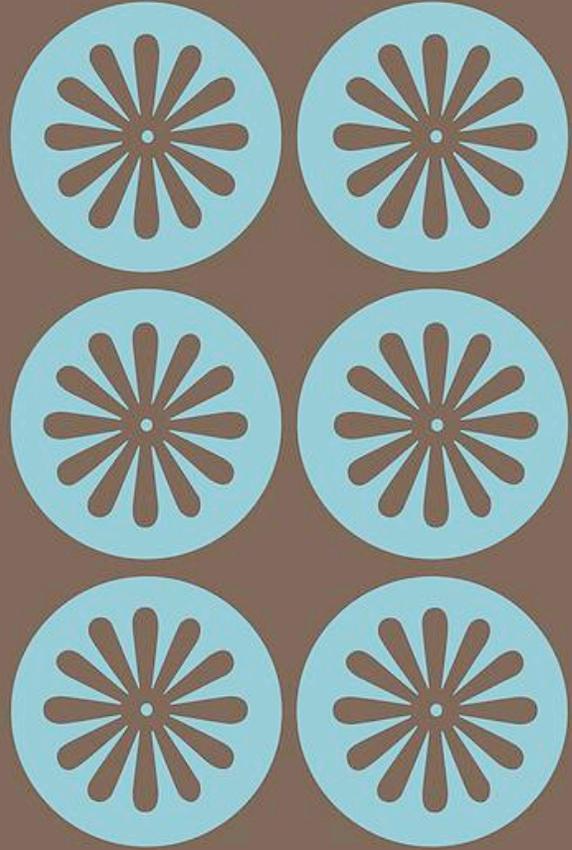


Total *Life* *Chocolate*



Stories
Valerie Poulin

ALSO BY VALERIE POULIN

POETRY

Something to Hide
The Trunk of a Green Malibu
Brushing Back History
Theory of Illumination

NON-FICTION

Seeking Representation: A Step-by-Step Guide
to Finding a Talent Agent (in Canada)

CREATIVE NON-FICTION

A Mixed Bag of Bones, Volume One
A Mixed Bag of Bones, Volume Two
A Mixed Bag of Bones, Volume Three (*forthcoming*)

FICTION

Celaire's Crush
The Best Girls I Know: Letters to My Girlfriends

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Printed and bound in Canada.

This book is for all of us

Chunks of Chocolate

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Acknowledgements

Thanks to Jean Légaré for the conversation that led to the
title.

Cover art from BigStockPhoto.com.

Standing in the Shadows

We used to have a tall, 20-year-old maple tree in our backyard. The tree's outstretched branches provided a respite for birds, a jumping off point for squirrels, and occasionally, a pit stop for racoons on the run. And each year, from May until November, the tree provided coverage for much-needed privacy from (and for) neighbours whose homes back onto ours. In late fall and throughout the winter months, without leaves to block the view, I get a clear view of a row of 15 carbon-copy houses.

On windy nights, especially in the spring and fall, the tree would groan and creak. And on blustery, rainy nights, I imagined that it might crash through the ceiling of our home in some Griswald-like comedic fashion. I was raised in a semi-rural neighbourhood, in Northwestern Ontario, where our home was surrounded by an acre of land and bordered by evergreen and Dutch elm trees. The property was populated with bushes—lilac, raspberry, and rose—and when the wind howled through our tiny homestead in the depth of cold, snowy February nights none of the trees around us groaned like our maple tree does now. To me, this was an indication that the tree was sick. It was.

Long after the tree had been felled and chopped into firewood, I noticed that the evergreen tree that used to stand in the maple tree's shadow had grown considerably. Where it had once leaned slightly to the right, away from the maple, the evergreen's curve straightened a little. Without the large maple tree blocking sunlight, the slow-growing evergreen was flourishing.

As I stare out the window of my office, as writers are wont to do, the space where the maple's leaves used to cross my view, I miss what bit of nature we suburban dwellers have. And in pondering that empty space, the evergreen tree became an obvious metaphor for how we sometimes hide behind friends, family members, spouses, lovers, colleagues, or coworkers—how we sometimes allow them to stand in the light while we remain in the shadows. In doing this, we bend away from them, lean to, and grow in, the other direction. We

allow those we believe are mightier (in strength, belief, opinion) to overshadow us. We bend in their shadow. Allow them to block our light.

Sometimes it's circumstances that keep us from standing tall or a job that won't allow to stretch to our fullest height. Sometimes it's our own insecurity that keeps us in the shadows of others, or in the shadow of fear.

While the evergreen in our back garden began to thrive only when the maple tree was removed, for us, it can simply be a matter of moving a little to the left or right, and sharing in the light.

Whatever casts shadows across your life, whether it is a person, or a perception, or a belief, don't wait on it to clear the way for you. Stand tall in the light and the shadow will fade.

Task: Take it outdoors. Step outdoors, take a walk, sit on a patio, or a park bench, or simply take stock of the view from public transportation. From what you observe in your surroundings (using nature as a guide), write five metaphors for your life. Next, write five descriptive phrases that represent the way you would like your life to be. Work towards making those statements true.

Life's Curriculum Vitae

The definition of Curriculum Vitae (CV) is a “brief account of one’s life” from the Latin “course of life,” according to the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary*.

Like many emerging writers, I have learned to celebrate my failures. As artists we have to. Failure becomes a form of motivation to a seasoned artist, where it might crush a young artist. And to those that have been steadily practising their craft, failure simply indicates that we are that much closer to our goals. In short, failure is simply a close call.

One of the signposts of failure that really gets to me is gaps in my list of publication credits. For whatever reason, I get annoyed when there are months and months between one publication date and the next. Maybe it is because it seems as if my writing career isn’t progressing. Or, maybe it’s a hold-over from my corporate business life where resume gaps between jobs are not only career-limiting, they also require lengthy (and sometimes fabricated) explanations to hiring managers.

With too many works-in-progress and too much time between completed writing projects, I decided to turn my attention to the milestones in my personal life to see if they matched, or out-ranked my writing credits. I decided to write a Life CV.

Sometimes we need proof of a life lived

As it turned out, this was a valuable exercise. Standing on the other side 40, I was better able to view my choices and decisions with positive reflection by detailing the landmarks in my life—highlights as well as the low points. It was refreshing to look at the first four decades of my life based on the maxim “it’s the journey, not the destination.”

If you are experiencing regret, or remorse, or wonder about the path you took to where you are now, try your hand at writing a life CV. Write it just as you would a resume to get a job, but with dates and events that highlight the adventures you’ve had in your life. Remember, the definition of “adventure” here is loose. You can almost call the entries

“interesting things.” The purpose here is to list any incident or event that was interesting or special *to you*. And if you don’t believe that you’ve done any interesting things, or had any adventures, start making notes. I can guarantee that you will uncover some experiences that you’ve forgotten about. Of course, there are those that haunt you and you ought to include them, too. They’ll look minor when compared against a stack of awesome activities.

With pen in hand, create a timeline.

- Start with your date of birth and lists all the “firsts”— first romantic interest, first kiss, first crush, the date you got your driver’s licence, your first car accident.
- List any memorable academic accomplishments, or the year you dropped out of high school.
- List any special events in which you were particularly happy, or particularly sad.

Before long, you’ll have a handful of dates and milestones.

- Continue with any evens you consider adventures, like white water rafting, or camping with high school friends after prom, or a gruelling canoe trip with an adventure-seeking boyfriend.
- Write all the dates of trips you took as a child with your family, or the first poem you had published, or the one piano/dance/choir recital in which you performed.
- Maybe you have shelves filled with hockey trophies, or ribbons from horseback riding. Write down those dates.

Depending on your personal situation, you may want to separate your “good” and “bad” experiences. Please don’t. It is more important to create a chronological list than to identify and label the experience. Trust the process.

Even seemingly innocuous, minor events are achievements

Get these seemingly small accomplishments down on the page, then spend some time typing the notes into a professional looking CV. Add subheadings like “Adventures/Facing My Fears” under which you might add public speaking (yes, even one speech counts), or a helicopter ride (fear of heights, of dying), or attending an event for a favourite author alone in which you are required to mingle with strangers (shyness).

Sometimes we need proof of a life lived.

In daily living, or when in times of emotional distress, it’s tough to come to grips with positive aspects of our past, which we need to do, so that we can keep moving forward. Smaller, joyful moments can get overshadowed in our memories by the larger, dramatic ones making us forget the awesomeness of them. Listing them on paper allows you to see your personal life beyond your work- and career-related accomplishments.

Once you’ve typed and edited, revised and proofread the CV, put it away. Now you can move forward. You’ll want to add to it.

Task: Write a Life CV. Follow the steps in this essay to create curriculum vitae for your personal life then consider what experiences you would like to add to it. Then take whatever action is necessary to fulfill the experience.

Follow-through Turns Thoughtful Suggestion to Kind Act

We never underestimate the value of homemade chicken soup to comfort a cold, a bowl of ice cream to ward off the blues, or the power of music to help heal a broken heart. Sometimes we forget that an act of kindness can make a lasting impression.

If you've read one or two spiritual books by well-known, popular, and spiritual teachers, you may have read many inspiring stories. You may even know mind-over-matter recovery stories like Moris E. Goodman who recovered from a vegetative state following a crash of his light-plane. You may also understand the sensitive and healing touch of a massage therapist, physiotherapist, or chiropractor, whose gentle manner can help you through another day of recovery; or you may understand the healing power of the slightest gesture of kindness.

When you're having a bad day, or even a mediocre one, a kind word from a friendly cashier at the grocery store can make a difference. But in moments when things are heading downhill in a hurry, one of the gentlest treatments I have found is listening to music. And while 50 minutes of music from the 70s is fun, you are likely to want to listen to something a little more relaxing. I recommend borrowing recordings from a local public library and giving classical music a try.

While working through thrice-weekly physiotherapy sessions following a car accident, I would often bring along my iPod and listen to inspirational podcasts. As I lay on a physio treatment bed hooked up to the electrical nerve stimulation (TENS) machine, I would make a mental list of the frequent and common blessings in my life—family, friends, creature comforts—and the thoughtful messages helped put me in a positive state of mind.

She noticed my unease and offered a solution

Knowing that anger and frustration with my situation was not conducive to healing my body, I tried not to think of my physical location, but inevitably I would. And my thoughts would turn to the reason I was there and in turn my mood would darken.

On one particularly difficult day, I flipped through a mix of self-help podcasts looking for something soothing to get my mind off things when one of the physiotherapists (PT) suggested classical music. She found it helped her study for exams when she was in school. And since one of her patients was a classical music enthusiast, the PT said she would ask for a top-five list to get me started. By the time I got home, I had forgotten our conversation.

On my next trip to the clinic, the PT provided me with a Post-it note of suggestions: Debussy, Bach, Liszt, and Grieg. Not only had this woman taken the time to ask one of her patients for this list she gave me, she kept the list handy for my next physiotherapy session. I was thankful for her efforts, in part, I think, because she had done what others had not. Sure, she noticed my unease and offered a solution as others had, but she also followed-up.

Dispensing advice comes easy

Most of us miss the last step: follow-through. Likely, because it takes the most effort. Dispensing advice comes easy, as is noticing someone else's pain or discomfort (something we often choose to ignore) but taking the time to follow-through, putting advice into action, after the conversation has long ended is what made a thoughtful gesture one of the most memorable.

Task: Take action. *Within one week of reading this essay, put observation and advice into action. Look for the opportunity to help someone then follow-through on whatever suggestion, recommendation, or promise of help you've made. Write a journal entry about the experience.*

Adventure

According to the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* next to my desk, the definition of “adventure” is “an unusual and exciting experience.”

Lately I have been thinking about how adventure is viewed differently from one person to the next. For example, some define adventure through physical challenges and dare-devil activities such as bungee jumping or skydiving. For others, it is a hike through the Amazon Rain Forest, or a trek along El Camino de Santiago de Compostela, or walk through the streets of London, Calcutta, or Prague.

Often, adventure is thought of as a type of tourism, or a “daring enterprise,” and although I have had a small share of thrilling experiences along those lines, I no longer consider only endorphin-blasting ventures to be the only risk-taking worth doing. For example, I now consider my one-time white-water rafting experience to be of equal adventure value as my inaugural poetry reading. Both activities required me to summon courage and grit to step out of my comfort zone, an area of close-fitting circumference that rarely extends beyond the things I enjoy, or those that I consider myself good at doing.

Helen Keller, who reminded us about the falsehood of security, “Life is either a daring adventure or nothing.” might be disappointed in my newly revised definition. So, might you. But, I ask that you reconsider and that you think about the things that you might otherwise file under the category of “life experiences” as I had.

We only start to redefine adventure later in life

So few of us make good use of the freedom our 20s offers us. For many of us, our 30s are filled with responsibilities of career or children, or both, and by the time we begin to examine our definition of adventure, we are in our 40s and the physical restrictions become too plentiful to deny. It is usually at this point our pursuits turn to intellectual, emotional, and spiritual and less physical ones.

If your idea of adventure now means just doing something different from your normal, day-to-day routine, something you are apprehensive about, or that simply scares you the undertaking is likely to remedy any spiritual stagnation or sluggishness that you may be experiencing.

Ask yourself: What is my idea of adventure? What scares me most? What scares me just a little bit, but I still don't really want to do?

Does walking into a room filled with people you don't know get your juices flowing? Does making conversation with strangers give you the willies? Or does the thought of doing a presentation to co-workers send your heart racing in panic? What about auditioning for a local theatre group? Displaying your artwork at a local festival?

Some might tell me it is just a to-do list

Where someone else might look at my list of adventures and tell me that it's simply a list of things I've done, or things I intend to do. They might simply call them activities, or personal growth opportunities. That's okay. As long as I feel as if I have challenged myself and I have grown on a personal, or spiritual, level then I feel as if I have been adventurous. And so should you.

My shy nature and love for creative writing keeps me out of the limelight in a solitary role, most often you will find me alone at a desk for hours on end, reading, writing, or researching. I have a tendency to cocoon into my work. At the office where I earn my living as a writer, it's doubly easy to get lost in my computer monitor for most of the day. With this type of work my challenge, therefore, becomes effort to move away from what is comfortable and experience life at large. For me, it means getting up and enjoying life. It meant the inaugural poetry reading I mentioned earlier; it meant an on-camera TV and film appearance; it meant cold-calling interview subjects for magazine and newspaper articles; it meant a hastily planned, solo getaway to New York City.

More recent adventures include quitting a full-time, permanent job without any job offers on the table (or prospective employers in the marketplace), taking a vocal stand at the office to underscore my contribution to a project, learning enough HTML to update my business website, creating and posting poetry videos online, trying my hand at editing a poetry publication.

Task: Turn an experience into a spiritual adventure. *Write a list of five experiences that you would like have that challenge you to step outside your comfort zone, if only briefly and temporarily. Do not include any physical activities; keep it on a personal-growth/self-awareness/spiritual level. Make whatever changes are necessary in your life to meet at least three of those experiences in the next six months.*

Lay Your Worries on the Page

There are writers dedicated to the daily ritual of writing non-stop for twenty minutes every morning. It's a daily writing practice presented by Julia Cameron in her bestselling book *The Artist's Way*. As Julia puts it, this exercise primes the pump for writing. And anyone who has kept journals and diaries in their early years knows the benefits of expressing thoughts on a page. It's one method of digging deeper into what is troubling you.

Now, don't get freaked out by the thought of writing, of putting your feelings on the page. No one will see these pages. And no one will grade you on your work.

This practice is second nature for those who think "on the page"—and for the rest of us who think we know what is bothering us, but do not spend any quality time contemplating the source of our dilemmas—this is a safe place to express our feelings. We can be open, honest, and vulnerable. And when we take to the page, often something quite unexpected pours out.

This exercise works for everyone, for all situations.

If you've been fired, laid-off, or if you've recently quit your job this exercise can help you adjust your feelings about the incident.

If you are experiencing physical trauma caused by a car accident, an operation, or if you are suffering from chronic pain from an illness, the daily routine is sure to elicit results. Emotions can be at a fever pitch if you've been divorced, widowed, recently given birth to a new baby, or if you've adopted a child into your home, you may not feel as if you have the time, energy, or even the inclination to write. But, at moments when you have the energy (even the smallest amount will do), I encourage you to give it a try.

Sure, you may not feel much like meditating and writing (for goodness sake, all you want to do is get some rest!!) and what's more you are already strapped for time. But this is precisely when you need it most.

This exercise, done daily will help you heal.

If you're angry or hurt, puzzled or challenged, and trying to move beyond a painful experience, or if you are just tired from the demands of everyday life, but feel overwhelmed by the thought of facing the problem head-on, try looking at your situation from another person's point of view. You can do this by following the steps in the exercised described below. I promise it will be enlightening.

You will be awed by the results.

Task: See your situation through another person's POV. Find an image of a man, woman, or child. You can get this from a print source—tear it out of a magazine or from a newspaper, or online—print it from a Website. Now, sit in a comfortable spot with a pen and paper ready beside you. Place the printed page in front of you. Close your eyes and let whatever emotions and feelings wash over you. Breathe deeply. Relax. After 30 seconds, open your eyes. Look at the image again and immediately start writing about what the person in the picture is experiencing.

What Results Do You Deserve?

Have you ever wondered how you ended up working day after day in such a crappy job? How did it happen? One day you woke up and boom! you were sitting in a cubicle shuffling papers, sitting in a cubicle pounding a keyboard, sitting in a cubicle shackled to a telephone queue, the Call Wait Time minutes on the Automatic Call Distributor wall board rising as quickly as your caller's temper.

This is not how you envisioned your work life.

When I decided to set aside my fledgling career as a full-time freelance writer and return to life as a permanent employee, I carefully searched the market for the perfect job. This time around, I was going to find it. I already traded one unsatisfying career for an equally unsatisfying one. With my foot on the lowest rung of the corporate ladder, I stepped off and traded it for the freedom of a contract technical writer. Freedom. Or, so I thought.

Somewhere along the line you settled. You never found a job in your field, and you never met the perfect partner you'd dreamed of, or he showed up in your life and turned out to be as much of a disappointment as you were to him. And now you're stuck in this humdrum life and you can't even recall what your dreams for your future were now that the future is here. Or, worse, you clearly recall your dreams and cannot fathom the failure that you've met trying to attain them.

After all, like most people, you have only been looking out for your fair share of good things.

After a long list of terrible work assignments that included hostile work environments, inept project managers, and impossible deadlines I was ready to settle. Sure, I would be giving up a few things: lucrative hourly rates, an average of four months off between writing gigs (financially supported by aforementioned lucrative rates), freedom to work from home, make my own hours, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera—by returning to full-time, permanent status, but it was a price I was willing to pay to have weeknights and weekends free for my creative writing work.

In the end, I got what I expected, not what I wanted.

Armed by what I knew about creating results, I made a wish list: full-time job as a technical writer, for a reasonable wage, a short commute from my home. The relaxed environment I'd asked the universe to supply turned out to be frustratingly lacking structure; absent also was leadership; I was used to autonomy on the job sure, but the constraints within the job were as tight as management's expectations were loose. The dichotomy of this struck my funny bone. When I finally drew the courage to leave, two days before my reporting structure was restructured for the third time in one year, I got in a car accident and stayed on for another six months while I recovered. Then, one day, during a lunch hour walk, I realized that I was not stuck in the job. I was just plain stuck. For the first time in a very long time I saw apathy as my own creation. So, I quit.

I handed in my resignation, giving six weeks' notice, and felt the joy that comes with knowing you've taken action.

Was there remorse? You bet.

There weren't any job offers on the table, and no potential assignments on the horizon, but when they did arrive, I turned them down. For whatever reason, they didn't seem right. Then a job offer came out of the blue: I was hired by a manager at the company I was about to leave.

What's more, I was offered an assignment at 40% above my current hourly wage. I would have the freedom to work for home when my schedule required me to and paid statutory holidays. Plus, I would keep the same office hours, and I wouldn't even have to change my route to work. I even parked in the same parking spot.

What took me so long to leave a job I disliked right from the day I started was the courage to do so; when I finally summoned enough bravery, I things changed for the better with little effort on my end.

It all seemed too easy. Then again, that's exactly how things should work.

Task: *It is said that people get the results they think they deserve. Answer the question: What do you think you deserve?*

Daily Walks Can Re-balance Your Spirit

Today is a cool, clear autumn day. On days like today, I like to lengthen my lunch-hour walks around the industrial complex that surrounds the office building where I work.

Starting out, to my left the blue sky settles onto an open field of yellow-brown brush. The clearing slopes past a stout office building. Beyond that, a four-lane highway. And beyond the toll road is a vista that runs into a new housing development deep in the distance. This is the favourite part of my walk. It's a far cry from a walk in the woods, but it's what is available to me and when I turn to my left as I begin my walk, some of the busyness and stress of the day falls away.

The view to my right is less spectacular; two short, squat office buildings sit side by side and both are surrounded by paved parking lots jammed with cars. So, I avoid looking to my right.

Instead, I take in the beauty of what little bit of nature surround me—trees, grassland, sun, sky—and allow it to lift my spirits.

This noon-hour trip through the streets in my employer's neighbourhood does the trick when I need a break from my workday. It allows me to daydream about my life as a full-time author instead of a weekend writer. This exercise becomes a poet's walk. In my head, I write short stories and essays and poems and dream ways for characters to get in/out of whatever fix they're in.

Back at the office, I settle into my desk. Daily walks are not a permanent solution; these small acts of creativity are fleeting, a temporary respite from a day job I am not fond of.

When job dissatisfaction and disappointment was at its worst, the more lunch hours I walked, the more frequently things shifted into focus quickly. For example, I came to understand that I was choosing to remain in a job I disliked for reasons that benefited my creative writing career. In short, I'd chosen to stay instead of leaving it for a better paying gig, or a more suitable role, or for a larger firm where I might learn new skills, or expand the ones I had. What had become clear

was that the choice was mine. In hindsight, the misperception seems silly now.

Daily walks helped me sort through this quandary and once I did, I focussed on the reasons I was staying.

What's more, as my feet pressed into the concrete, step by step, I realized that these walks were essential to my well-being. The benefits of taking a break from the office with only nature as company, was beneficial to my mental and physical and spiritual health. These walks had become a form of meditation for me. It was how I had come to conclusions about my personal motivations for my professional decisions. These walks helped me view my problems in a different way and helped me resolve some issues I was facing at the office. Daily walks calmed me spiritually as well as physically and with a clearer head, I was able to come up with creative solutions. Many writers walk daily because they understand the calming influence it has on their work, health benefits aside.

Task: Walk daily. *If you want, make a list of challenges you're facing at work, or problems that exist in your personal life. You may wish to write about the resolutions, or as you cross items off your list, you may want to simply add more.*

Are You Striving Too Hard to Achieve?

There's a scene in one of my all-time favourite movies that recently came to mind when I thought about the extent to which I have spent money to work in a field that does not seem to want me.

Over a period of 10 years, I've spent nearly \$10,000 in pursuit of technical writing, freelance writing, and creative writing careers. This is in addition to the cost of half of a college diploma. Despite weekend workshops, college credit courses, and writing seminars, my success as a novelist is not imminent; a freelance writing career has not be forthcoming either. So I continued to pursue a profession closest to the two I was most passionate about: technical writing. While I cannot dismiss the financial rewards of writing business documents, I've had only a modest return on my investment with creative and freelance writing.

Like actress Terri Garr's character Sandy Lester in the movie *Tootsie*, who, after another failed audition, complains to her friend Michael Dorsey (played by Dustin Hoffman) that all she does is "buy things" to pretend to be someone else.

It makes me consider that at times we all pretend to be someone else. Some folks spend their lives dressing up as someone else, like Sandy Lester, eventually getting fed up with trying so hard, with pretending and eventually find it easier to accept defeat. It's in the acceptance that things get better. A younger generation might call it "keeping it real." (In 1990 terms, it's called being "authentic.")

When I examined my reasons for chasing a profession I was interested in only because it had the word "writer" in its title—a profession that I'd traded an equally unsatisfying career for—I found that it had given me the courage to call myself a Writer, capital "W." Because if the business world accepted me as a writer by paying me to write I must therefore be a writer. Weak logic, I know. But if this writing thing was a marketable skill, I reasoned, others may want to capitalize on it. I was especially interested in having editors of literary magazines read my stuff.

It was then that I created a writing resume listing all my publication credits. Over the course of a decade, I'd amassed a decent number of them, and I was pleased with the resulting list.

I had spent a lot of money in professional critiques by editors, established writers, by practising poets; I paid membership fees to writers groups just to get a sense of belonging. But it was when I accepted the fact that I would likely never fulfill my dream of life as a full-time author (read: novelist/poet/screenwriter), that I needed to keep my day job, it was then that I experienced a sense of freedom in my creative writing. And that is when, I believe, my writing improved.

Now I had nothing to lose. The pressure to earn a living as a creative writer was lifted.

I stopped complaining about my inability to switch from one form of professional writing to another. And I still tended to my creative writing habit every spare moment I could find.

My writing hobby flourished. In the spare time I gained by not enrolling in post-secondary credit courses, coupled with a steady 9-5 job, and augmented by my teenage son's growing independence, stalled projects gained momentum; I accepted my writing as a part-time pursuit and settled into a rhythm of writing weeknights and weekends.

Tootsie's Sandy Lester was annoyed mostly because she had not been given an opportunity to try. The director wouldn't let her audition and that seemed the most frustrating thing for her in that moment. Looking at my list of publication credits I could see that I have been given, and continue to be provided, opportunity to share my work with an audience.

With that in mind, I don't push as hard for results as I once did. But I've not stopped pursuing results.

Task: A meditation assignment. *Think about the following questions in a quiet space, meditating on them if you can. What are you striving so hard to achieve? What results are you trying to force? What results have you overlooked?*

A Different View

It's been said that if you want a different view, look the other way.

This lesson was handed to me one morning when I was particularly displeased with my work life and resentful of the lingering physical pain that resulted from a traffic collision months earlier. As I slowly backed my car out of our driveway, I checked to my right for pedestrians along the sidewalk and stopped suddenly. I started at disbelief that our neighbour next door had mowed their lawn.

The muscle in the back of my neck thumped. Hard.

We live on a street with 50 other homes with pie-shaped lots. Our lot draws to about 18 inches where it meets the sidewalk out front and flares to about 60 feet at the back.

In part because of the size, in part because of our immediate neighbour's commitment to community living, we take turns mowing our shared front lawns, so that each family is only required to maintain our lawns every other weekend.

I shook my head in disbelief. To anyone passing our home, it appeared as if our neighbours were making a point. Cutting half a front lawn tells passersby that the other neighbour isn't doing their fair share. This is what set me off.

From my perspective, we had done more than our fair share (mowing more frequently, clearing snow more often, returning garbage cans blown by strong winds onto the street).

And it wasn't just that. Just two days earlier, on Saturday afternoon, I explained to the neighbours on both sides of our home that I knew it was our turn, but I wasn't able to start the gas mower and when my husband returned from his 24-hour shift, he would mow the lawn. So, to see a strip of lawn mowed set me off.

As my neck muscle twitched, a podcast started up on my iPod. I was reminded that I had been making a conscious effort to live more graciously.

I left off the brake and the car rolled over the sidewalk onto the road. And when I looked to my left to check for traffic, I noticed it. Our other neighbour had mowed our shared front lawn.

After almost 15 years of living next door, we knew these folks on a social level, we'd had dinner parties and their kids babysat ours. We took turns clearing snow from one another's sidewalk. So, I knew that he wasn't trying to make any sort of point. He was the real deal.

On the other side, the neighbours passed on many neighbourhood events and social invitations; they kept to themselves; they shovelled the snow only on their side of a shared, bottom portion of our driveway.

As I drove to work, I tried to understand why I felt so angry about such a minor thing. Then, I switched gears. I thought of the neighbour who had taken the time, knowing that my husband would be home the next day and tend to the lawn, but also understanding how tired he would be from his shift, had taken the time to do it anyway. I said a silent prayer of gratitude for his thoughtfulness and his kindness.

In essence, I looked the other way.

Task: Look the other way. *This week, when you come across a situation that irritates, enrages, or otherwise causes you to feel anything other than gratitude, check yourself. Then consider the situation from another point of view, one that will shed light on the positive side of it.*

Ube: Where Am I?

Task: Write a paragraph explaining where you are: (a) geographically, (b) romantically, (c) financially, (d) professionally, and (e) spiritually. Aim for four to six sentences on each topic.

Life Goes On

By facing difficult challenges in my life, I've learned that downturns have an expiration date.

The adage “life goes on” produced for me what Marjorie Garber in her book *Quotation Marks* refers to as a “truth-effect.”

Of course, I'd experienced this truth before, but like most, I suspect, commonly used to rationalize our feelings when we are mourning the passing of a loved one. Intellectually, we understand that this period of pain will subside as the weeks and months pass; however, in the moment—the only real time we have, spiritually—we are in pain that cuts deep.

After a car collision that left me physically injured (and emotionally disfigured), this “life goes on” lesson was brought to the forefront. With every sleepless night, every stiff and sore muscle, every Advil I gobbled, I had to mentally remind myself that this distressed physical condition was temporary. The physical pain from the injuries was prolonged beyond my expectations, but still, it was temporary. Each time my muscles complained I was reminded of the reason and this set me back emotionally as well, and this was all the more reason to remind myself that the anger and resentment of the collision and the other driver would subside. Indeed I would have to put aside the bitter feelings because it would slow my progress.

Everything—everything—is temporary.

The truth hit home. I may have sustained injuries that affected my daily life, but I began to measure small successes and as I progressed physically, I also healed emotionally and psychologically. As I covered more distance on my daily walks in less time, I became less fearful driving through intersections. I had faith that things would work out because for me they always have. Somehow everything always works out. It was another way to remind myself that “life moves on.”

I would indeed overcome this challenge and with each day my health returned. I continued to write. I went to work. I attended my son's hockey games. I modified my lifestyle to do these things in bits and pieces, which is an apt expression since I did not yet feel whole.

Then one of those gorgeous, timely pivotal moments arrived. This particular one occurred on one of my daily walks while listening to Caroline Myss on my iPod. On the podcast, the author and medical intuitive mentioned how she'd "stood vigil" with her alcoholic brother while writing her book *Energy of Anatomy*. Wow! This was like a spiritual shove forward.

Although I'd listened to the podcast before, this bit of information really made an impression on me this time.

Before the accident, I had been struggling to continue to write beyond my day job, so in my recovery, my personal writing projects received very little attention and that kept me angry and questioning the fairness of my circumstances.

Somehow I imagined that the author lived a substantially more privileged life than I did. I imagined that she lived the writing lifestyle I so badly wanted . . . to get up every morning and write with the sun and a cup of tea as her only companions. I imagined that she tapped out her books on a MacBook, without interruption, with little effort, while the day rose around her. In this moment of realization, I had to laugh at the silliness of my perception: I had not considered that Myss might have been living her life as well as writing a book.

On that 25-minute walk with Caroline chatting in my ears, I came to understand the meaning behind the axiom "life goes on."

Indeed it does.

We lose family members and life moves around us. Even as we lay loved ones to rest, the world goes about its daily business. We bring children into our lives and welcome new lovers into our beds and the universe moves with us. We leave long-term jobs, say goodbye to retiring colleagues, and the world barely notices. We lose use of our bodies in familiar ways, end friendships, bury beloved pets, and mourn loss in every way imaginable. And while our world stands still because of a tragedy, life carries on around us.

At times like that we want to throw our voices to the sky and scream for the world to stop and pay attention to our anguish. Sometimes, we do.

As I continued my walk that day, even as my hips radiated pain to other complaining muscles, I knew that the walk was helping me heal so I could move forward. On a metaphorical level, it showed me that life is always moving forward. And so should you.

Task: Write one paragraph about a moment when you came to a realization that helped you through a tough period in your life. If you have not yet experienced one, write about what might get you there.

Recovery: Slow and Steady

Do you recall the story of the tortoise and the hare from the children's stories Aesop's Fables? As a kid, I thought it was one of the more boring of childhood fables and fairytales. Maybe it still is. The story lacks certain glamour; there are no fancy dresses, no hard-bitten relatives, or mean-spirited siblings to dislike—and there was no re-stating of the happily-ever-after theme.

As a life lesson, what kid wants to be told about the rewards of patience, or the virtue of persistence and fortitude? From an adult's point-of-view, the trouble I have with this story is its accuracy.

As a cautionary tale the story works. Because my day job interferes with the progress of my part-time/weekend writing projects, I must constantly remind myself of the slow-and-steady-wins-the-race maxim. For every page of text, every handwritten poem, every 500-word essay, I've committed a minimum of an hour a day outside of my daily responsibilities to my family, my friends, my employer. At the end of a month, this commitment translates to 25-30 hours per month. Slow and steady really racks up the numbers.

You can apply this same principle to healing. Physical healing is usually noticeable only in incremental remnants. That is, what's leftover from days and days of consistent activity, slowly working muscles back to health. While we are in the day-to-day process of healing from an operation, a traffic accident, or an illness, we do not notice the recovery; we tend to notice weekly and monthly progress.

Emotional recovery is harder to pinpoint. Most often, emotional injury cuts deeper than its physical counterpart, yet we are somehow expected to heal quicker from events that hurt our feelings because it is seen as weak to have allowed someone else's words to affect the way we feel. Sticks and stones. However, we don't always hold up the way others would like. It's not always easy for those of us who feel as if we've been emotionally kicked about to do what others want us to do: pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, suck it up, get over it.

Others view non-physical injury as something that is recovered from more easily when in fact it often takes longer and requires more work, but because it is harder for others to gauge its effect they tend to become suspect of it when it lingers and soon they begin to believe that you are playing on their sympathy.

I once took an informal poll of close friends and family, asking them how long I should be expected to lend an ear and extend sympathy to a friend who was going through a particularly rough patch. After several months of emotional investment on my part, I began to dread conversations with her. She was draining me; she had become an energy vampire and I had become weary of her inaction.

For whatever reason, we believe that we have a limited resource for emotional support, so we get stingy and hold it tight. Sometimes, we're too busy feeling sorry for ourselves that we're unwilling to share it with others.

There's no timetable for emotional healing, unlike physical recovery, there's no expiry date on emotional distress. Yet, it still takes regular work. Once the cane is gone, or cast comes off, once the prosthesis is fitted, or the chemotherapy is done, the physical healing is well on its way, but there's more to do.

Like my daily writing that culminates in a larger piece of work, the cumulative efforts of physiotherapy and physical activity help to rebuild your body and also your spirit, no matter the trauma.

But, as recovery experts tell us, you must be willing to show up and do the work.

Task: Track your progress. *Every day for one week, make a concerted effort to do one thing to heal—emotionally, spiritually, physically, and/or psychologically—and write down what you did and how long you did it. Repeat the activities and length of time you spent on your recovery for a full month.*

Practising Grace

It's a cold, grey November day. In this part of the country it is a perfect day for one of my favourite things: cozying up with a blanket and a good novel. The only thing missing today is a thunder storm and a roaring fire in the fireplace. With clear skies and a comfortable temperature, I put aside my wont to read and tend to some work I have promised to complete by the end of the week.

For most professional writers, whether freelance, contract, or permanent employee, working from a home office seems to be as much necessity as it is luxury. I try to view it simply as a benefit of my profession, but on days like today—perfect work at home days—remind me how fortunate I am. Many practising and struggling writers do not have this freedom.

At the office, the earlier part of this week had turned miserable—overworked co-workers trying to meet unrealistic deadlines—and to avoid catching the bitch bug, I withdrew to my home office.

I would sit in my cubicle staring at my computer monitor

Here, at least, I could be productive because otherwise, I would sit in my cubicle staring at my computer monitor and resenting my employer and colleagues and fuming about the passage of unproductive time. Or, I would spend my time daydreaming about a time when I could spend all day with my creative writing and freelance writing projects, and rail against the reality of having to earn a living at an occupation that keeps me in the role of employee working in an office building. Instead of focussing on the task at hand, on days when the tension in the workplace is palpable, I rue the fact that I can't seem to earn a living doing the type of writing I enjoy.

When things are not going smoothly in our personal lives, workplaces can become depressing, oppressive, or downright toxic—I've spoken to many folks who work under some terrible conditions, and when the collective tension seeps into my mood, before I get pulled into it, I try to take myself out of the office in order to regain perspective.

As I've said, I sometimes have the luxury of leaving a stressful environment when things turn ugly, but when I can't leave, I try to bring grace into the office.

When bringing grace into a job seems an impossibility, challenge yourself to give it a try.

Practise bringing grace into your every day life

One of my favourite books by author Caroline Myss is *Invisible Acts of Power, Channelling Everyday Grace into Your Life*, and in it Myss teaches readers how to behave in a way that allows you the opportunity to bring grace into the daily activities of your life.

I tried this recently and discovered that it takes practise, and patience.

In the weeks leading up to a deadline on a particularly rough project our team was responsible for and faced with daily frustrations with the work and with co-workers whose job it was to provide me with information, but turned hostile and evasive during our meetings. They wanted to be left alone to do their work, not spend time telling me about their work. In turn, I carried with me to each successive meeting frustration from our previous encounter. I could almost feel the underlying adversarial and confrontational current. It was affecting my job performance and impacted my personal life. I was becoming miserable outside the office, too.

In reading Myss' book about channelling grace, I continued to try to bring grace into the office.

You have to mean it.

I tried to pay attention to the circumstances and rather than invest irritation with a particular situation, such as when colleagues were overscheduled and thorny about meeting, I would be as accommodating and patient as possible without jeopardizing my deadlines and work schedule. Too often, I would reschedule a meeting when a day's workload caused colleagues to become overscheduled in order to avoid their tense moods on a hectic day. That resolved nothing except push me back to my desk aggravated and upset. The trick, I

learned, was to not fake mercy, which was, and is, difficult to do.

To show grace—the kind that Caroline Myss describes in her book—I learned that I had to give my colleagues the gift of space and time and mean it. This meant that I could not just pay lip-service to the situation. I had to feel tolerant and be understanding of the situation, which is, as you know, not easy when you're pressured for time. And I had to do this in a supportive, unpatronizing, way.

What I have also learned is that this approach doesn't always provide textbook result, and you cannot expect to be consistently authentic, but most often you will walk away from an encounter like this feeling less angry and less resentful.

If you can make this a regular practice in your work life as well as your personal life, you may find that you are able to more easily tolerate events at work that might otherwise bring you to a level of unbearable frustration.

Task: For one week, practise bringing grace into the office to every day tasks and business activities. When you experience situations that have a positive outcome, write about what you did and how you felt afterwards.

Keeping Your Spiritual Muscles Strong

My daily spiritual practices, like yours, are interrupted by daily life.

There always seems to be some reason I can't get to meditating—I'm too tired at the end of the day, I can't focus and relax and the beginning of the day. I don't get up early enough to write in my gratitude journal. I go to bed forgetting to make a list of the things I am grateful for.

We spend time online paying bills, working toward deadlines, sleeping off the hangover of a busy night shift. Everyday life can exhaust us. We have to bend to the demands of bosses, the needs of elderly parents, the inevitability of laundry, housework, homework, high-needs children, ill spouses. There are social obligations—friends' and children's birthday parties, dinner parties, funeral services. And raising children has its own special set of emotional, physical, and psychological challenges.

Yet, if you were to set aside all of the busyness of your lives for 15-20 minutes per day to be still—no matter the form of meditation you choose—you would find that the stillness helps reinvigorate your spiritual health and that it translates directly to other areas of your life.

We set aside spiritual practices to get on with the responsibilities of everyday life.

Unless we are in a quiet house, alone, it is not always easy for us to squeeze in quiet moments that are necessary for spiritual practices. Yet, the reasons we hesitate may extend beyond excuses of not having the time.

Sometimes, the unique spiritual connection we make when we regularly practice meditation makes us feel odd, out of the ordinary, and this new sensation can be frightening. Returning to a normal routine makes us feel safe. We are familiar with the busyness of our lives and familiarity means security. However, the challenge we face with abandoning a practice is that it is harder to get back into it. In order to keep our spiritual muscles strong, we must exercise them. Just as physical activity keeps our bodies strong and lean, a daily spiritual practice keeps our spirit nimble.

The thing is, you don't need large chunks of time. Wouldn't it be nice if we had that kind of time to commune with our higher spiritual selves? Some days, it's a matter of practicality.

Like my weekend writing practice, I look for small chunks of time for spiritual practice.

During a lunch hour walk, or on the commute to work, I listen to podcasts of my favourite self-development authors. Or, I will read passages from their books in the evenings. I look for times when I can meditate for longer periods, but when I cannot, I gather a few minutes of quiet time to breathe deeply and relax. I write in my gratitude journal.

Because even infrequent practise is better than no practise at all.

Not long ago, while recuperating from a car crash every time I closed my eyes to meditate, I relived the trauma of the accident and the anger flared as intensely as my physical injuries. The return to a normal lifestyle took more than eighteen months, yet I continued to write my morning pages (daily, long-hand, non-stop for 20 minutes, per Julia Cameron's advice in *The Artist's Way*), even when lying prone on the couch to relieve back, shoulder, and neck pain.

Slowly, I returned to normal routine and lifestyle. And with each page I wrote, I remained connected with an activity that fed my soul. Even if I just wrote a paragraph, it meant something to me and I continued the practice.

Don't underestimate the power of those little things you do.

If don't keep a journal, you might like to start. It may be easier for you to begin with three, hand-written pages than to meditate for 20 minutes.

From daily journaling it's only a matter of time before you feel a strong pull to other spiritual practices because your new normal, as they say, will be a sense of well-being and that higher state of consciousness will do wonders for the way to view the world, and consequently, the way you behave in it.

Try it.

Task: Move forward. *After a week of writing "morning pages," shift to a different, more intense form of meditation for a week. Continue writing, but add another element for one week. Repeat for one month. Has your outlook changed? Are you in a positive mood? Are your moods more consistent?*

Unde: Where Have I Been?

Task: Write a paragraph recalling some of the events that may have led you to where you are today. Remember to include at least one event that is: (a) geographical, (b) romantic, (c) financial, (d) professional, or (e) spiritual. Aim for four to six sentences on each topic.

What Is the Measure of Courage?

When I experienced my first corporate restructuring in 1994 at the height of the upswing of cutting corporate jobs to cut costs by using the increasingly popular “redundancy” double-speak. As the manager of a department of 30 employees, including two supervisors, I was expected to counsel them to finding new jobs, either within the bank, or externally, and in chatting about job options with one of my direct reports at her desk, I noticed the latest edition of *The Canadian Writers Guide* on her desk.

I was stunned by her bravery. And, of course, I was envious. Her job was “being made redundant” as they said and she had the courage to switch occupations from data entry clerk to freelance writer AND she had the courage to do it openly. She was backing it up by reading a book about the marketplace.

Like many others, I wouldn't risk the potential ridicule by making such an announcement, even though it was my dream, too, to become a published writer.

At that point in my life, I had been secretly writing poetry for more than 15 years. It would take another four years before I self-published, and another nine before I told family members that I wrote poetry.

Even with a reminder note “Risk it” torn from a magazine posted on a bulletin board above my desk, I continued to hide my interest in writing fiction beneath my day job as a technical writer and to camouflage my desire by publishing non-fiction articles. Even after coming out of the poetry closet, so to speak, I still found it difficult to share my desire to be an author with others. It seemed, too, uh, lofty. As if dreaming of something beyond my station in life.

So, I changed tactics. I began to write fiction on the side, to move away from non-fiction writing (it seemed so much more legitimate, read: acceptable), and to write fiction—in poetry, short stories, and screenplays—in my free time. And I have found it immeasurably satisfying. The satisfaction is due, in part, I believe, because it's no longer a dream. It is reality. I am writing fiction regularly, instead of dropping it to the

bottom of my to-do list. Whether I choose to share my characters, plots, and passion for writing with others, or not, seems inconsequential now because I've mustered the courage to dedicate time to pursuing my passion. And to me, that is a form of risk-taking.

My question to you is: How do you measure courage?

Task: Write a list of 10 ways you avoid taking risks. Write a list of 10 things you can do to take risks this month then act on them.

Travelling Will Inspire You

A spiritual moment can happen anywhere. You can feel your spirit soar at a baseball game, at a poetry reading, and in front of a potter's wheel. You can experience beautiful moments of spiritual clarity in front of a sketch pad, while carving wood, or while fixing a mechanical problem on a car.

Your spiritual path can be found indoors, or out. At home, or on the job. On cobblestones streets of a European city, or in the backyard of your suburban home in Saskatchewan.

No matter the location, it often occurs when you least expect it.

Travelling is one way of connecting with your spirit

I discovered this, as others have, while travelling on their own in a foreign country. I would later be reminded of my own experience when reading Paulo Coelho's article Road to Santiago, assigned reading material for a magazine writing course.

Once the airplane touched down at LaGuardia airport and we disembarked, I pushed my flying nervousness under wraps, and when I hit the sidewalk of Manhattan for a walking tour of the mid-town neighbourhood near my hotel, I felt my spirit soar. The expression, "I felt as if I'd come home" came to mind because that is exactly how I felt.

That sense of "being home" was for me a sense of connectedness, of rightness, of belonging. My identity had been stripped and only my spirit remained. Most of us wear our labels as identity from our familial standing: mother, wife, daughter, sibling. Or professional label: electrician, writer, forklift operator, doctor. But, while travelling, these labels do not apply. The folks we come across on our travels—other tourists, hotel workers, wait staff—none of them know us by the facade we wear at home with our friends, coworkers, lovers, spouses.

In short, we are completely ourselves when we interact on a spiritual level. Sometimes it doesn't last long. Sometimes the feeling lasts as long as we remain in the adventurous, spiritual mode, but that is not usually the length of the trip.

We get comfortable and fall into our habits, we slap our labels on, and before we know it, we're back in the charade of "doing" rather than experiencing the being.

It takes practise to regain our sense of being home.

Task: Take a trip. *One day to the beach, a long vacation abroad, a weekend to a nearby town, an hour at a park. Pay attention to how you feel when you are in harmony with your new surroundings. Focus on those feelings, the sensation of "being home" and ask yourself how you might capture that feeling in your everyday life.*

A Poet's View

For me, there's no better nature experience than the stillness of a snowy, winter night. It was only in recent years that I understood the connection with the stillness of the night and the practice of being present in the moment.

The cold of winter is comforting to me. Perhaps because it is familiar—I was raised in a northwestern Ontario town on the shores of Lake Superior—perhaps it is in my Central European genes, I don't know. But I do like frigid temperatures; it makes me feel alive.

In the January before last, I stood at the boards of my 12-year-old son's outdoor rink while he practised shooting pucks. It was 19° C, a warm night by January standards. It was my job to keep him company while he stick-handled and performed shooting drills, and just before large, fat snowflakes began to fall, I found myself looking up at the sky, mouth agape, as if in a Peanuts cartoon strip.

When I looked over at my kid he was staring at me.

How could I explain the moment to him? He wanted me to be engaged with him, as he skated up and down the ice, showing me how he could stick-handle the puck and the force of his slap-shot, his skill in netting a one-timer.

Instead, I was thinking of the line in a poem I'd written, how "dreaming stars exist" and about the promise a night sky holds.

The Kid wanted a hockey mom; I was a star-gazing poet.

He banged a puck off the sideboard nearby and startled me. I imagined what he might have been thinking as he watched his mom staring up, seemingly at nothing. But as the snow started to fall, he, too looked up at the sky. We laughed as the snowflakes dropped onto our eyelashes and melted. We stuck out tongues out to catch the falling flakes.

It didn't last long, The Kid was back to skating in less than a minute, and my attention was his again.

Task: Spend some time outdoors, preferably close to nature.
Find a green space somewhere and practise being still, being present. Just being with nature.

Luck or Good Fortune? It's All the Same, Isn't It?

What is luck?

We all have highs and lows, emotional, personal, and professional mountain peaks and valleys, but we too easily recall the downside of situations and consider good fortune “luck” when luck often has little to do with the outcome.

It's as if we expect the worst and so we thank our lucky stars for a good outcome.

Most likely, easy recollection of negative outcomes served us well back in the day when we relied on our fight-or-flight response for daily survival. (Best to remember that a tiger was seen skulking around the watering hole, over the mound of berries we collected for last night's dessert.)

Last year, when another vehicle slammed into the side of my car, I was told over and over how lucky I was. The frame twisted and bent, the dash crunched, my own body bruised and injured, I had a hard time accepting this form of luck. A near miss would have made me lucky, but at every turn—on the scene, at the hospital, at the physiotherapy clinic—inevitably someone responded with what was sounding to me like a pat phrase: “you're lucky.” What they meant, of course, the EMS worker, the ER nurse, the ER physician, my family doctor, co-workers, and colleagues, was that I was lucky it wasn't worse.

I told friends that luck would have had the other driver running a red light before or after I cleared the intersection.

As I recovered, I better understood this well-meaning comment as a stand-in for something else, something more embittered and disingenuous.

Sometimes, we mean it derisively. “You're lucky,” can be an implied insult, or too lightly veil snarkiness when what we really mean is that the person we're calling “lucky” is not deserving of whatever good fortune has been bestowed on them. As if they didn't work for, or somehow haven't earned, whatever opportunity they've been awarded.

I heard this “luck” thing many times when I was worked as a freelance/contract technical writer. In many cases, as a self-employed writer, I often worked from home and earned

enough annual income in eight months to take four off. In my down time, I wrote. I got up every day and wrote; I blogged, I created a website, I submitted stories to literary publications. In short, I worked on my side career as a fiction writer and poet. And I tried, unsuccessfully, to get a freelance magazine writing career off the ground for almost a decade.

Sure, I felt lucky. It's not as if I didn't count my blessings. I was well-versed in the routine of 9-5 office work, so I felt blessed to have the opportunity to work in my home office, to make my own hours, to work at full-tilt in order to get chunks of time away from the corporate world.

Somewhere along the way, I learned to find this "luck" thing amusing.

Folks thought luck was the root of all my good fortune. As if it had something to do with obtaining writing contracts. A strong resume and skill set took care of that end of things. Sure, some contracts were lucrative, but employment agencies also took high percentages of my hourly wage. Luck is what some folks also called my time off between writing gigs. I called it unemployment. When the market could take the hit, I charged corporations more per hour. This was the result of good negotiation skills. When was the last time you heard someone call a lawyer "lucky" for billing \$200 per hour?

With self-employment came tax write-offs. Luck? No. A thorough and competent accountant.

Any success or advantage I gained was the result of hard work. Well that, and a strong work ethic, an ability to work with diverse groups of people, a willingness to compromise, to work weekends and weeknights, an adaptable skill set, and on-going professional development, to name a few things that helped.

While I often feel as if I were born “under a lucky star,” no such intangible thing earns anyone success in any endeavour.

I no longer respond to arguments about my luck because there’s a certain truth to the viewpoint that you make your own.

Task: Are you currently experiencing good luck or bad luck in your life? Challenge yourself to view your circumstances differently. Write a list of the things (good and/or bad) in your life and how your actions made them and how new actions can resolve them.

Recuperative Thoughts

When recuperating from a bout of cold, flu, or another other minor illness, by laying in bed or on the couch in front of the television, our bodies too ill to move, our minds are free to wonder.

Being forced into a place of stillness, our thoughts turn to regret, we start to ruminate.

A stuffy nose, a congested chest, leg in a cast, a bad back out (again), during any recuperative period past experiences can weigh heavy on you, too. Yet, despite how miserable you feel physically, there are benefits to being laid-up.

You can use this time for emotional recovery. While your body stitches itself up and with that comes the opportunity to revisit and overcome emotional wounds, past and more recent.

Because you are already feeling vulnerable, you cannot help but recall points in your past when things went wrong—someone said something to you that hurt your feelings; you were left speechless, unable to respond to a particularly rude comment; a decision you made led to someone's physical or emotional, or psychological impairment; you yelled at your child and feel guilty about it.

Instead of moping about it, filling your memories with regret, use this down-time to dig a little deeper into the events that continue to come to mind and deal with them. (Because if you don't you know that they will continue to resurface until you do. So, you're just putting off the inevitable.)

It doesn't take much investigation to identify the root cause (a stranger, a friend, a boss, a sibling) and to conquer the injury. Simply by using this recuperative period to free yourself of wound, you'll overcome it. You can do this by meditating—your body is still (you're already resting) and since half the battle is finding stillness, you've managed that simply by being physically unwell.

Look objectively at whatever perceived damage to you has been caused by the event(s)/person(s) , and ask yourself what you have learned from the experience, or what positive outcome came (usually much later) from it.

Understanding and learning from these moments helps you deal with what got you where you are today. The purpose of looking deeper into these events is not to lay blame, or to push yourself into finding fault with your choices and decisions. It is to assess your life and identify incidents that were hurtful, harmful, outright dangerous, or caused mild regret so that you can move past it, and move forward.

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One of the hardest things to accept is the role we played in the incident that has hurt us. We often ask ourselves: What could I have done to prevent the outcome? To have softened the blow? Could I have behaved differently?

Asking these types of analytical questions is better than begging the sky and asking, Why me?

A traffic collision one summer brought back memories of a single car accident I'd had 20 years earlier. In moments during my physical recuperation, which included three weeks of sleeping on a couch, I spent a lot of time between physiotherapy sessions and graduated-work duties thinking about both collisions and what they might mean on a metaphorical level.

In both incidents the cars were written off, damaged beyond repair, and my physical injuries were soft-tissue injuries—the type of injury that cannot be seen by others (bringing little sympathy the way broken bones and casts do)—and perhaps mirroring emotional injury that was also unseen, perhaps even hidden. Both car crashes occurred at times when I was at a crossroad in my life. Unhappy in my job and looking for a way to earn a living, hiding a want to explore my creative side. Both times I returned to jobs I did not like to pay the bills that resulted from the car accident.

After the first accident, it took me a year to recall the details of the crash where the front wheels grabbed hold of loose gravel on a back road causing me to swerve. I quickly gained control, but started by the close call, I slammed the brakes and the compact car, a small Honda hatchback, rolled several times before coming to a sudden stop by a boulder embedded in the hillside.

Metaphorically, my life tumbled into misery.

Fast forward 20 years and my car is hit broadside at about 60 km/hour and spun 130 degrees. Movement catches the corner of my eye as I drive through an intersection and I turn to see a car coming at me. It's maybe three feet from the driver's side door, my eyes fix on its bumper as the car aims its bumper at my door.

I blackout and regain consciousness. The car has spun 130 degrees. What message was I to take from this?

Was I going the wrong way in life?

Or was this simply, two "pain bodies," as Eckhart Tolle explains it, meeting on a roadway?

You may read something different into these events than I have. And you may see similarities to your own situation. For example, a collision on my left side may be a wake-up call to my logical side. Maybe the lesson was to the driver who hit my car. He ran the red light and was charged then found guilty in a court of law when he exercised his right to a trial.

It may show that I can live through a damaging event, survive, and even come away with something positive from it. Perhaps it was just a reminder of my own resilience. Or a way to give me the experience of a witness in court. Or a lesson to me to look at events from an objective perspective, rather than a self-pitying "woe is me" attitude.

There are myriad possibilities and we give weight to those explanations we can easily accept. Your perspective on incidents and events is what counts because the positive way in which you apply the lesson is the best possible outcome. And that will help you heal.

Task: Write about the experiences you most often ruminate about. Make a list. Pick the top three and write one paragraph (of any length) detailing the experience, one paragraph describing how you felt about it, and one paragraph narrating how you might react now or how you could have acted differently then (thereby changing the outcome).

Look at the incident(s) from a logical and objective point of view and in one or two sentences, state the lesson(s) you learned, or could have learned from the experience(s).

Intuitive Nudges

Do you follow your intuition, or do you ignore it? Maybe you don't believe or understand intuition. Maybe you think it's just a bunch of hokey created by touchy-feely, new-agey, spiritual freaks.

One of the problems with understanding intuition is that because it is a feeling, a sense, an impression, it is difficult to explain. If intuition were a mathematical equation, say algebra, or geometry, you will not only be able to find the right answer, but you would employ knowledge, skill, and logic to solve the problem. Intuition is felt, not reasoned, despite the silliness of software designers who use the word to describe easy-to-use applications, as in "our software is intuitive." Binary code is not intuitive. It is logical.

All that aside, intuition speaks to us in symbols and murky impressions, which makes it easy to ignore and hard to fathom. Even for the initiated, translating a gut feeling to real-world, real life experiences can be challenging.

My own experience with intuition has taught me to listen carefully to it because the alternative experience is not a preferable one. For example, listening to my intuition to stand in line at a lottery booth after work, despite nearly missing a commuter train, provided me with second prize lottery of \$29,900 a month before my wedding.

Is there something to this?

For me, the times I clearly remember not following my intuition—to call my father who died the following day; failing to return to the house for a camera I'd forgotten followed by a car crash that left me dealing with injuries for two years; even though I felt uneasy about doing so, giving a lottery ticket to a vendor who said it was not a winning ticket, but refused to give the ticket back to me—left me with experiences I would have preferred to live without.

I could go on. There are dozens of times my gut told me to be wary, to be aware, a situation in which I felt uneasy, or sensed trouble. I don't feel as if I need to make a case for

listening to one's intuition; I don't think I have to. You've probably had many similar experiences.

I am only reminding you to pay attention.

After all, I had solid, rational reasons for not calling my father. It was my mother's birthday and I because I had a copy of her work schedule, knew that she was working nights, so I called her at the hospital where she worked as a registered nurse; in the car, we had time to stop by the house to pick up the forgotten camera, but it seemed like too much of a bother, as if it was a waste of time when an elapse of time was exactly what would have made me late for the collision.

Similarly, I felt a pull to go to a local library (pre-Internet) to learn later that a writers group met regularly. I would have met a group of supportive writers. Instead, I met them years later after learning about the group online.

Those inexplicable nudges mean something. They are directing you to the best possible outcome. And they are trying to protect you from potentially harmful situations. Listen to them.

If the concept of intuition is too esoteric for you, imagine applying only the principles of logic to the workplace.

Have you ever walked into a room for a job interview and felt that it "wasn't quite right" for you, despite a very close match in the potential employer's needs and your skills? Did you later learn that the department underwent a management shake-up and folks were being laid-off?

Have you ever, like I have, resigned from a job and called a friend to share the news who told you of a job you would be perfect for? Or resigned and asked a former manager for a letter of recommendation only to be offered a dream job instead? Have you ever dashed off an email to someone you haven't spoken to in a while only to learn that they were just thinking about you. And your email reminded your former colleague of how perfectly you are suited for a terrific position that just came available at the company she works for?

Rather than resisting, or ignoring your intuition, following it allows you to go with the flow, which can be frightening to those who feel a need to control aspects of their professional and personal lives, but always results in unexpected results.

It also means trusting the universe more to provide what you need.

While I will never know for certain that the job I did not take would have been better than the one I chose, I know for sure that any time I made a decision based entirely on logic despite uneasiness I felt about it, rarely worked out favourably.

A pro and con list while helpful in looking at the upside of something without ignoring its downside is not the only tool one should use to evaluate opportunities in your professional life. Or your personal life for that matter. Following your intuition and going with the flow—following up on that gut feeling, rather than meticulously strategizing your next career move will work out better than you might think.

The more I lead with intellect and rational thought, the less I like the results. Besides, one way or another, things have always worked out. Why would this time be any different?

On the bulletin board in my home office there's one quote, pinned among a dozen others, that is an all-time favourite. The quotation reads, "trust in the process."

So, I trust my instinct, my intuition. I will trust the process. And in the upcoming year, I will leap with faith because I know the universe will catch me.

Task: Every day, for one week, write about times in which you put yourself in situations where you had to follow your intuition. Detail the results.

Physical Manifestation

I was very much looking forward to a long-weekend in Las Vegas with a friend whom I'd lost touch with and had not seen in 20 years, but as we confirmed the date of our girl's weekend, I could not shake the feeling that being away from home on that particular Saturday was not a good thing. It wasn't until the phone in our shared hotel room rang two days after we arrived in Vegas that I understood my reticence. My son had had a skateboarding accident the night before and he smashed his orbital bone and broke his nose when he missed a trick and planted his face on a trailer hitch.

As these things generally go, this accident was a mix of extra-ordinary events and timing: a borrowed trailer hitch to do a friend a favour, a truck backed into the driveway that is usually parked hood against garage door, a rainy Saturday night, two kids in tight quarters in the garage without the usual room to practise tricks, and a normally clean garage temporarily filled with storage, to name circumstances that added complexity to an uncommon situation.

Back home two days later, I considered my son's bruised and swollen face. I was convinced that the accident—in all its gory—had meaning, I just had to look for the symbolism, or the image beyond the injury. And this approach got me thinking about the way in which pain manifests.

As it turned out, this new way of thinking for me, this digging deeper, came in handy when I was severely injured in a car crash the following summer.

We might consider the breaking of bones, the injury to soft tissue, the disintegration of health, as a way to deconstruct an outdated view we have of ourselves. Even as we grow spiritually, when we look in a mirror we tend to see the persons we used to be, instead of the persons we've become, even when we feel different inside.

Perhaps the reflection my son saw in the mirror was fractured, and as the bones healed, he saw something different. Or, maybe, the perception he had of himself strengthened. Either way, at 12 years-old he wasn't able to articulate it, even if he could have identified with that line of thinking. The incident, however, showed me the value of looking at life in symbols and images, to deconstruct events that challenge us, and to view lessons that life offers me in a less obvious way.

It's never turns out to be about what we first think it's about, does it?

My own physical injuries taught me about our miraculous physical bodies and how they heal given time and rest and how simple exercise rebuilds injured muscles. It taught me about not holding on to emotional injury; that letting it go along with physical pain can heal past as well as current emotional trauma.

And I learned to see time in a different way. I could see, really see, the passing of time as moving forward rather than leaving something behind.

Task: Take a look at a particularly troublesome situation from an objective point of view. This can be difficult to do because we are so emotionally tied to tough situations and their outcome. Make a list of ten positive, progressive things could potentially result from a recent, challenging experience.

Quo: Where Am I Going?

Task: Write a paragraph recalling some of the events that may lead you where you wish to go. Remember to include at least one event that is: (a) geographical, (b) romantic, (c) financial, (d) professional, or (e) spiritual. Aim for four to six sentences on each topic.

