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How Writing Can Be a Spiritual Practice

by Diana Raab

Spirituality is the search for truth in one's life in the interest of being happy. Using writing as a spiritual practice can connect us to what seems most right for us, personally and professionally. It can also help us identify our life purpose.

One way to begin writing as a spiritual practice is to write about life-changing experiences. When I look back at my own life experiences and reflect on what has truly transformed me, challenged me, or made me feel more aware or more alive, the events involved the death of loved ones, relationships with others, being parent, friendship or love relationship. It's been said that people come into our life for a reason and exploring the reason is something that could be done if using writing as a spiritual practice.

Most writers like myself will confess that they write because they *have* to write, not necessarily because they want to write. We write out of necessity because it either makes us feel better or we want to share our stories with the world.

My beginnings as a writer began when I was ten years old. I was the only child of immigrant parents who were gone working all day. My grandmother was my beloved caretaker while they were at work, and on Labor Day in 1964, I was at home with her.

It was a hot Indian summer day common to the season. We lived in a suburban community along with other immigrant families and their children, so I was excited when a friend invited me to go swimming in her pool. With a child's enthusiasm, I knocked on my grandmother's door to ask for permission. There was no answer. I tried several times, but still no answer. I called to her, but there was only silence. I looked inside the room to see my grandmother, completely still, in her bed. Trembling with fear, I phoned my parents at their store. They came home and before I knew what was going on, my beloved grandmother was being carried down our creaky wooden stairs on a stretcher and put into an ambulance. I never saw her again. She had taken her life.

My mother knew I was grieving and wanted to help me through the trauma of my loss. Reaching out to therapists wasn't done in those days, so she bought me a blank, red leather journal with a saying by Kahlil Gibran at the top of each page.

For many months after my grandmother's death, my mother continued to encourage me to write down my feelings. Having been an English major in college, my mother intuitively knew that this was the best way for me to deal with my grief. It was also the time before psychotherapy went mainstream.

For me, writing was a spiritual practice back then and continues to be a very important part of my life today, six decades later. Little did I realize that my mother's inclination to buy me a journal would set the stage for my lifelong passion for writing.

Coincidentally, around that time, my mother gave me my grandmother's hand-typed journal telling of her early life as an orphan in Poland during and after World War I. It was the greatest gift a granddaughter could ever receive. I devoured every word and used it as a part of my MFA thesis, which turned into my first published memoir, *Regina's Closet: Finding My Grandmother's Secret Journal*.

In that book, I dealt with the two major turning points in my life: losing my grandmother and then discovering her sacred journal. The journal was sacred because of its role in my understanding of my grandmother and why she might have taken her life at age sixty-one.

Studying my grandmother's life helped me become empowered by her experience and take on the role of a woman warrior. I realized that she had been a survivor for most of her life. In continuing my path of writing as a spiritual practice, I returned to school to get my PhD, where I researched the healing and transformative powers of memoir writing. Basically, my research examined how life-changing experiences have inspired some esteemed authors to write the narratives of their lives. I learned that writing one's story is a way to reclaim one's voice, share a family secret, or simply relate a personal story to others.

Writing as a spiritual practice is very liberating and satisfying, because when we release our secrets, we achieve a level of freedom that gives us more control over our lives. Freedom comes in many forms. When I was diagnosed with my first cancer in 2001, I journaled my way to recovery. One thing I acknowledged was the brevity of life. I realized that there is no time like the present to seek bliss by writing down the experiences that brought us joy. I also acknowledged that having toxic people in my life was a bliss deterrent, so as much as possible I tried, and still try, to surround myself with inspiring, positive, and loving individuals.

During my own journey of writing as a spiritual practice, I've learned that I'm not alone in my practice; many writers, such as Anais Nin, have used writing in this way. In my own case, pivotal or life-changing events have served as stepping-stones for either new writing projects and/or self-discovery processes—an example being my book, *Writing for Bliss*.

In my latest book, *Hummingbird: Messages from My Ancestors, a memoir with reflection and writing prompts*, I continued my passion for writing as a spiritual practice. I wrote the book during the Covid-19 pandemic when there was a visiting hummingbird outside my writing studio. I came to learn that it was my grandmother returning to deliver me messages.

Overall, what I've learned as I use writing as a spiritual practice—and what I also teach others—is that this very personal creative process can bring about a sense of wholeness and, ultimately, a sense of bliss... which is what we all ultimately strive for in this life.

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