outlet. You explore your changes -- from day to day. You overcome the worst elements and persevere in improving your own emotional life. You raise your spirits and your sense of well-being.

I'm reminded of advice presented in a brochure on coping skills for people

with chronic illness. It told patients that although they may be limited and unable to control all elements of their sickness, environment, losses, or limitations, they can try to be in charge of their own emotional responses. Simple? Never. But, certainly worth our efforts. Writing can be one significant ingredient in successfully managing the emotions of sickness.

You come full circle through writing, a circle which offers an opportunity to work through emotions. You evaluate and come to understand the root causes. You expunge the worst excesses of negative and destructive feelings and thoughts. You find a balance and inner peace. You reaffirm your core self. You engage in an involved dialogue with yourself. You affirm your being and your life. You heal. You create.

Writing offers more than self-talk and self-therapy, although these are significant and useful elements in themselves. Writing also can provide escape. It brings you to distant lands and magical moments. It offers time travel to events, people, and places in your own past or to those encouraged by historical imagination or freewheeling fantasy. One woman told me that writing generates a safety valve for her. In her case, she rarely writes of daily coping and long-term sickness. Instead, she resorts to flying away with other topics, stories, and issues. She literally gets away from herself (and her illness) via writing.

The noted Chinese-American writer Amy Tan has told of the precipitating factor which led to her writing. She visited a psychiatrist to seek help with workaholism and life-out-of-balance. After the therapist fell asleep three times during sessions, Amy Tan picked up her pen and started to write! She admits it was initially a form of self-therapy, but it also required a great deal of creativity and imagination as she explored the fictional lives of generations of Chinese and Chinese-American women. Her writing began to free her of gnawing personal troubles.⁵

Many people in varied circumstances have discovered that writing does offer an escape. Prisoners and hostages, for example, have attested to the "escape hatch" offered by creative thinking or writing. The ability to temporarily divorce oneself from the bleak surroundings and abysmal restrictions of imprisonment makes a major difference in preserving mental health. The ill and homebound often find themselves prisoners to their symptoms and attendant limits. Even a few minutes a day of creative thinking and writing provide a significant respite and improve emotional health.

Let me illustrate this with two simple examples. Perhaps you loved horses, rode horses, and cared for horses when healthy. Writing a descriptive story, or poem, or journal entry recalling in intimate detail a favorite "horse day" will transport you to that younger pre-ill self. Keep the pen to paper (or voice to scribe) and sensations, thoughts, and events will pour out, thus temporarily transporting you. Or perhaps you're working in the imaginary realm and fabricating a conversation and life among the squirrels in the tree outside your window. You are escaping your daily restrictions as you create another world. For at least a few minutes (maybe an hour), you are transfixed in the magical arenas of creativity and imagination. Your creative spirit has carried you away from oppressive illness, related emotions, and physical restrictions. After all, when working in the imagination, you can ride the horse -- gallop, even -- or you can join your squirrels in scurrying up the branches. (Hmmm! Guess I was absorbed by animals today.)

Writing can offer an escape from overbearing and harmful isolation -- the sense that you are apart from the "normal" world. Anyone who has lived in a cold climate of long and severe winter is familiar with the term "cabin fever." Having lived in the harsh climate of Wisconsin's Northwoods for seven years, I thought I knew the reality of cabin fever. However, being ill and limited in a mild climate (four seasons with wimpy winters) gave a deeper meaning to the phrase. As a sick and homebound person, you often experience cabin fever on a grand scale. Unlike the cabin fever imposed by heavy snows and frigid temperatures, you can't ease the fever by getting outdoors to chop wood, nor can you vigorously clean closets. Instead, your mind must offer release.

Unfetter your mind to allow entry into a wider world and to stymie isolation. Use whatever is available to help in this quest: books, visitors, telephone, VCR, "good" TV program choices, music, radio, new crafts or collections or hobbies suitable to your limits, telescope, magazines, puzzles (crossword, jigsaw, others), recipes, computers, more music (!), and games. And, boost your creative spirit and fight the cabin fever through writing. Bring the temperature down, so that isolation is no longer an issue for you.

Absorption in the creative process is the key to a successful and healthy escape. Teacher and author Natalie Goldberg offers these important points to her writing students:

- Commit yourself to writing practice; keep your hand moving; keep at it; practice.

- "Don't worry about spelling, punctuation, or grammar; lose control; go for the jugular; and (perhaps most important) feel free to write the worst junk in the universe."
- Shake fear of the "editor" or "nagging voice" -- kill the overly critical. "The editor is the person who wants to control things and look good. The creator is the one who wants to say it as it is."⁶

Amy Cushman recently compiled a list of helpful basic guidelines culled from many teachers. All were committed to the values and concepts of exploring and extending creativity in every individual. Cushman's basic guidelines include:

- Trust your intuition, your "first thoughts"; don't censor yourself.
- Stay within your "here and now" thoughts -- whatever comes. Don't force.
- The process is what matters, not the product. The process brings a "sense of aliveness, of deep contact with the sacred mystery of our lives." It can provide "sheer pleasure" and "vibrant aliveness."
- Don't analyze what you've done.
- Special talent is not necessary. Don't feel you *always* need more training, etc.
- Practice, practice, practice. Perseverance is needed, but facing the empty notebook diligently and "goallessly" is an end in itself.⁷

One or more of the points made by Cushman or Goldberg probably jumped out at you. Have you been too self-critical? Have you felt writing is only for college-educated English majors? Have you been intimidated by the fear you'll write "the worst junk in the universe"? Have you worried that your imagination and creativity levels are akin to a slug's? Get rid of these censors. Throw such thoughts to the side or place them on a very high shelf. (A friend offering a workshop on "TIME OUT" had participants write all their worries and fears on slips of paper. They then dropped them in a large empty flowerpot where they stayed for the duration of the workshop. Thus all worries were put on hold in order to take care of open reflections. This might be a great way for you to get on with managing your disability and writing each day. Do it through your mind's eye, if not physically. By the way, at the end of the workshop, people picked up their worries on the

way out!⁸⁾

Ray Bradbury delightfully captures the essence of absorption and imagination found through writing in an inspiring collection of his essays. Bradbury's essay titles speak directly to the topic:

- HOW TO KEEP AND FEED A MUSE
- RUN FAST, STAND STILL, OR, THE THING AT THE TOP OF THE STAIRS, OR, NEW GHOSTS FROM OLD MINDS
- THE SECRET MIND
- HOW TO CLIMB THE TREE OF LIFE, THROW ROCKS AT YOURSELF, AND GET DOWN AGAIN WITHOUT BREAKING YOUR BONES OR YOUR SPIRIT
- ZEN IN THE ART OF WRITING⁹

I encourage you to thumb through and read an essay or two in Bradbury's collection *Zen in the Art of Writing*. Chances are you'll be fascinated and read them all. You'll want to join Bradbury and "climb the tree of life, throw rocks at yourself, and get down again without breaking your bones or your spirit." Bradbury prods us in gentle and exciting ways. His quest sparks our individual creativity. His humor demands laughs and chuckles. He urges all of us to "keep and feed a muse."

Our attempts to maintain a creative spirit while coping with the beasts of physical symptoms, emotional rockiness, boredom and ennui, and debilitating constraints are absolutely necessary. By touching upon an inner core of creativity and imagination, we say "YES" to life. We tell our sickness that it may have robbed us in significant arenas of daily activities, but we won't let it take control of everything. Indeed, through writing we shout down our demons and raise up our spirits of creativity, imagination, goodwill, and hope.

Ultimately it is up to you to try creative thinking and writing. I can continue to extoll the benefits of writing, but the experience of being in it yourself will provide the best testimony. Remember some of the advice contained in previous pages. Don't judge the worthiness of writing till you've tried it for a month or more. You will notice significant changes within yourself by the one month point. Do try to write each day, if at all possible. Remember alternate routes if you can't wield a pen or use a keyboard.

The succeeding chapters offer many points of departure for you. Remember to go with your intuitive sense. On a given day, you may feel capable of jotting lists and little more. On another day, you may start a poem, a short story, or a journal entry. Some of you may be consistent and choose to work in one area, while others may graze here and there. All directions are just fine. Lastly, do not feel obliged to write from this guide. It is meant merely as a guide, not as a required lesson. Your loyalty should be to your creative spirit. Soar with it and let these suggestions be a small part of your journey.

Testimonies

These Days

You do not know me on these days
when I can barely lift my iron body
from my bed

these days
when I eat bread,
crackers, cheese

these days
when leaving home is a dream
as distant as a summer breeze deep in mid-winter.

These days
the only ones who know me
are my pen and this small volume
in which I lay my body between bound sheets
in a narrow bed of silence.

Tara Allan

Sharing My Gift

What do you do? is an often-asked question of us all as we meet new people. That is currently difficult for me to answer. Most persons respond in terms of function - a title or a specific position. That is not possible for me. In February 1990 I was told I could no longer work due to four chronic health conditions/diseases. Although I did not wish to accept this decision, it became necessary to do so. After fifteen months of waiting out the "system", I was approved for Social Security Disability.

At one time I had been a Writer and Photographer - self-employed but with chronic pain, dizziness, sheer lack of energy, etc., etc. Working either full time or enough hours to support oneself became impossible.

What I have learned is I am still a writer/photographer and can still obtain bylines. One possible reward does not need to be money. I can and do write for my Parish and Soup Kitchen Newsletter, Food Co-op Newsletter, my college alumni magazine, this publication and small newspapers (as in the past).

Also as the spirit moves me, I can sit down at my computer as pain and fatigue allow and write for the pure enjoyment of it. And this too gives me joy and satisfaction. I am a writer and photographer who may one day do that again for money on a part time basis but who obtains personal satisfaction from contributing this God-given gift wherever possible. And that makes me happy!

Alice J. Foley

Some Thoughts

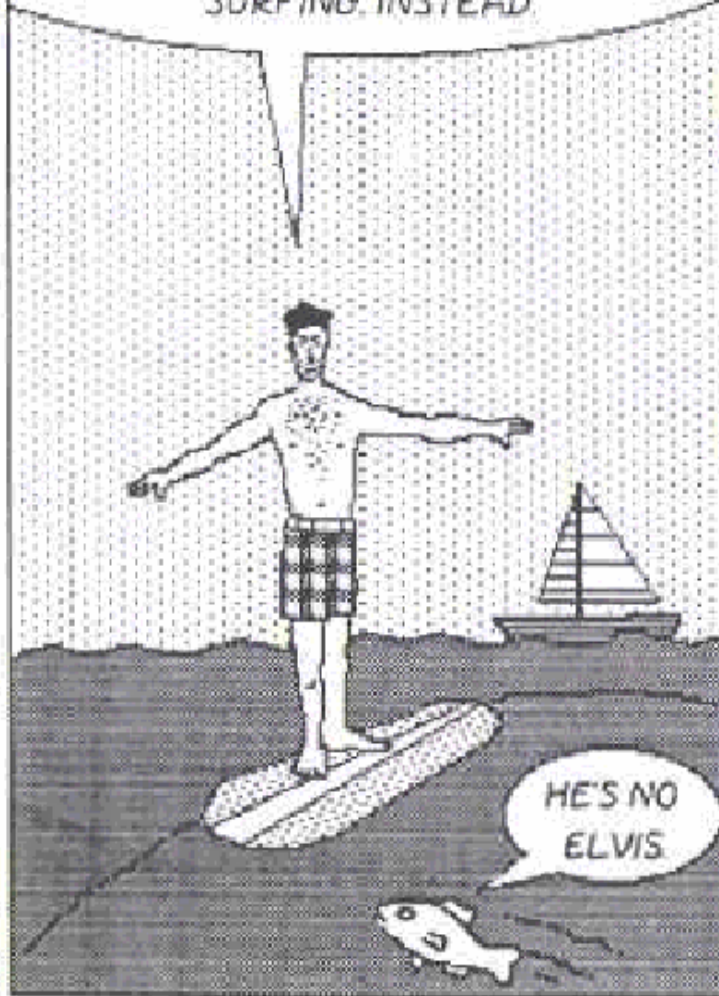
My name is Laura and I have suffered from a debilitating chronic illness for all of my nineteen years. Through all the years of doctors, medicine, and limitations, I have found serenity and joy through my writing.

I am unable to live the exciting and glamorous life I'd like, even the normal, slightly tarnished life most people have is beyond me, but I can create it in my mind, and through my words. Writing creates a place inside myself where I can dream my dreams and scream my frustrations.

It allows the world of emotions I live with, but can't express out loud, to take flight. The love, joy, hope, pain, and fear I feel, can be vented and moved beyond. It enables me to shed any binds that I have around me, and to become happy with the person that I am.

Laura Sutton

THE ANTI BIOTIC TREATMENT WAS
REALLY UNPLEASANT. SO I
THOUGHT I WOULD DRAW MYSELF
SURFING. INSTEAD



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III. Creative Expression: Catching Moments Each Day

Trying to catch moments each day is the least frightening route to take in your writing. It slowly cranks your internal machinery of creative thinking, but does not put pressure on you to produce. Brenda Ueland uses the term "moodling" to describe periods of "long, inefficient, happy idling, dawdling and puttering." She tells us that "good ideas must come welling up into you." However, as one moodles, "put down the little ideas, however insignificant they are." Ueland lovingly calls this process "creative idleness."¹⁰

Creative idleness is an interesting juxtaposition of words. It implies the mind is never truly idle, yet at the same time it recognizes the benefits of just daydreaming. How often have we recognized the lessons of sheer creative idleness? However, we may also hold negative views which criticize it in ourselves and others -- perhaps interpreting it as laziness, lost time, and ineffectiveness. Now is the time to reconsider some of your thoughts on this. Living is not merely doing. The life of the mind is a significant part of our being. And letting the mind creatively wander actually allows us to participate more fully in daily life. Brenda Ueland writes: "Creative power is life itself. It is the Spirit. In fact it is the only important thing about us. The rest of us is legs and stomach, materialistic cravings and fears."¹¹

If it helps, and is possible, have some special places to moodle. In nice weather it might be on a porch, in a park, or in the backyard. If weather or restricted mobility makes such options impossible or rare, try a different setting in your home, or perhaps a different position in bed. When restrictions are severe, you can "think" yourself in a different site as you begin. For example, picture yourself enjoying a rocker on a country porch in the August heat, or pretend you're stretched out on a hammock on a gentle spring day, or imagine sitting in a favorite hiding spot in a city park. Other possible routes to offer you a place to moodle without physically changing locations might include: a new art piece or poster on the wall; a collection of photos of different places; a file of colorful (or black and white) clips from newspapers and magazines which offer varied retreats or exotic settings; or, a video of ocean scenes, Alaska, streets of Munich, or other intriguing places. For some, music may be a key to a change of scenery. There are many ways to create "special places" for moodling.

You can painlessly enter the world of the creative spirit by observing and jotting down even the most simple of descriptions, ideas, or accounts. There is no need in this approach to worry about complete sentences, paragraphs, grammar, or spelling. In catching some moments each day one is exercising, albeit in an unaccustomed way. Here and there throughout the day (or night!), you may find yourself leaving a few words on any number of topics: people, nature, humor, food, still life, patterns, emotions, events, thoughts, symptoms, tasks attempted, memories, imaginary scenarios, mishaps, visits, the mundane and the unusual, things viewed, read, or heard, and the senses. Any and all of these wanderings contribute to your creative growth. Making an effort each day to capture a few moments through writing (or dictating to scribe or recorder) is important. It spurs on creative growth as we think and learn and live. Not one of these thoughts or writings needs to be a coherent, cohesive whole.

Later, you can find other uses for these captured thoughts. You can integrate them in letters, journals, poems, or stories. One quick idea or observation captured might turn into a detailed writing project at another time. Or, as you work on a piece of writing, you may find a significant use for a few words describing the bedspread pattern! It flows and grows in some interesting and startling ways. But for now, your efforts are aimed at two things: (1) to creatively think, and (2) to write a few basic words capturing a few moments each day. Be certain not to heap pressure on yourself by being a perfectionist or thinking heavily about future projects. These beginning efforts should flow easily without our inner critic or workaholic self nagging us. Aim for the few words. Flow with it. This is creative idleness.

Now, for the fun of it, you may want to acquire a special tool (or several) to approach your moodling periods. For example, you might enjoy a notebook or attractively bound blank book for this purpose. Or, you might try using index cards (one per thought?) filed in your personal index box. Others may prefer a folder for stray pieces of paper, or a three-ring binder for assorted remnants of thoughts. You don't need to utilize any of these accoutrements, but if it eases the way or creates more enjoyment, do try it.

Think about your approach to moodling. You may like to do several short sessions (ten minutes?) scattered recklessly throughout the day. Or, you may find that one or more short periods can be planned routinely. Perhaps it's a good time to write following physical therapy or exercise. Or, perhaps you choose a period when you're most intellectually alert. Depending on your physical condition, this may be a predictable time of day. For others,

a "duller" time may be the choice for moodling. In some cases, people might find one modest session each day is the best set-up. And, perhaps some can manage a full hour or more of creative thinking and catching the moments through writing. Regardless of your choice, always try to do the following:

- Create a special place (physically or mentally).
- Try to discard all other anxieties or duties.
- Jot down the words -- no matter how inconsequential (or record them, etc.).
- Do not put pressure on yourself to produce.
- Think idly, observe creatively, let ideas flow, write.

The following examples and exercises are meant to be a stimulus to creative idling. Don't feel locked in to any of the suggestions. However, one or more may help you as you begin. They may also provide a catalyst for those days when ideas are sluggish. Sometimes one tiny spark can lead to a long period of creative thinking -- with a jumble of words to follow.

EXERCISES: Possibilities to spark periods of moodling -- and jotting of ideas.

- A room. (Consider items, moods, memories, personalities; focus on a particular point -- still life, smells, sounds, connections, colors; or note the familiar in relation to you.)
- Eyes closed for 5-10 minutes (try indoors or outdoors). Flow with thoughts, visions, sounds, smells, touch, taste, and more.
- Wallpaper patterns or the patterns found in ceiling, tile, floor, walls, clothing, towel, sheets, bedspread, or rugs. Looking for patterns can offer many fields for creative wanderings.

EXAMPLE: Desktop considered for 10 minutes

Written in notebook:

- Black on so many items
- Print on some old ads
- Top of paper clip holder
- Small streamline stapler
- Type from old electric typewriter
- Some pens and pencils in casino cup
(casino cup for slot machine winnings)

Although drawing not a skill -- one yellow pencil lying on a clean spot looks ripe for a sketch -- maybe I should try? -- lines and color and sharp point are easy and fascinating

Why do the pencil shavings peeking through the smoked (black again) pencil sharpener look fragile, lonely, forgotten? Hmm. Pencil sharpener is a tiny portable one -- reminds me of grammar school, pencil boxes (does anyone use them anymore?), erasers (big fat ones), and a special smell . . . a school smell

Desktop is messy, yet not in disarray -- can a desktop look affectionate, friendly, companionable? It sort of looks that way.

64 Crayola Crayons -- Who does this belong to? Why are they on this desk?

Just checked -- looks like there are 63 in there. No, 62. But, one is missing its head. Her dress stands above her neck. Others have worked pretty hard, Only one looks a virgin. Lots of variety with other tips -- rounded, dull, semi-pointed, worn on one side, flat! Each assumes a personality related to shape. Tired one, pretty one, workaholic one, boring one, older one. A crayon village.

Mind fading now, body extremely weak crayons are worth another look some other day.

- Wander via a window. Thoughtlessly (idly) focus on the scene framed by a particular window, regardless if it frames a brick wall. Note weather, specific images, possible changes from varied angles, and other details.
- Use different inside landscapes as points to ponder. This could include: bureau top; section of kitchen or bathroom counter; desk or table top; piece of electronic equipment (VCR, stereo, clock-radio, microwave); items on shelf (closet, kitchen cabinet, book or display shelf); piano; pile of "junk" on floor, bedside table, chair, or other place; medical equipment; light fixtures; or stuff on your bed.
- Concentrate solely on one sense. Many sessions could be devoted to experiencing and thinking through the sense of smell, for example. Not only note the smells and explore them, but idle with ideas, connections, and memories they conjure up. Coffee? Furniture polish? Insect spray? Gasoline? Fresh cut grass? Unforgiving perfume of a visitor? Tobacco? Various foods? Wood shavings? Wet earth? A similar process could focus on touch, or hearing, or sight, or taste.
- People (or one person) can be the catalyst for a moodling session. You can meander through one or more in a given period. Take on groups. For example, how about doctors? Consider real doctors, TV and film doctors, doctors in your family, good and bad doctors, doctor stories, or a mythical perfect doctor. Or, focus on one person: a loved one; a person known for a few minutes in a chance encounter; a person encountered only by phone or mail; a passerby (create an entire persona and life from a glimpse); or fictional characters met via reading, viewing, or listening.
- Animals, fish, birds, or insects offer us opportunity for creative thought. Think of the child watching an ant hill for an entire afternoon. Do you have a pet? Can you see birds through the window? Can you sit outdoors and watch the ants on the sidewalk? Do you have an aquarium to contemplate? Photos, TV shows, films, videos, and books may all offer opportunities for lengthy moodling about animals.

- Think and write a few words about actions -- the most basic of activities performed by yourself or others in the past or present is fair game. Do you accomplish a "normally" easy task via numerous accommodations and superhuman effort? Describe. For example, perhaps brushing your teeth requires special strategies and grim determination. Think it through. Moodle. Jot down a few key words and phrases. Consider other actions: running, cooking, swimming, driving a car, gardening, hammering, digging, conversing, and more.
- Moodle through feelings. Write down the fragmentary feelings. Perhaps you've suffered a disappointment . . . or you need to ponder some hurt. Let your mind and heart walk you through it. Perhaps you might specifically use a moodling period to contemplate a particular pattern in your responses to conflict, difficulty, or set-backs. Write down the insights (or lack of them!) as ideas flit through a session.
- Some creative explorations of the BIG question: The meaning of life? Or, bring it down to a micro-level: What are the significant elements in your definition of a meaningful life? You may have many unanswered questions to pose to yourself in one or more periods of creative thinking. You may not find all of the solutions, but remember, the examined life is one worth living. Write the shorthand approach to some of the ideas with which you tangle.
- Sometimes the smallest item can be a catalyst to a moodling session: a certain box, a bottle of lotion, a bowl of soup, a fork, a sandal, a fallen twig, a bedpost, and more. Think on. It's never ending.
- Memories are sometimes worthy of retrieval through creative idling. Think back to a childhood escapade. Or, reflect upon an especially memorable moment or scene of the Ha! experiences of life. Recall a crazy encounter or period of heavy laughter. You may choose to examine poignant or sad memories. Through all, think through the memory. Bring it into better focus. Let the thoughts flow. But, be certain to write a few words encapsulating some of your journey. (Many of these wanderings may be great seeds for future writing projects.)

IV. Lists: Keep Going

When you are very tired, drained, constrained, immobile, or facing "writer's block" -- don't give up! Many a writer -- healthy or sick -- has faced the inevitable despair of feeling there is not a scrap of creative spirit from which to draw. Being ill compounds the problem, but it does not have to make it a deep, dark hole. Take *tiny steps* to alleviate the block or combat the strain of physical symptoms. Do not let your medical problems control every aspect of your daily life. Nurture that creative spirit, even on those dismal days. Remember Bradbury's essay title: "How to Keep and Feed a Muse." Well, we can take on the responsibility of feeding our individual muse. We can slowly restore our creative spirit. We can gently urge it on -- even on the roughest days or in the middle of the meanest blocks.

One of the easiest routes to replenishing an exhausted muse and a depleted physical body is to play with lists. Like catching moments each day, approaching your writing through lists offers a relatively painless way to think creatively. However, there is a bit more structure as you zoom in on a particular topic. Later, these lists (or elements in the lists) might provide the kernel of a larger creative project. But for now, they can offer a zillion benefits to you as you restore a creative spirit. They can provide pleasure and fun or encourage self-therapy. They quickly reward your mind and spirit with the fruits of creative thought. In a matter of a few moments, a dry dead dull period can turn into a feisty list of reflections and images.

Again, do not be overly critical or concern yourself with perfection. Your lists can be a compilation of disconnected words, or phrases, or paragraphs. Go with what comes naturally. It may present itself to you differently on a particular day or given a specific topic. Flow with it as it comes. Raise the stakes higher or lower -- depending upon your energy and interest. Perhaps, for example, you aimed for a goal of ten reasons you hate lima beans. When you began, ten reasons seemed like a long-shot. However, you gleefully ran through nine in a matter of thirty minutes. You're having such fun and the topic is so intriguing, you decide to enlarge the list to fifteen reasons. You have a lot of lima bean memories, stories, and descriptions!

Lists can have some practical purposes as well as the purely creative. Alice, a Philadelphia woman, reminded me that a list does sometimes literally "keep you going" in facing lengthy illness. It might be a basic list of required "to do" items, along with a hopeful list of "maybes." If you keep

these in a small notebook, you will have a testament to your accomplishments at the end of a day. Over a period of weeks and months (even years), you'll be able to reflect on the fullness of your life despite sickness, disability, and limits. Remember to include a writing period on your list regardless of the particular goal (i.e., creative list, catching a moment, journal entry, letter, poem, or others).

Below you will find suggested exercises with the creative list. The number and topics are all flexible. Start wherever you can. If it is a gloomy day, why not interject some humor? If you are down on yourself, why not look at positive experiences? If you are totally baffled, pick something relatively straight-forward to consider. If you need to make sense of your illness or medical procedures, why not break them down in list form?

EXERCISES: A list approach to creative thoughts:

- 25 things that make you laugh, chuckle, or smile.
- 14 satisfying experiences.
- 10 major struggles overcome.
- 9 people in the news who really get on your nerves (and why?).
- 11 quirky people remembered from grammar school, or high school, or college, or a particular job, or a neighborhood, or an organization (or combination of any of above!).
- 20 favorite films, or books, or foods, or cars, or locations, or people, or TV programs, or musical compositions (and why?).
- 50 fluffy, silly, fun fantasies. (Example: conversation between Mother Teresa and Elvis Presley while in a stalled elevator.)
- 28 elements of an ideal community. (Create your own ideas for utopia!)
- 15 of the most petty daily annoyances. (Example: fitted sheets which JUMP off the mattress!)
- 13 of the absolutely worst points about living with your illness. (Catharsis?)
- 19 of the odd and seemingly minor "inconveniences" of daily life with

illness and limits. (Example: one foot always slightly swollen so shoes never feel or look right -- and you were always a shoe person.) Hey, get every little pesty point on paper.

- 44 reasons for avoiding war.
- 1 joyful life event to match your current age in months or years.
- 16 of the understandings or insights gained through the experience of long-term sickness and homeboundness. (Example: learned to be more interdependent.)
- 21 steps of a particular medical procedure, including words of medical personnel, your physical and emotional responses, odd circumstances, and other points.
- 30 warm fuzzies. (This is a list that cheers you and makes you feel okay. It is one that you take out on low days for its affirmation and positive thoughts.)
- 7 reasons you are afraid of _____. (You fill in the blank. The dark? Raw sores? Creaking floors?)
- 14 ways to use a particularly intriguing word. Perhaps you noted such a word in previous reading or through a radio, TV, or film program. Or, thumb through a dictionary and select one. Thus you create your own word game. (Here are a few possible words to wander with: indolent, shill, turgid, plethora, asymmetry, coupling, effulgence, zany, or essential.)

V. Journaling v. Maintaining a Diary

Keeping a diary or journal (or both) can be instructive, useful, and relatively easy. Either one or both also contribute to our creative spirit. The differences between the two are somewhat arbitrary and academic. A diary typically denotes a daily record of one's experiences. Entries are often brief and to the point, with little insight or personal reflection included. Journals, on the other hand, offer opportunities for journeying through our interiors. They are often considered a place for reflection, commentary, soul-searching, and private wanderings. One can also write a mix of the two -- a reflective diary or a journal with diary elements. (In fact, I keep one which follows this last pattern.)

A journal or diary (or hybrid) may be kept for one specific reason or as a broad account of many activities and thoughts. Indeed, some people keep several journals or diaries active at the same time -- for different purposes. One possibility for a specific journal or diary may be one that solely relates symptoms and attendant treatments, emotions, activity levels, and related concerns. A diary form may be quite succinct in this regard. A day's entry may simply state: May 5, 8:00 p.m. -- chemo in a.m., rest & sleep much of remainder of day, very low, but tolerated better than last week. A journal entry covering the same day would differ -- by probing the day's events and your inner thoughts in more detail. For example, perhaps you'd write about your feelings at the hospital. Maybe they were quite different from earlier sessions and marked some kind of turning point. Or perhaps you meander in this day's entry through a long written journey regarding the symptoms of your cancer.

Journaling is a journey which provides a comfortable and safe place to explore innermost thoughts. There is absolutely no pressure to create for others. There is no need to be concerned with elements of form. Journals provide a venue for exorcising the WORST and most destructive elements of ourselves. By putting on paper (or expressing via recording) sad, angry, mean, and BAD thoughts, we diminish and gradually expel them. We come to new understandings by talking them through on paper and in our heads. Thus one potential benefit of journaling is a creative form of healing (or self-therapy). Journaling is not the sole format for writing through emotions, but many people have found it to be the most fruitful and accessible form.

Neither a diary nor a journal needs to be kept simply to chart the glories and disasters of your health! If you keep a broad journal, the reflections on your illness or disability may wax and wane -- sometimes disappearing altogether for one or more entries. Some people, including Mary Ann, have confided that they avoid discussion of symptoms and constraints in their journal. (Note that some of these same folks often keep a simple symptom diary, however.) Mike maintains one journal as an escape hatch from illness and rotten days. He keeps it as an "up" place where he can retreat and focus on the positive. On days when he feels too weak and sick to write, or if his spirits are at a low point, he can read some of his previous accounts. This has the effect of positive reinforcement and soothes his physical and emotional pain.

Some journals may be kept to explore creative ideas on a host of subjects: philosophy, literature, reflections on books and films, relationships, nature,

and world events. The subject matter is inexhaustible. In fact it is your interests that define the subjects for your journal or journals. Note that in pursuing interests, an illness can be defied. Certainly, you can no longer scale mountains -- but you can still read, think, and write about mountain-climbing. In some cases, you may gain an insight on mountain-climbing not evident to you when healthy.

You can use a journal to problem-solve. Simply "throwing around" ideas can be enlightening. Seeing (or hearing) some of your thoughts on a problem can clarify issues and lead to solutions. These might be important but relatively small problems specific to you. (For example, how can I manage some alert and valuable time to assist with my children's homework each day?) Or, an issue may require action in a large way. (For example, community and political advocacy may be something you'd like to do, but you need to evaluate how you can help.) Writing through the problems can often lead to a visible outcome. Thinking and writing are beneficial to you as you sort through conflicting desires and constraints. A journal offers perspective. It replaces unproductive and draining fretting. Be patient, however, as it is a gradual process!

Many people write in their journal of daily activities, family life, challenges, high and low points, and all of the oddities encompassed in life. One day, your writing may focus on a drooping flower -- using that as an exploration of the mood in the house over the last few days. Perhaps while pondering the various factors leading to irritable sad spirits, you come to an understanding of its roots. In addition, your reflections may move on to create ways to break through this particular hump. On another day, you may write about the sterling qualities of an old friend who called you earlier. Or you may choose to consider the frantic and silly actions of your cat. Or you may chart your ideas and emotions as the world changes -- the fall of the Berlin wall? Race riots? The depletion of the ozone layer? Bombs in Atlanta? Recent elections?

Your journal reflects your journey. Write when and where you find it appropriate. Some people write on a regular basis -- every evening? Others try to manage a once-per-week session. Some write more sporadically. (I am in the sporadic group.) If you keep a diary, pay attention to its purpose. If it is a charting of your symptoms, it is most helpful if it is kept regularly. This is true for other purposes as well. Depending on your goal, it may have entries several times a day. Or it may be kept on a daily, every-other-day, weekly, or monthly basis. The suggested exercises provide some ideas for getting started with a diary or

journal. As always, remember that creative thinking and writing are a process. It is *in* the process that we come to experience great personal benefit. Indeed, we give a gift to ourselves. Nowhere is this more evident than in the diary or journal.

EXERCISES: Ideas for varied "to-the-point" diaries:

- A plant diary following the changes of indoor or outdoor plant life. (An amaryllis is a wonderful plant to chart through a diary, if this is a new concept for you. You will have great fun watching its quick-changing evolution.)
- A hobby diary charting progress in a new venture or as you continue an old hobby.
- A "connection" diary simply charting contact with friends, family, acquaintances, strangers -- via mail, phone, electronic mail, or in-person visits. (I find this is helpful in remembering when I last wrote to someone. I can check my "mail diary" so I'm sure not to repeat stale news.)
- Outdoor diary noting changes in weather, visuals, sounds, and plants. (Even if your mobility restricts you to a window, you can be connected to the outside world and sensitive to its many changes. Chart it all in a diary.)
- Growth of children and grandchildren or changes in friends. (If you have a baby in the house, a diary charting changes in the first year is well-worth preserving. But also note the incredible changes of others -- regardless if teens, forty-somethings, or near ninety!)
- A feeling diary will briefly note your moods and emotions on a given day or week. This is helpful to chart the course of emotions without in-depth analysis.
- Diary noting tasks attempted and charting successes, gains, and failures. Physical Therapy? New activity? Household chore attempted? (For example, a typical entry might include: Friday, January 22 -- With several rests, I was able to strip bed. Managed entire routine of p.t. Could not attempt walk -- too weak and in pain.)
- Diary itemizing books read, movies/videos watched, music enjoyed, and radio/TV programs of benefit.

- Travel diary of outings and vacations. Include the mundane and the unusual. A trip to the post office may be worthy of mention, depending upon your limits. A quiet break at the shore? A long country drive?
- A basic daily diary -- written at the same time each day -- encompassing highs and lows of day. (See if this fits. Try it for 2-3 weeks to give it a fair chance.)
- Eating diary includes foods relished, new meals tested, amounts tolerated, and so on. If you can cook, it might include new recipes and results.

EXERCISES: Starting points for journals:

- Open your journal with an exploration and reflection on being sick, disabled, and limited. Consider what it has done to you physically, emotionally, and intellectually. Has it altered your personality, your philosophy of life, and your approach to family and friends? Has it affected daily life, income and lifestyle, meaningful and gainful employment or education, physical activity and mobility, relationships, future planning, and social life? What have you learned through your illness or disability? What have been the worst and the best experiences faced? What has helped you persevere? What skills have helped you cope or "manage" your symptoms and constraints?
- Use a time for self-talk. Perhaps you choose to keep one journal solely for a positive, self-affirming monologue, or a dialogue between your inner and outer selves. One approach: I will . . . I will not. (For example: I will do something which makes me laugh each day. I will not let negative thoughts go very far. I'll STOP them, so they cannot control me. And so forth . . .)
- Explore a social or world problem. Choose one which concerns you, or focus on an unfamiliar topic. Do some reading or listening on the issue. Let your journal be a conduit for your ruminations. Teenage pregnancy? Poverty in our cities? Economic power of Japan? The "new map" of Europe? Religious wars? Earthquakes and buildings in California? The changes in family life? A specific piece of state or national legislation? Tracing a Supreme Court decision? Historical roots of national welfare programs? Watch your own ideas evolve as you research and reflect on a specific issue.

- Write about your powerful emotions. Were you extremely angry today? Why? Were you hard on someone? Or, were you unfairly whipping yourself? Were you sad or depressed? Did you face an unusual level of frustration? What were the precipitating factors? How do today's factors parallel other precipitants? Is there some common ground of understanding? Something to be learned to better manage such frustration? Did you identify a personal "red flag" which needed to be diminished, avoided, or handled differently? Did you feel joyous, mirthful, satisfied, loved, silly, generous, or appreciated? Write through the positives and negatives of your inner life. Come to terms with the impact and roots of various emotions.
- Journals, like diaries, may be subject specific. Or, they may utilize a common theme for larger understandings. Some additional routes for journal writing: a nature journal (Have you read Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*?¹²); a relationship journal exploring connections and disconnections among family members, friends, and associates; a creative, imaginative journal -- a safe place to wander with make-believe possibilities -- to try out characters, story outlines, topics for poems and stories, and more; a task journal detailing and reflecting on the meaning of varied challenges -- a hobby? physical abilities? a chore? rehab? gradual resumption of previous work? redirecting of interests to fit health limits? self-care?; a journal of the absurd prompted by crazy predicaments, lunatic news stories, and the ironies of daily living; a memory journal capturing important and basic moments from your past -- learning to tie your shoes, falling in love, a significant illumination and context, a cherished experience; or, a family history journal which reconstructs varied elements of past and present family life. Consider the large and small characters and the major and minor events. Reflect and revitalize your soul. Regardless of direction and focus, your journal or journals foster a creative spirit.

A Testimony

Alice Schwartz wrote to me about the significance of keeping a journal as she cared for her ill son. Her words remind us that loved ones, too, face enormous challenges when a health crisis and long-term illness strike a person. Family and friends are profoundly affected. Alice writes:

I've had a hard time getting this letter written as Paul's injury was so traumatic for our family. It has been two and a half years now and at times it is still difficult talking about it.

The aneurysm, located in his brain, ruptured while he was at his girlfriend's house and my husband and I were out for the evening. Before we even knew anything had happened his girlfriend's mother, a nurse, had him to the hospital and admitted to CCU. Upon rupture he immediately went into a coma, had surgery and remained comatose for almost two weeks.

After surgery, Paul looked so helpless hooked up to all the life support systems. I knew all was being done that could be done, but I, as a mother, could do nothing. This was when I began a journal. I started by writing to Paul telling him what was happening and as I wrote I began to feel I had a part in what was going on and it felt good.

Twelve days later, when he began coming out of the coma, I began to feel I could do something such as hold his hand or talk to him and get a response. I wrote about how things were going and now I, at least, had a part in it. This continued to help my frame of mind and I became a little more relaxed.

When Paul came out of the Critical Care Unit and into the Progressive Care Unit, I was then asked to help with leg and arm movements to aid in his physical therapy program that had been set up for him. It hurt him to move and it hurt me to have to do it for him.

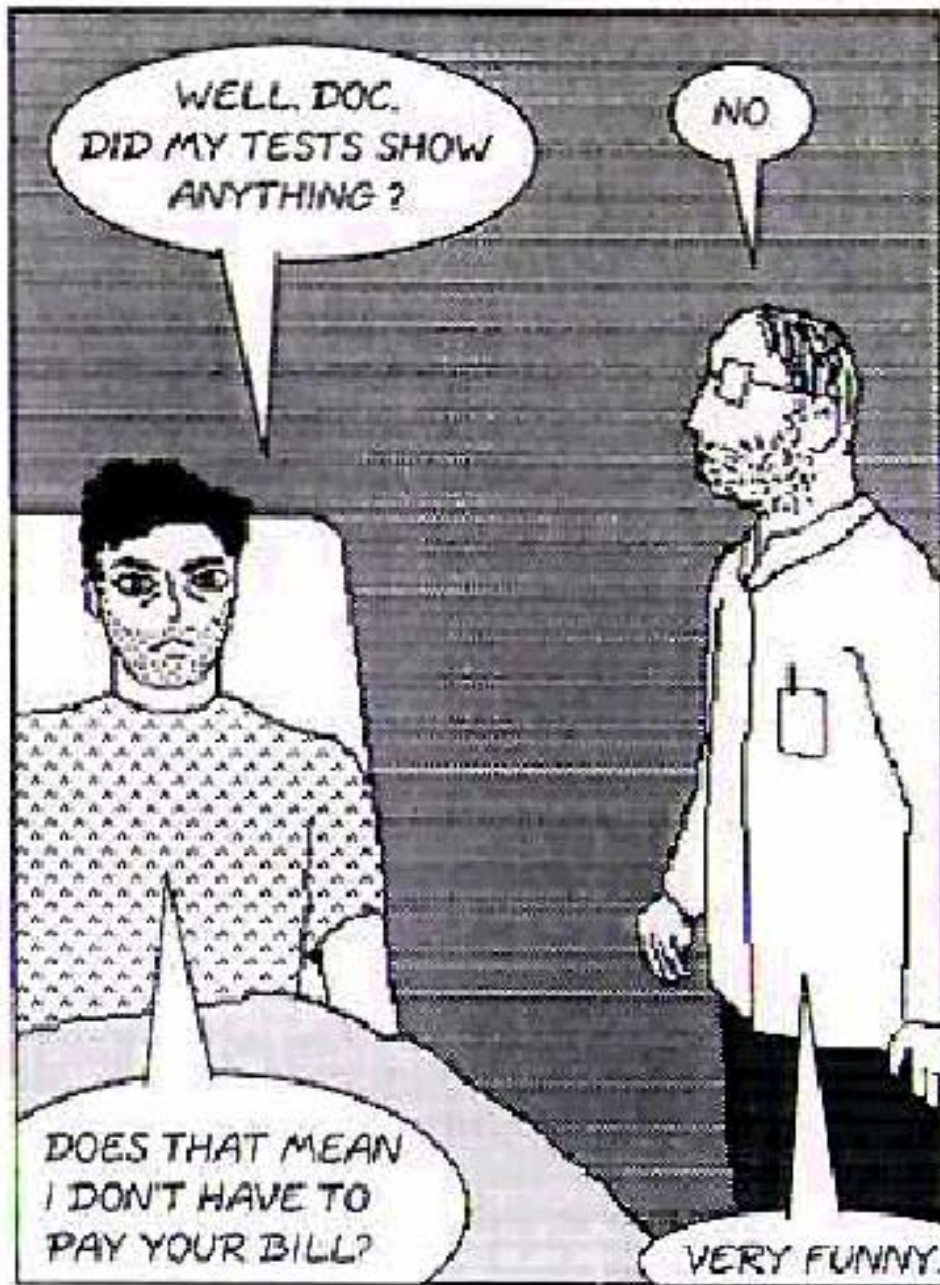
There were days when we cried together, they were tears of pain and they were good tears knowing that we were starting on the road to recovery. At this point my writing helped me see the progress he was making and how far he had already come.

Paul was transferred to a Rehabilitation Center a little over a month later and within two and a half weeks he was discharged home as an outpatient. After three and a half months of occupational and physical therapy, as an outpatient, he was discharged from their care. I did a lot of his therapy with him at home and I finally began to realize I had a handle on things again. Not only with him but with my own life as well.

If I had not been writing in my journal I don't know if I would have done as well coping with his illness.

Today, Paul is a happy and healthy 20 year old college student with a part-time job. He hopes to work in the field of computer information when he graduates.

Alice Schwartz



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VI. Letterwriting: The Lost Art

Letterwriting is often neglected for consideration as a creative act. However, when one reflects upon the ideas, actions, and images conveyed via the letter, it is clear it provides a worthy vehicle for creative thinking and expressing. Read through the precious letters exchanged between John and Abigail Adams during the Revolutionary War period. Wander through published collections containing letters of ordinary people -- a goldminer in California, a farm wife in distant Kansas, a college student in the 1920s, a soldier in Vietnam. The resurgence of letterwriting seen in the Gulf War and resurrected through the haunting readings of the PBS masterpiece "The Civil War" underscores the possibilities inherent in this art form.¹³

Distance has often been a prod to letterwriting. Despite the increased cost of postage stamps, letters are far more economical than the telephone. Soldiers, college students, world travelers, separated families, and long-distance lovers have all known the impact of sending and receiving letters. Many of us have looked forward to daily mail delivery in anticipation of fresh news and queries from old and new friends. Unlike phone calls, a letter can be read several times and responded to at our own pace. We can pause, think, consider, add, and continue. Letters are powerful connectors with people in varied situations. In addition, letters document our rituals, thoughts, and actions. (The preserved letters in archives are an important resource for historians.)

Letters are a powerful means of communication. Their concreteness offers opportunities which can surpass the potential of regular conversation. At the same time, letters offer a conduit to discuss and explore the most trivial of thoughts. (For example, a person living abroad and feeling isolated may write home with the most poignant of longings for . . . a good American cheeseburger!) Writing or reading a letter can instigate strong responses: tears of laughter or sadness; pangs of loneliness, warmth, and joy; and empathy for another's difficult struggles. Letters can be used in a variety of situations: to keep in touch with long-distance friends and family; to renew old connections (an old high school friend or former neighbor you've wondered about?); to communicate with geographically close people, using writing as the means; to convey special thoughts via a letter to the person (or persons) with whom you reside -- a spouse, companion, child, parent, sibling, roommate; to advocate for causes and political changes of concern to you; to conduct business of all types (e.g., a letter to a medical-supply company suggesting an improvement needed in a specific wheelchair);

and, to meet new people through "pen pal" programs or other networks.

In all of these instances, the letter is a means for you (the writer) to express your creative spirit. In many cases, that in itself will be the most significant reward. Writing the letter is food for the spirit. It is an act of courage, renewal, growth, and connection. In some situations, however, letterwriting will carry other rewards. It may re-ignite an old friendship or ignite a new one. It may crystalize a gripe or a need to a loved one -- acting as a mediation tool and instrument of healing in a relationship. It may educate someone on a particular issue. It may, indeed, instigate a change. In addition, the letterwriter may similarly be affected by letters received -- gaining new insights, friendships, and sources of support.

As with other forms of writing, the letter may serve as a means of self-therapy. Some people find it offers a more potent avenue of catharsis, simply because the thoughts are meant to be shared. You can say the most awful things about yourself and others in a letter -- and someone else "hears" you. It is off your chest. For those of us isolated by illness, letterwriting offers another engagement with the outside. Here we share a bond with prisoners, soldiers, and others confined by distance and circumstances from a more mainstream existence. We continue conversations with the world from our small corner.

In my worst periods of sickness, letterwriting was my most important physical and intellectual endeavor. For me, it created a "thin blue line" between hope or despair, connection or isolation, and affirmation or dissolution. It truly worked miracles. It was one of the few things I could attempt with a drained, unalert mind and a debilitated body. If I made atrocious spelling or grammatical errors, so what? The person on the other end would listen anyway as I spilled out my feelings and pain. And, the pouring out into the letter was emotionally healing over time. Also, the letters, notes, and cards received were instrumental in continuing the dialogue and maintaining sanity and emotional balance. I not only preserved contacts with friends and family, I renewed some shaky ties and gained some new mail friends. In a few of the roughest moments, I wrote to my husband to confront some tortuous entanglement of heart, body, mind, and relationship. It's hell being sick, isolated, and limited. (Has anyone mentioned it is also confusing and frustrating?) Letterwriting can help save our spirits while traipsing through hell.

If you decide to try letterwriting, don't worry if you're rusty, or out of shape, or a novice. Your letters may take the form you dictate. Let them move

along in any direction. Never feel compelled to complete a letter in one sitting. Sometimes I write a letter over several days or even a week before mailing it. Don't be distraught over length -- a few sentences may be all you need, while another may frantically rush through 20 pages. Sort out your correspondents. Think about those to whom you are writing -- recognize their needs and concerns. One way to escape from our own pain and limitations is to be involved with and care for others. It tears us away from the understandable but dangerous mode of self-absorption caused by the pain, sickness, losses, and limits of poor health.

In some cases, you may decide to write letters to a specific person, but choose to not mail them (e.g., your ex-spouse, a mean 3rd grade teacher, an ornery nurse, or an admired co-worker). The reasons for refraining from mailing a letter are many. (I have one written several years ago -- never mailed, but preserved.) However, the act of writing the letter may promote some form of discovery and resolution. Other letters may also be written and not sent: to God; a fairy godmother; a deceased loved one; a hoped-for child; a spirit; or an imaginary friend. Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* gives vivid examples of the potential for letterwriting to God and others.¹⁴

Several people shared stories with me regarding the importance of letterwriting while homebound and ill. One person developed elaborate pen pal networks around the world. She found herself learning about varied cultures and individuals via the mail. She found herself re-thinking her own place in American culture. Letters transported her away from debilitating illness. She delighted in checking each day's mail. A cancer patient bravely wrote to an author of a book on healing and the spirit. Not only was a supportive correspondence the result, but they met and became personal friends! Still another person recounted writing letters along the slow and scary path of recovery from a lengthy and severe bout of depression. Initially, letterwriting seemed impossible -- only attempted through inner force. Slowly, it became easier to communicate through letters. Letters turned into a barometer of emotional healing. The painfully forced early efforts were gradually repaid in multiple rewards of well-being. Thus, letterwriting can offer many benefits, all of which help sustain our creative and emotional spirits.

EXERCISES: Some starting points for letters:

- Write to an old friend or acquaintance you've wondered about -- someone with whom you've lost touch for a time.
- Connect via a letter with long-distance family members. Catch up on news of others while sharing your experiences.
- Feeling extremely frustrated about a relationship with a caretaker? Try to write through your perceptions and discontent via letter.
- Develop a network of new "pen pals." Depending on your needs and interests, you might include others coping with the same health problem. (Roxanne Black, a spirited young woman with lupus, founded the pen pal exchange Friends' Health Connection for just this purpose.) Patient and advocacy newsletters often include a letters exchange. Or, you might try networking through other sources -- prisons, clubs, churches, military, and pen pal associations.¹⁵ (For some pen pal services, see pages 39 & 40.)
- Write an occasional group letter filling in several people at the same time. It can be copied, with personal letters attached to each one. This reduces your effort and assists in streamlining if you have numerous correspondents. The group letter can be a news-type approach, thus reducing the need for you to continually repeat the same ground. However, the personal letters will maintain the dialogue. Both offer opportunities for creative expression.
- Use the letter with geographically close friends. Drop a "thank you" to friends who have recently visited, sent lovely cards, or phoned. Let them know how important they are and add a few reflective thoughts along with some news.
- Write a letter to God or a higher spirit. (An angel, fairy godmother, genie, or sprite?)
- Develop an activist stance via a letterwriting campaign. You can address issues of deep concern. This may include your illness or disability. (Write to members of Congress urging more research monies, for example.) Your activist letters may address a broad array of political and societal issues: education, poverty, displaced homemakers, HMOs and health care, Social Security legislation, town library, crime, corporate responsibility (or lack thereof), eldercare, the environment, and others.

- Use letters to educate others. Respond to an article or advertisement in a newspaper or magazine which instigated strong feelings. Compose a letter to the editor or advertiser on the subject. (I recently drafted a letter to a major magazine opposing the inclusion of an advertisement which preys on the vulnerabilities of the sick and disabled. It offered a "cure" for just about everything -- the equivalent of the nineteenth-century snake-oil salesman! I intend to follow up with letters to a consumer advocacy office and Better Business Bureau.)
- Have you admired a particular book, film, recording, or television show? Or, have you been thoroughly disgusted and offended by something in the media? Detail your thoughts in an organized manner via a letter.
- Try a letter to your children (or other loved ones) to be opened at a later date. Maybe it is for your five-year-old when he turns twenty. Or, maybe it is only for their eyes after your death.
- Write love letters. Write them to people you cherish. Let them know RIGHT NOW.
- Write letters to those who are no longer here . . . a high school beau, a spouse or lover, an eccentric great-great aunt, or a parent.
- Set a goal with your letterwriting. One personal letter per week? One "business" letter every other week? One group letter every other month to 10 correspondents? One letter each week to another person who is ill and homebound -- even if it is only a few sentences?

Pen Pal Organizations

Worldwide Friendship International
 P.O. Box 562
 Randallstown, MD 21133
 (Home and abroad, all ages.)

Friends' Health Connection
 P.O. Box 114
 New Brunswick, NJ 08903
 Toll-free 800/483-7436
 Web: www.friendshealthconnection.org
 (National non-profit network connecting people with similar health

problems; open to all ages; customized one-to-one mutual support.)

Prison Pen Pals

P.O. Box 120074

Fort Lauderdale, FL 33312

(Agree to write and keep prisoner in touch with world. Send SASE for guidelines and lists. Use caution.)

Children's Hopes and Dreams Foundation

Pen Pal Program

280 Route 46

Dover, NJ 07801-3633

(For young people worldwide ages 5-17, with life-threatening or chronic illness and disability.)

Voicependence Club

2373 South York Street

Denver, CO 80210

(Blind and sighted persons exchange ideas via audiotape. Ideal for those unable to write.)

VII. Poetry: Fragments and Wholes

Have you ever attempted to express yourself through poetry? Have you captured the beauty of an iris in a few poetic lines? Have you distilled some feelings or portrayed an odd situation in a short poem? If your answer is no, it's time to start a new identity as a poet. If your answer is yes, but a long time ago, make now an opportunity to revitalize this craft. If you've written poetry throughout your life, you have the outlet readily available to you. You now can tackle writing under new conditions, while perfecting and experimenting with your style. Poetry offers another avenue to maintain and nurture a creative spirit while sick and restricted. It is accessible to everyone.

Poetry comes in a variety of styles and forms. The subject matter (content) is never ending. Familiarize yourself with poetry by reading. Listen to poets on CD or tape. Explore collections of varied poets. Include the obscure (or little known) as well as some of the giants. Be sure to acquaint yourself with the work of some contemporary poets. It can be useful, inspiring, and pleasurable to share the reading aloud of poems with a companion, alternating the listening and reading roles if possible. The reading and listening will help you grow and learn about multiple directions. Your explorations should destroy any old stereotypes you might hold regarding rhyme, meter, form, or appropriate subject. The search feeds your creative muse.

Perhaps you'd like to play within a fixed form, such as a haiku or a sonnet. Or, perhaps you'd like to write in a more modern style of free verse. Maybe you are contemplating the silly limerick or a rock-style love ballad. All of these are worthwhile forays and beneficial to your creative spirit. If, by chance, you have a distaste for poetry rooted in horrible old classroom experiences, you will find that reading widely will open a new world of poetry for you.

Untitled

Sometimes people watch
Every word I say
Trying to guess
Who I am

Sometimes people watch
Every step I take

Trying to guess
Where I'm heading

Sometimes people watch
Everything I do
Trying to guess
Why I left

Laura Sutton

Be sure to experiment. Try different styles and many subjects. I recommend a delightful and informative slim volume to you: John Hollander, *Rhyme's Reason: A Guide to English Verse*.¹⁶ The main text runs only sixty-six pages -- and this is the new, enlarged edition! Hollander is not only succinct, he has a charming sense of humor evident throughout the book. (If your intellect is dull and confused because of illness or medication, a few areas may be difficult. However, take it in slow reasonable doses. You'll gain numerous insights.)

John Hollander gently guides you through the main forms of verse: pure accentual, accentual-syllabic, pure syllabic, free verse, and quantitative verse. He assists you in quickly understanding the intricacies of varied meters (iambic pentameter, anapest, dactyl, et al.). Hollander neatly describes the numerous forms of verse and rhyme utilizing original and chuckle-evoking examples. (Note couplets, quatrains, sonnets, and others. Identify alliteration, assonance, sight-rhyme, and internal rhyme.) Limericks, blues, sestinas, and ballads are all covered in *Rhyme's Reason*. And, the material is clearly explained for both the novice and those who once knew this stuff! Hollander's book is not the only good introduction to the mechanics of poetry. Look at others, too. I highly recommend *Rhyme's Reason*, however, because of its brevity, humor, and accessibility. If you are looking for credentials, Dr. Hollander is a Yale University professor and respected scholar.

Don't let the varied terms frighten you. Depending upon your background, they might represent an unknown world, or resurrect a long-ago classroom exercise. Regardless of positive or negative past reactions, poetry can now offer you many creative possibilities. Whether reading, listening to, or writing poetry, you will develop a better foundation in the art. Thus you will nurture a finer appreciation of it. A friend told me he never liked poetry until he attended his first poetry reading at age thirty. His physical, emotional, and intellectual reaction was one of astonishment and joy. Listening to the

poet enriched his senses and gave him a life-long appreciation of poetry. It promoted a creative spirit previously untapped.

Amy E. Laub shared an interesting account of pay-offs from writing poetry. She suffered a ruptured lumbar disc which required surgery at a fairly young age. She was in extreme pain and homebound for a lengthy period. Amy found writing to be "a safety valve for frustration. One particular poem began on an 'endless' afternoon as disjointed fragments, which were then set aside." As the weeks crept by, she "added bits and pieces to the original thoughts, trying to capture her difficult experience. The poem gradually gained shape and momentum as recovery progressed." Amy was rewarded in spirit from the effort. In addition, she placed first and earned \$700.00 in a local poetry contest. The money was desperately needed because of loss of income and mounting expenses.

Circle

My days these days are slab and slow, pages
of rock brittle and riddled from ages
of slow shifting, settle, and seep.
Hairline flaws web, splitting deep
and deeper. Minute after minute blinks and
crumbles into night-scratching sand.

It is dry. It is winter. I am lying
beside my damaged spine, trying
hard, trying not, to claim as mine
these boulders, these vertebrae, scattered from line:
insular, separately strewn and shy,
like shells kids coin words speckled spotted die.

Pain is a circle. It surrounds and it spins.
Its edge is razor. It slices. It stiffens.
It shrinks the world, chanting sharp and sour,
sunless and endless, screeching and claw. The cloud
in my hand is a dangerous gift;
I draw into it, darken, and wait and drift

and become again. Scarred and slowly, slipping again
and again rethreaded and again restrung, and again
I can stride, I can dance and command my armor

inside. The stones have not changed, but now they are
ruby and now they are mica. Beneath and below,
I have sought them, and seized them, and taught them to glow.

Amy E. Laub

Begin your life as a poet NOW. Write, write, write -- right now. Let the thoughts flow. Use some of the suggested subject exercises to get yourself going. Don't worry initially about style or form (unless you prefer the challenge of rigid form). Following the subject exercises are a few style and form exercises. Remember the main point. You are attempting to foster your creative spirit. You will find great joy in seeing a blank sheet of paper transformed into a poem -- *your* poem.

EXERCISES: Possible subjects for poems:

- Childhood memories and experiences are a cache for good subjects. You can focus on triumphs, joys, pains, understandings, and turning points. Some possibilities: first fishing expedition, trek to a haunted house on the edge of town, a stupid "dare", a humbling episode, an early crush, the building of a treehouse, or a typical encounter with a mean neighbor. You can also take an ordinary thing of childhood and craft a poem in its remembrance. Think of baseball bats, piano scales, chocolate brownies, chalkboards, Baby Ruths, shiny patent leather shoes, basketball, stickball, jump-rope, math book, or snow shovel.
- Use old mementos or photographs as the source of topics. These poems could capture a story (real or fictitious), or describe the complex visual representation, or explore emotions evoked.
- Similar to above, but utilize magazine, video, newspaper, or book images to conjure up ideas for your poems. This can be quite absorbing because of your lack of knowledge or personal connection to the subject. Keep a file of clips for this purpose. (I once wrote a poem about nineteenth century mill girls inspired by a book photo of a scrawny, pathetic young girl standing near her machine in a New England textile mill.)
- In-the-moment poems. Write short poems at various times of the week. In each instance, try to capture the essence of how you feel or think in that moment.

Example:

Tuesday, 8:00 a.m.
Hopeful, but struggling
Feeling, yet fighting
 self-pity
Talking to my SELF
Trying to resume balance
 In unfairness
Moving on.

S. Dion

- Try some poems focusing on common items: a pair of socks thrown on the floor, a loud and peculiar clock, an electric outlet, a frayed rug, a ceiling fixture, a cup and saucer, a bowl of morning cereal, a bagel, a bathtub, a pillow, a rocking chair, a hammer, or a toothbrush. There are numerous possibilities. (At one writers' group session, we wrote such items on slips of paper, folded them, and placed them in a bowl. Each person blindly selected one and started writing. From that session I began an interesting poem about nail polish! One compatriot wrote a charming, inspirational poem about an old teacup. By the way, a writers' group can be a real boost. The healthy folks can come to your place once a month. No one has to be a professional -- just interested in writing. You can each share what you choose from any work in progress. You can also alternate a leadership role. That person is responsible for providing two or three creative exercises. This can tap everyone's creative spirit and offer great benefit. Keep the group small. And, don't be afraid to try it. I was very ill at the time I was involved. We met for one and one-half years, to everyone's satisfaction.)
- Funny, crazy poems can be a real release. (Some might fit the definition of "doggerel.") How about a poem (or several) on major and minor everyday gripes -- all with a humorous bent? What of a poem focusing on people, situations, animals, or ideas which never cease to amuse you? Other specific suggestions:
 - ◆ All the reasons I'm annoyed by _____. You fill in the blank. Sugar donuts? Crude people? Phone solicitations? Telephone answering machines with "cute" messages? Politicians? TV commercials? Madonna (the singer)? Arrogant

neighbor? Flaws in new clothing? Remember to see the light side!

- ◆ The silliness of being ill and confined. (There must be elements suitable for a humorous poem. I'd love to read the poems on this!)
 - ◆ All the things they never taught you about _____. (Fill in the blank again. Taxes? Childrearing? In-laws? VCRs? Disability? People? Bosses? Insurance? Time? Roses?)
 - ◆ Funny animal poems. For example: the human-like qualities of your cat, dog, hamster, or fish.
 - ◆ Befuddled moments. "Come-again" incidents? Write about conversations which don't make sense, news stories which are stranger than fiction, or quirky incidents where you just can't figure something or someone out.
 - ◆ There is life after _____. (Another fill-in-the-blank worthy of several tongue-in-cheek poems. Hmmm! There is life after forty? After a failure? After marriage? After illness strikes? After retirement? After first love? After a house in the suburbs? After the kids leave the house?)
- Write a poem using the topic list below. As an exercise, choose one topic and exhaust the subject while trying to develop it as a poem. Try for fifteen minutes on any one topic. Topics: bacon grease, lipstick, ketchup, placemats, screwdriver, silver tarnish, mold on shower curtain, cracks in sidewalk, mailbox, accordion, zero, weather vane, soap, sky at this moment, workbench, garden, noises from street, your hand, lethargy, earthquake, helicopter, or beets. Compile a list of your own. Work from it now and then to restore your creative juices.

EXERCISES: Varied forms -- a few beginning points:

- Haiku, a form of Japanese poetry, offers a delightful and challenging way to create a poem. And the results can be breath-taking -- truly. The subject matter is wide open. The form is simple and brief. Haiku is composed of three lines only. The number of syllables in each line conforms to a 5, 7, 5 pattern. Thus,

Sadly, birds of spring (5)
Look out at the bleak landscape (7)
A March snow is nigh. (5)

S. Dion

- Try a quatrain -- if you like to rhyme. A quatrain has four lines with the first and third lines ending in one rhyme and the second and fourth ending in another.
- Develop some ballad stanzas (four short lines) where only the second and fourth lines need to rhyme.
- Try working with free verse where words are neither metered nor rhymed. Every word and its placement and cadence are certainly important, however. (Set yourself a goal. A rough poem each week?)
- List poems. List poems can actually adopt various guises of meter and rhyme, or they can be in free verse. They provide an interesting route to work with associated words. Pick your subject first. (It might be one from the poetry subject list, or a topic in another guide section, or one of your own choosing.) Perhaps your list will be about blue, or favored numbers, or the day's newspaper headlines, or items on a closet shelf. Brief example:

Crackers

Crisp, salty crackers
Dry, stale crackers
Crackers in my soup
Crackers in the meatloaf
Yellow crackers
Off-white crackers
Crackers in the south
Crackers as in: what Polly wants
Tiny oyster crackers
Orthodox, blessed crackers
Crackers with peanut butter
Crackers with cheese.

S. Dion

Hmmm! Other ideas for list poems?

- Found poems. Sometimes, one sits down with an idea or thought which just flows quickly into a poem. Work with the ideas. Let them spill out. In some ways, you are only the vessel when this happens. It is a wonderful, magical feeling. At a later date, you might want to carefully review and edit the found poem. Another type of found poem can be identified through reading. It is not your creation, of course, but you can play with it and preserve it. A fellow student in a writing class once brought such an item to our attention. He found it in the PERSONALS of a city magazine. He put it in a poetic form -- where it was an extraordinary delight of words and thoughts.

Stained Glass

Some days
my words fall like shards of stained glass
slicing pages until they bleed
from hidden arteries.

Tara Allan

Hope

While there is hope
we write through pain
dance in sorrow
sing across frozen yesterdays
and paint
the shadowed landscapes
of tomorrow.

Only in despair
is there silence.

Tara Allan

VIII. Making Stories: Creating Fiction

Have you ever tried to create a fictional story? It might be brief -- a matter of a few paragraphs. Or, depending on how much you need and want to say, it could evolve into several pages -- perhaps even book length. One

person who has been ill and homebound for many years told me of two completed novels! Both were attempted as creative exercises and practice for the third, which will be sent to a publisher.

One key to writing stories is to recall the pleasures of telling, hearing, or reading stories. Have you enjoyed swapping tales with friends and family? Have you been mesmerized as you watched an involved fictional account revealed through drama or other media? Did you listen in awe as a child to the storyteller in the family -- someone who could always keep everyone hanging on every word? Have you wondered at the unfolding of a story as you read a short piece of fiction or a novel? Did you scare yourself and others recounting a spooky tale of the supernatural at a camp-out, sleepover, or late night get-together? Such recollections can spur you on to write stories.

As with exploring poetry, it's helpful to re-acquaint yourself with various forms of fiction. In some cases, you might try reading in genres unfamiliar to you. Think of all the possibilities: mystery, science fiction, romance, adventure, horror, historical, coming of age, magical, realistic contemporary, animal, and reflective. If you haven't done much reading lately, why not immerse yourself in some recent fiction? Sample the insights and styles of varied writers.

Reading fiction can assist in nourishing your own creative spirit. It's also an absorbing outlet for people confined and ill. If you can't read, try some of the books-on-tape. In addition, having someone read to you can be a beneficial experience. If reading is difficult because of poor vision or other related medical problems, try the large print books. They might offer a solution.

In your first attempts at creating stories, be sure to give time to idle thinking. Remember Brenda Ueland's idea of "moodling." As your thoughts materialize, recklessly spill them out on paper. Don't be concerned about disconnectedness or disjointedness. Remember to avoid criticism of yourself as you move through the early steps of creative process. Writing a story should flow from some of your ideas. Write what you can, when you can. Try to put some daily time aside, however, to focus on a particular story project. The way to write stories is to keep on writing!

It is probably better to start small. And, many people find it easier to write about what they know. For example, if you are working on a story about

first love, set it in the small Michigan town with which you are so familiar. If you are creating an unlikely elderly woman sleuth, model her after your real-life, eccentric Aunt Clara who clearly could handle the exploits of your heroine. If you are intimately aware of the specifics of drag-racing, develop a fictional account of the sport's adventure, passion, and commitments. At some other time, you might leap into areas foreign to you but buttressed by thorough research. If, for example, you choose to tell a tale of the macabre set in seventeenth-century colonial Virginia, do your homework. You want your chilling account to be accurate in its setting and basic historical details. You don't want a New England tribe inaccurately situated on the Virginia shores!

Writing fiction requires some patience. Regardless of length, writing a story involves several steps. The steps are not always neatly compartmentalized, however. They overlap and blend and reassert themselves as you proceed to create. Recognize some active elements of the process: creatively think (to conjure up ideas, characters, moods, plots, locales, and so on); write down thoughts; sort through and clarify ideas; write through the basic story (without your internal critic or censor); review and rethink; develop and rewrite; think some more; let it sit; reread and rethink; rewrite to polish; let it gel; return for more refinement; and add or delete for a final piece.

You will find a process which works for you as you tackle and complete several pieces of fiction. Perhaps you do not profit from jotting down ideas, but move quickly into a first draft. Someone else may benefit from long detailed scribbles which outline the specifics of characters, plot, and settings. Other persons may find a different process which works for them. In addition, your goals and expectations regarding a "finished" story may be quite different. Some people will create stories solely for their own satisfaction, without a great deal of concern regarding the perfection of a final draft. Others will choose to improve their style in a modest way. Still others might choose to share works via publication. They will be aiming for a high level of craft.

Regardless of your final goal, it is so important to recognize the emotional and creative gains made through the *process* of writing fiction. And, it is equally important to remember that writing a story re-quires writing -- not thinking, not merely preparing, and not repeated plannings and postponements. Be sure to write -- start somewhere, anywhere. Get some words out on the paper. Don't worry if it is garbage. Keep at it. For a superior collection of thoughts on the writing process, delve into *Writing*

Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within by Natalie Goldberg.¹⁷ It is guaranteed to instill movement and joy in approaching your writing.

Writing fiction allows you to soar beyond the confines imposed by your poor health. As you create a fictional tale, you defy the boundaries implied by long-term illness and restricted mobility. Through the tapping of your imagination, you create a new world. Regardless of how far you pursue a particular story (both in content and form), you are feeding your creative spirit in the process. Each little step is worthwhile on that count alone. It is also satisfying to give birth to a new character, an unusual plot, and unique thoughts. Writing fiction offers the chance to reconstruct reality. It can open doors to understanding life and its many complex and simple truths. It helps those who are homebound and ill to delve into their imagination and temporarily escape the angst of chronic sickness.

EXERCISES: Some avenues to get you started (if you have trouble writing fiction):

- A coming-of-age story. This can blend your experiences as well as those of others in a fictional account.
- An imaginary world of magical creatures: trolls, fairies, witches, talking animals, magicians, fauns, etc. (Create your very own type of magical characters.)
- A story addressing an understanding of life. Some possibilities: the near loss of a child through injury; the simple joy of fishing, gardening, walking, baking, or some other basic activity; the growth of married love; a turning point in a personal odyssey -- retirement, high school graduation of youngest child, 25th wedding anniversary, divorce or widowhood, or changing gears in career and work; and, a mystical, unusual experience -- a miraculous moment, an unusual and meaningful contact with a stranger, or a point of illumination.
- A story of tension, human pain, and humanness. Incorporate the details of familiar settings, occupations, and routines. For example, if you spent twenty years operating a soybean farm, use that as the riveting backdrop for your account of a marriage facing change. Or, if you've noticed every detail of a local old-fashioned pharmacy, use it as the setting for a robbery which changes the perceptions of all involved: customers, pharmacist, clerk, cop, and adolescent robber. Or, if you're a jigsaw puzzle enthusiast, develop a story line of a

character obsessed by resolving the case of the missing puzzle piece. Other ideas? Try to take what you know and use it as a solid background for a work of fiction.

- Write a fictional tale of sickness or disability which instructs the reader on insights gained from the experience. (You'll have lots to draw from on this significant subject.)
- The home life and activities of a bird family -- especially one who chooses strange houses, like the engine of a caterer's truck!
- A mystery. The possibilities are endless: children sleuthing; armchair (sick? handicapped?) sleuth; hardened, down-and-out detective; wild woman nurse thrown into a mystery through disappearance of trucker husband; or an unlikely timid accountant-sleuth. Mysteries are ever popular. Browse through selections of recent titles. Enjoy as you read . . . and write!
- Romance. Dream on. Another area of massive public interest. An absorbing romance tale can take place in the most ordinary of settings -- or, in the fantastic.
- Adventure. I don't know where to start, but you might have an abiding interest in: revolution, the West, intrigue and espionage, high-risk mountain climbing, space, cutthroat politics, motorcycle maniacs, underground radicals (of any persuasion), a ladies auxiliary caught in a hilarious escapade to uncover corruption in the community, or a cops-and-crime saga.

IX. Non-Fiction: Straight Facts?

Your desire to write might include or focus on non-fiction. There are so many areas to consider: biography, history, essays or articles on any number of current political or social issues, autobiography, science and technology, and others. You can discuss the lowly potato, or the politics of your state, or a local 18th-century historical event, or your tenement childhood, or the nuances of living with multiple sclerosis, or the activity level of four-year-olds. You can try reviewing new books, television shows, films, recordings, or museum exhibits. Any or all of these attempts might initially begin in a journal, a letter, or a list, or in your notebooks catching moments each day. Or, you just might be piqued by an issue or topic and delve into a piece right now. (I recently used this last approach in writing and publishing a 13-point essay on coping skills for the chronically ill.)

Writing non-fiction doesn't mean you have to be boring. It also does not mean you stifle creativity and thought. Regardless of the type of topic, you'll have lots of room to creatively think and develop ideas. After all, your essay on the importance and beauty of tomatoes in garden salads will make others envious (not to mention hungry) for those luscious, home-grown, deep-red tomatoes!

You have great power in presenting facts, opinions, and feelings through non-fiction. For instance, an article published or shared on a particular topic can educate or persuade others. Some specific possibilities include: rodents, skin cancer, cooking with sage, a new technology, wetlands preservation, impact of state budget on property tax, a new musician, a dangerous intersection, ethnic customs, monster trucks, or a local historic site. A non-fiction piece can probe human emotions causing the reader to laugh, cry, commiserate, or smile. An insightful essay can lead others to reconsider entrenched modes of thinking or to address previously overlooked angles. It can instigate change. In the process of writing non-fiction, you sharpen your own ideas and incite your creative spirit.

Try submitting short articles to a small local newspaper or weekly shopper. Or, submit an appropriate article to a specialty magazine or association newsletter. Be certain to fulfill any submission requirements, if applicable. (For example, a certain hobby magazine requests 3 copies with specific form requirements.) There is a great sense of accomplishment and pleasure gained by sharing your ideas through publication.

Perhaps you can harness some energy and offer to write occasionally for a

publication. Church bulletins, for example, often desire volunteer writers and editors. Other small, local newsletters or papers might offer similar opportunities. If you're enthused and knowledgeable about a specific topic which fits neatly into a larger specialty magazine, try seeking a connection with it. For example, your background in model railroading makes you a great candidate to write for a model railroad newsletter. Or, your specific experience as a patient and writer can greatly benefit a patient magazine or newsletter. Such publications rely on the generosity of volunteers. For some of you, a large notebook may be your sole venue for non-fiction writing. Perhaps sections are photocopied to share with a small group of friends and family. This private (or semi-private) writing of non-fiction continues to offer you a conduit for maintaining a creative spirit. You are in constant touch with new ideas, intellectual growth, and creative thinking.

Regardless of the direction you take with non-fiction, you will gain enormous benefits. Write on a variety of subjects. As with your other writing, you should let your ideas flow. Don't worry about style and form at the outset. Get those first words on paper. Later, you'll review and consider pruning, adding, clarifying, and changing. At your own pace, you'll polish some essays into treasured accomplishments. Throughout the many steps, you'll feed your creative muse.

EXERCISES: Some suggestions for non-fiction:

- Essay on a special "trick" of yours. Possibilities: keeping raccoons out of garbage cans; never-miss yeast bread; fighting bathroom mold; strategy for approaching a difficult situation or person; feeding roses or a finicky child(!); shoveling snow (or a trick for getting someone else to do it); grabbing things when physically restricted; or keeping the car in top condition.
- Article on resilience of the human spirit based on a highly specific, factual illustration.
- A short biographical account or anecdote regarding either a famous or little known person. This could range from Winston Churchill to your great-aunt Mary.
- A short article on something of great interest to you. Build on your warehouse of knowledge. Topics are determined by you, but never underestimate the worth of a topic. Table saws? Cats? Rug-braiding? Paper dolls? Croatia? Home-brewing of beer? Coffee tasting? Automobile history? County-fair judging? Look back at

topics listed or covered in your notebooks, journals, or letters. Develop some in a more formal way. Perhaps a topic addressed in your fiction also lends itself to a non-fiction account. For example, you wrote a fictional story about the disappearance of a prize-winning horse. Your love of horses also directs you to do a straight news piece on the local harness races.

- Try writing a personal family history. It could be an integrated account of several generations or a collection of "sketches" of varied family characters. You could also attempt your autobiography.
- Do a research piece on a topic unfamiliar to you. It might involve reading, phone-calling, and using other media -- depending on your limits. Think creatively! If you're writing about a school board controversy, seek varied sources. If you're exploring the rise of car theft, talk to some authorities.
- Stumped? Here are some potential timed non-fiction pieces. Write as fast and furiously as you can for 10 minutes on one of the topics below. Add to this list and go back to it when you feel uninspired or frustrated with writing. Then, write for another 10 minutes on one topic. It will move the spirit.
 - ◆ Describe the worst meal you've had.
 - ◆ Reflect on a news story in today's paper. Pick one quickly and go.
 - ◆ Write a "How to." Some choices:
 - How to tie shoes.
 - How to bathe your hamster.
 - How to avoid rudeness.
 - How to build a simple birdhouse.
 - How to _____ , (Fill in blank.)
 - ◆ Write a portrait. Describe in detail: your mother's face; your back porch; a tea; a neighborhood misanthrope; pumpkin pie; a decaying tree; a toe; or a friendly bird. (Remember to write fast and furiously on one topic for a full 10 minutes.)

- ◆ Select a past birthday. Sixteen? Sixty? Seven? Twenty-one? Discuss events, feelings, and ideas about it.

- ◆ Write about one of your interests or passions (former or present). For example: Darts. Hunting. Swimming. Jump-rope. Baking. Sailing. Fishing. Hiking. Gardening. Watching pro football or college hoops.

- ◆ Add ideas to your STUMPED list for future dead-end periods:
 - _____
 - _____
 - _____
 - _____
 - _____
 - _____
 - _____



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X. Closing Thoughts

Almost a month has passed since I worked on section nine. I needed time away from this project. I moved in some other directions and wrote two brief essays. One of the essays was a serious book review of a new medical history. It was a difficult read and a challenging analysis. The other essay was light -- addressing the craziness of living through tough northern Wisconsin winters. Although I felt positive about both efforts, I was more pleased with the final copy of the book review. Indeed, the winter essay is definitely a work-in-progress. In addition to these two essay attempts, I managed to make a few entries in my journal and to write several lengthy personal letters. The proclivity toward letterwriting is an indicator of my physical health. On the very sick days, it tends to be the easiest way for me to keep pen to paper. Often it is done in bed, or while resting on the couch, or outdoors in a lounge chair. Frankly, I've had several bad weeks with some excessively sick days and nights.

As the length of this heavy symptom period dragged on, I started to feel frustrated at my inability to spend a few minutes on this last section. I tried to be kind to myself recognizing that one cannot always do just what one wants. I made some half-steps by slowly reading through the earlier drafts, making editorial changes, and creating a "to do" list for minor elements (checking footnotes, contributor list, acknowledgments, etc.). I patted myself on the back for hanging in there regardless of severity of sickness and the inevitable emotional lows. I reminded myself that I was still writing, even if the project was not in focus for several weeks. I gave myself words of hope and confidence (not always with stunning success, but a positive message nonetheless). In short, I persevered and maintained a creative spirit through writing, albeit in varied forms and directions.

There is a lesson here for me and for you. Don't get stuck with a specific idea or project. Let it go now and then, if it seems impossible to write on that piece. Give yourself the loving permission to create in another direction. If your mind is fatigued and fuzzy, write just a little on something which comes easy. For me, this is a personal letter. For you, it might be the journal or diary or blindly selecting a directed exercise. It is okay, for example, if your normal personal goal of writing one hour each day cannot be sustained and you stop after ten minutes. Be sure you're not whipping yourself with unreasonable SHOULDs on a sicker day, or a treatment day, or a day when some other effort or activity takes precedence. Your creative spirit is sustainable under adverse conditions. Although you might

feel disappointed, frustrated, and angry, nudge yourself. Remember even healthy, prolific writers have bad days, unproductive days, sick days, draining days, and dead idea days.

You will find renewed creativity after a rough period. The key, however, is to hang in there in some way. Daydream; muddle; jot (or record) a few words; read (your own material and the works of others); try a new direction but write for only a few minutes; talk through some ideas with others; listen to or watch a relevant radio, TV, or video program; make lists of possible projects for a better period; and catch a few moments each day. Be as kind to yourself as you would to a dear friend facing a similar period.

In closing, I'd like you to recall the many benefits you gain from writing. I don't want to repeat the comments from sections one and two, but it's fine for you to glance back and read again! It will help when you are negotiating through tumultuous seas or frightening dead calm. In addition, I'll add some more exercises here. These can be considered as a last resort when nothing else works or seems in line with your limits. Give some of these a try -- if only for a few minutes. As always, adjust them to your needs and wants. If they tap a creative spirit, that is all that counts. Best wishes with your writing. And, know that your creative spirit is sustainable.

EXERCISES: Some starting points when at a dead end:

- Pick up a book, magazine, or newspaper. Randomly select one sentence. Use it as the starting point for your writing. Flow with whatever form or direction your mind takes you. Don't feel locked in to some narrow reading of the sentence. For example, the sentence reads: "You must walk the streets with other people's children and attend school with other people's children."¹⁸ Its context does not limit you. Your pen begins to carry you through seemingly unrelated sketches of people from widely different backgrounds. Move along. Keep your pen to paper. Write.
- Following the directions of the previous exercise, use one of the sentences below as your take-off point. (This makes it very easy for you. You don't have to waste time selecting a sentence. Run with it!)
 - a. "She sat glumly in a chair in the sitting room, wearing the grey uniform of the jail, and watching the matron and an officer carry away her suitcase. . ."19

- b. "For most Americans life on the home front was unexpectedly free of hardship."²⁰
- c. "She was worried to death about three things and she did not know which worried her most, as two of them were serious and one was not, but the non-serious one being the most recent was naturally uppermost in her mind, out of all proportion to its gravity."²¹
- d. "The women attending the birth decided to keep the miscarriage quiet, but rumors began to spread through the town."²²
- e. "I don't remember really looking forward to any season on the farm for each season followed as the night the day, and though the kind of work in summer would be different from the winter work, we knew what it would be."²³

Remember to allow your ideas to jump in multiple directions. Do not feel compelled to write a literal continuation of a specific sentence. Soar with it.

- Play a writing game with a friend or companion. One starts a story, poem, or sketch with several sentences or phrases. It is then passed to the other person to continue -- without discussion. It is shifted back and forth several times until a resolution. It's often quite funny and it does spark creativity.
- Keep a file, notebook, or box for the worst days -- whether considered "worst" because of physical deterioration, emotional YUCKS, intellectual unalertness, or writer's block (or any combination thereof). GO to this resource on your terrible days. In it, you should keep uplifting, inspirational, zany, and reassuring bits and pieces. This might include your own writing clips as well copies of articles, poems, and sections of books by others.

You might include a "warm, fuzzy" collection: complimentary and supportive notes, letters, and cards to you; lists of your good traits, accomplishments, relationships, and services; a particularly distracting or inspiring writing piece of yours -- even if it is but a phrase; items of positive significance to you (ribbon, certificate, degree, photo, key, souvenir from the tackiest shop in Florida yet a reminder of a lovely vacation); and anything else which makes you

feel good by offering a pat on the back or a happy reminder. It may sound gushy and Pollyanna-ish, but it is restorative. In addition, include some BAD DAY IDEAS in this emergency kit. It could be a list of suggested readings for a bad day or scraps of paper with some directions for you to take on the worst days.

- Play with words. Try some unconventional placements of words. If you need a structure, take a dictionary and randomly turn pages and point to words. Make a list of about forty. Then, play with your words. See what you can create. Do not think only of meaning, but of sounds, odd non-sentences, and cadence. (This is pleasant to do with a friend or companion as well as alone.)

Notes

Many of the books cited are available in several editions with varied publication dates.

- 1 Ray Bradbury, *Zen in the Art of Writing* (1989), xii - xiii.
- 2 Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (1981) and Cheri Register, *Living With Chronic Illness: Days of Patience and Passion* (1987).
- 3 Brenda Ueland, *If You Want to Write* (2nd ed., 1983).
- 4 Norman Cousins, *Head First: The Biology of Hope* (1990).
- 5 Mickey Pearlman and Katherine Usher Henderson, *Inter/View: Talks With America's Writing Women* (1990), 18.
- 6 As quoted in Amy Cushman, "Are You Creative?", *Utne Reader* (March/April 1992): 52-60. See Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within* (1986) for inspirational and insightful short essays on writing. Highly recommended!
- 7 Cushman, "Are You Creative?"
- 8 "TIME OUT" workshop offered by MaryAnn Maradik, at Nicolet College, Rhineland, WI, 1985.
- 9 Bradbury, *Zen*.

- 10 Brenda Ueland, "Want to be creative? Don't do anything!", *Utne Reader* (March/April 1992): 62. This is a powerful and delightful excerpt from *If You Want to Write*.
- 11 Ueland, *If You Want to Write*, 10.
- 12 Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1988 ed.).
- 13 For some interesting samples of published letters, see Abigail and John Adams, *The Book of Abigail and John: Selected Letters of the Adams Family, 1762-1784* (1975); Gilbert Barnes and Dwight Dumond, *Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimké Weld, and Sarah Grimké* (1970); William Garner, *Letters from California, 1846-1847* (1970); Jane Swisshelm, *Crusader and Feminist: Letters of Jane Swisshelm, 1858-1865* (1976); and Bill Adler, ed., *Letters from Vietnam* (1967).
- 14 Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (1982).
- 15 Patient advocacy organizations often include pen pal exchanges in their newsletters and magazines. In addition, magazines like *Mother Jones* often contain addresses for pen pals in prison.
- 16 John Hollander, *Rhyme's Reason: A Guide to English Verse* (1989).
- 17 Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones*. Also look at her follow-up volume: *Wild Mind: Living the Writer's Life* (1990). I had a chance to merely glance at this book as I was concluding the project. However, it's clear it contains many worthwhile insights on writing . . . and living -- similar to her earlier book.
- 18 Marian Wright Edelman, *The Measure of Our Success: A Letter to My Children and Yours* (1992), 31. A good example of an "open" letter turned into a short book!
- 19 Elliott Roosevelt, *Murder in the Oval Office* (1989), 194.
- 20 Lawrence S. Wittner, *Rebels Against War* (1984), 110.
- 21 Margaret Drabble, *The Needle's Eye* (1973), 53.

²² David Paul Nord, "Teleology and News: The Religious Roots of American Journalism, 1630-1730," *Journal of American History* 77, no. 1 (June 1990), 9.

²³ Rachel Davis DuBois, *All This And Something More* (1984), 294.

Additional Resources

Cameron, Julia. *The Right to Write: An Invitation and Initiation into the Writing Life* (2000).

DeSalvo, Louise. *Writing as a Way of Healing* (1999).

Fox, John. *Poetic Medicine: The Healing Art of Poem-Making* (1997).

O'Conner, Patricia T. *Woe Is I: The Grammarphobe's Guide to Better English in Plain English* (1995).

Remen, Rachel Naomi. *Kitchen Table Wisdom* (1996).

Smyth, Joshua M. et al. "Effects of Writing About Stressful Experiences on Symptom Reduction in Patients With Asthma and Rheumatoid Arthritis, A Randomized Trial." *Journal of the American Medical Association* 281, no. 14 (April 14, 1999), 1304-1309.

Spiegel, David. "Healing Words, Emotional Expression and Disease Outcome." *Journal of the American Medical Association* 281, no. 14 (April 14, 1999), 1328-1329.

Credits

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About the Contributors

Tara Allan is a recipient of an Emerging Artist Grant from the North Carolina Arts Council and the Arts & Science Council -- Charlotte/Mecklenburg, Inc., for completion of her first volume of poetry *Watercolors*. A Concord, North Carolina, resident, Tara has extensive experience in theater, music, and sign language, along with her experiences growing up with a disability.

Alice J. Foley lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She is a member of the Germantown chapter of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, the Mayor's Commission for Persons with Disabilities, and West Mount Airy Neighbors. She writes for religious and disability magazines and newsletters, and writes and edits a newsletter for the Women's Enterprise Resource Center support group for women in business.

Amy E. Laub is a calligrapher and secretary from Upper Darby, Pennsylvania. She recovered from a ruptured lumbar disc with surgery and exercise to music.

Alice K. Schwartz chooses not to add more.

Matt Straznitskas was pursuing a B.F.A. degree at the University of Connecticut (Storrs) when he became extremely sick with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome in 1990. While seriously ill for several years, Matt worked from his couch or bed to create illustrations and graphics on his computer.

Laura Ann May Sutton is pursuing an English degree through a home program. She plans a career as a writer. She resides with her family and two cats in southern New Jersey.

Several persons choosing to remain anonymous shared personal accounts. Their names in text have been changed. Bio. notes are from original entries.

About the Author

Susan Dion tries to write a little on most days. Her background includes years of teaching history and women's studies on the community college and university level. In addition, she has published scholarly and general articles as well as poetry. She finds inspiration and serenity in the beauty of rural Salem County, New Jersey, her home since July 1991.

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S. D.

OH, NO! ONE MORE WRITING PROJECT!

Evaluation and discussion.

Yes, do write and evaluate this guide. Please share information about sections and exercises which worked for you. Do not hesitate to condemn those which tied you up in knots.

Include comments agreeing or disagreeing with ideas presented. What did you find valuable? Helpful? Confusing? Enjoyable? Frustrating? Useless? Silly? Constructive? Creative? Comforting?

Feel free to share additional exercises and approaches to maintaining a creative spirit through writing. Who knows? Maybe we can plan a sequel.

Send your comments to:

WRITE NOW
P. O. Box 341
Penns Grove, NJ 08069-0341

If you'd like a response, please include a self-addressed and stamped envelope. Thank you. Susan Dion, Ph.D.

About the Puffin Foundation, Ltd.

The Puffin Foundation, Ltd. was founded "to encourage a dialogue between art and the lives of ordinary people." Applications for funds are reviewed annually on a competitive basis and grant recipients are located across the nation.

Projects involve theater, writing, dance, music, visual arts, and public-interest films. For further information about the Puffin Foundation, contact Puffin Foundation, Ltd., 20 East Oakdene Avenue, Teaneck, NJ 07666. A first grant to fund *WRITE NOW* was awarded in 1991 and the initial printing was completed in September 1993.

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