THE JOURNAL OF Creative Aging

SAGE-ING

with Creative Spirit, Grace & Gratitude

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KNOW YOURSELF. BE YOURSELF.
LOVE YOURSELF. SHARE YOURSELF.

ONLINE AT www.sageing.ca

FROM THE EDITORS

As the Journal moves into its second decade of publication, we seek to reflect the rich diversity of this third millennium. On the pages we uplift and strengthen our voice by sharing stories and inviting response. We have a newly expressed manifesto, as seen on our back cover. We are eager to engage with you along the many trails that celebrate creative aging. Integral to our belief is trusting that all creators need to feel "community," to know that we are connected to others on similar journeys, where the vulnerability and tenderness of our heARTS inspires us to reap the wisdom of Sage-ing With Creative Spirit. To that end, we encourage you to make a connection with the author of a story that particularly moved you, or evoked deeper reflection or questions. In most cases, contact information is provided at the end of each story with the author's bio note. Too, please send us an email to let us know how the issue "landed" for you, and what further thinking or action it inspired. Finally, we'd love to receive your story and read your words on the Journal's pages.

When we go within, relax into and fully experience the moments of our lives, gratitude for the magic of being creative urges us forward. For this issue we invited contributors to consider how a creative pilgrimage manifests into an expression of gratitude. In his recent book *Four Thousand Weeks* (a life to about 80 years) UK author Oliver Burkeman suggests that to live life to the fullest, people must choose to settle rather than strive, to come alive to ourselves. He suggests an exercise of looking at a painting for three hours straight. In WHY I LOVE VERMEER Antoinette Voûte Roeder, a contributor to our creative community since Spring of 2012, shares the pleasure of 'looking at a painting' with her husband. IN TROUBLED TIMES Tenneson Woolf advises "it is wise to live moment to moment," and, urged on word by word, Chris Lihou in GRATITUDE'S GIFTS shares the pleasure of "communicating something of meaning – perhaps, with hope, even of beauty." Her "lifelong musical urge" nudges Cate Helgeson in LUCKY STARS to find 'love at first sight.' Savouring the pleasure of her profession in SHE SIGHS, Virginia Madeline Stephen shares the love of "making possible the engagement of others with art and art making." Encouraging readers to join what she calls a GRASSROOTS GRATITUDE journal writing movement, Lorraine Widmer-Carson explains, "Writing longhand is my best tool for honing my sense of wonder, cultivating a positive mindset."

When we review the wealth of wisdom contributed to our pages though the past decade plus, gratitude abounds both in the articles and in our editors' hearts for all those who have generously created with us to build our community. Please consider looking through our back issues and catching our pulse. In Issue 5, Okanagan artist JULIE ELLIOT CONSIDERS ART, LIFE & PROCESS. "As I work, I process my thoughts and experiences. It changes me and I learn things that I wouldn't otherwise know because the whole of me finds alignment..." Julie continues to explain how her deep engagement aligned to inspire her to create "Art For Social Change." Recent contributors, Ron Bradley and Ray Lautt, shared a similar experience in our last issue. In A DELICATE BALANCE, they described how imagining, carving, painting and planting a log pole was a creatively inspired, deeply engaged response to climate change.

In a similar vein, for our next issue we invite you to consider how your experience of sage-ing with your creative spirit connects you more strongly to the issues surrounding us today. As always, making explicit a theme is only an invitation, and not meant to limit you sharing your story about your creative expression. We look forward to hearing from you.

HOW TO SUBMIT

The theme to consider for our next issue will be in the FROM THE EDITORS in each issue. Your story is to be original, related to creativity in any of its many forms, as a path to gaining self awareness and wisdom, and/or the act of harvesting your life's wisdom as a legacy for future generations.

Please attach it as a word document (.doc) – not a PDF - to enable editing, using calibri font, 14 pt, 1.5 spacing. 500 – 1500 word maximum (use word count).

Please attach 3-4 photos, separately, including: Your headshot, 2-3 photos related to your article. All photos should be numbered, given a caption, and attached in high resolution jpg. format. Insert the word "photo #" with its caption within the article where you would like each image placed (we'll try to honour this request as layout permits). Please include a brief bio note, written in the third person (one or two short paragraphs of up to 200 words). Your bio will be placed at the end of your article and is intended to give the reader an idea of who you are, your passions and/or what you do and have done with your life that feels relevant to the article. Please include your preferred contact information, including email, website, blog address – whatever you want included in the publication. In your cover email, please share how you found your way to submitting to Sage-ing. Please email your article and photographs to Karen Close at karensageing@gmail.com and Katharine Weinmann at panache@interbaun.com

Quarterly issues of The Journal go online around a solstice or equinox: March, June, September, and December. We need to receive your intention of submitting an article by the first day of the preceding month or earlier. **Your complete submission is required by the first day of the month preceding publication.**

WHO WE ARE

Karen Close, Editor, taught English and Visual Arts for 30 years. Retirement in 1995 gave her the opportunity to meet vibrant senior Canadian artists and to hear their stories. Indigenous cultures teach us, "All Elders have medicine—physical, emotional, musical, story. Let's give our unique medicine to the world." In 2011, believing in the medicine inherent in creative expression, Karen began editing the free online arts and aging journal *Sage-ing With Creative Spirit, Grace and Gratitude. She* is the author of two books. *Unfinished Women: Seeds From My Friendship With Reva Brooks* and *The Spirit of Kelowna*: *A Celebration of Art and Community* profiles a community art project in Kelowna, BC. In January, 2015 Woodlake Publishing released *Creative Aging: Stories from the Pages of the Journal Sage-ing With Creative Spirit, Grace and Gratitude.* Karen is the recipient of the 2016 City of Kelowna *Honour In The Arts* award.

Katharine Weinmann, Co-Editor, is a writer of poetry and contemplative creative non-fiction. She shares the beauty in her imperfect, sometimes broken, mostly well-lived and much-loved life in her weekly blog, *A Wabi Sabi Life*, a celebration of life unfolding in all its mess and mystery, grit and grace. awabisabilife.ca Katharine has been published in the global online *Abbey of the Arts* blog, *The Poets Corner* in Maine, USA, the online *Canadian Company of Pilgrims,* Edmonton Public Library's *Capital City Press Anthology (V.2)* and Off Topic Publishing's *Wayward & Upward Stories and Poems*. She wrote the poetry and forward for the upcoming anthology, *Weaving a Tapestry of Hope Through Alberta's Educational System.*

Johanna Beyers, Copy Editor, is a poet and mixed media artist. She began her career as a marine paleontologist, and holds a PhD in environmental policy and a Master's of Social Work. She is a certified sandplay therapist. Johanna is the author of Sandbar Islands (The Caitlin Press, 1988) and Wearing my Feathered Hat (Wind Oak & Dove, 2013). Her work has been published in The Capilano Review, Sage-ing, Room of One's Own, CV2, Waves, and elsewhere. She has been copy-editor for Sage-ing since 2018.

Robert MacDonald, Designer and Publisher, has lived by his wits, some hard work, and a good lashing of luck. Almost completely unschooled, he has, over several decades, invented identities as graphic artist, typographer, printer, community activist, publisher, information architect, program director, programmer, and designer. He hasn't finished with inventions. Having spent most of his life thoroughly urbanized (Toronto, New York, San Francisco, Vancouver) he is now nestled into the grasslands and orchards of the Okanagan valley. He finds profound solace in the virgin wilderness upland from his habits. His works have appeared in the journals Kosmos, Image, Sage-ing, and more, and he has chapbooks: Dead Drop and Headwinds, with more anticipated. He is transcribing several decades of writings from notebook to manuscript, and is otherwise biding his time.

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IN TROUBLED TIMES

Tenneson Woolf

Though it might seem strange to connect this month's gratitude theme with troubled times, my process for writing poetry is often one that brings health through metabolizing the fullness of life's experience into a few words and images. My gratitude is not just for resolution, but also for learning this can't happen anywhere but in the messy middle.

In Troubled Times of the Heart

In troubled times of the heart,
it is wise to live moment to moment,
to let the belly instinct within us,
tend to our animal nature.

In troubled times of the heart,
the deeply inner requests attention and honoring;
the muscles, the joints, and the cells
need time and spaciousness.

Little Dell Reservoir, Utah, U.S.A, January 2023

In troubled times of the heart,
the mind will resist getting still;
it likes to vigilantly run and rerun stories
in frantic search among dark landscapes.

In troubled times of the heart,
it is wise to surrender
to that which is dying,
and to that inner longing that so shyly peeks forward.

In troubled times of the heart,
let us remember that a new story need not yet come;
it can be a moment for a vacancy
to bring its unique and timely medicine.

Tenneson Woolf has, all of his life, been a person with as much interest in the unseen as in the seen, guiding him to a professional life of facilitation, leading workshops and teaching. Tenneson is also a poet who recently published his second collection, Most Mornings (CentreSpoke, 2022). Originally from Edmonton, Alberta, he now lives in Lindon, Utah, a small town where urban meets rural, in a valley at the foot of the Wasatch Mountains. He can be reached at www.tennesonwoolf.com, or by email, tenneson@tennesonwoolf.com.

WHY I LOVE VERMEER

(OR MY ARGUMENT WITH ART HISTORIANS)

Antoinette Voûte Roeder

Why am I so attracted to the paintings of the Dutch Masters, you may ask. Perhaps it's mere nostalgia for a childhood now lost in the mists of time, when my artist mother stood me before the huge painting of Rembrandt's "Night Watch" in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam; or the fact that I was born in our family home on the Rembrandtlaan in Naarden, in what we referred to as the painters' district. The Rembrandtlaan intersected with the Vermeerlaan, and the Jan Steenlaan was not far from either one.

But it's Johannes Vermeer I want to talk about. It's not as if I've seen many Vermeers in person, though I'm sure I've seen the ones held by the Rijksmuseum at some time, which I no longer remember. I recall best the three Vermeers held by the Mauritshuis Museum in The Hague, which my husband and I visited in 2011, the last time we made a trip to The Netherlands. There, of course, hung the girl with the pearl earring, a modest-sized painting, among others, as if she were no more special than they. Like many people, I lost my heart to the girl with the pearl a long time ago.

In the last few years, Vermeer has become a household word. My husband, who minored in art history when he was still working on his undergraduate degree, has been studying Dutch in order to be able to join his wife in her native language. In the process he has chosen to read books about the Dutch painters: Rembrandt, Jan Steen, Van Gogh, and our beloved Johannes Vermeer. We keep coming back to the latter, to books with large representations of his art, so detailed that we can see the cracks in the paint on the canvas. We sit together and he reads aloud, and occasionally I may correct his pronunciation or attempt to figure out the meaning of a particular idiom of which the Dutch are so fond.

Most of all we peer, we gaze, we marvel at the special genius of Vermeer – how he notices and notes light coming through a window, the soft shadow of a drape, the thickly tufted multi-patterned colours of a tapestry flung over a table, the deep folds of a woman's orange skirt, reflected light in her pearls, her hands beautifully and realistically depicted holding a glass, a letter, a pitcher, a lute, a guitar. Soft textures paired with hard lines of floor tiles and furniture, quizzical or thoughtful looks in the eyes, many scenes pregnant with a story we shall never know but on which art historians love to speculate. Vermeer liked maps and one would surmise had a strong interest in science, as attest his globes, his wall maps, his astronomer and his geographer. Though most of his paintings take place in one or two rooms, his muse also peopled the exterior world.

Art Historians

They would all be out of work
if they couldn't weave their stories
about Vermeer and the girl
her earlobe heavy with the pearl.

What they do is speculate
on intrigues and seductions,
lovers lurking off canvas
while the girl looks calmly on
unperturbed by centuries
of silly tales
told by silly men
whose thoughts
tend to linger
below
the
belt.

Girl With The Pearl Earring

The person attracted to art likely has the soul of a contemplative. "To contemplate," one definition I learned when following a course in spiritual direction, "is to gaze upon with love." The result of such gazing can be a kind of joining or merging with the object of one's contemplation. It is easy to "fall" into a painting and become slightly intoxicated with the deep pleats of a gown, the marvellous play of light and shadow, the wistful expression on a face. The love that takes hold of one easily extends to the painter whose vision and gifts allowed him to express himself in this manner.

I would like to think that I could love universally, but obviously nothing of the sort is true. Art historians really annoy me. I find, when I immerse myself in the writing and interpretations art historians and experts tend to offer, they inevitably come up with stories and speculations about the paintings that nobody can know. Vermeer paints mostly women, mostly privileged women, though he includes a few less privileged, to be sure. Perhaps that subject matter should already alert us to the track historians seem to love to follow. More often than not, a look on a woman's face, her hand on a glass of wine, a man's presence with her in the shadows of a room, lend themselves to remarks about her loose morals, her likely promiscuity, the chance she is a prostitute or that the letter in her hand is from a male not her husband, etc., etc.

What is this, I ask myself. Are these 21st century males bringing to bear the fact that sex sells everything and sensationalism is the order of the day? And why the speculative emphasis on the woman of loose morals? What about the other side of the coin, that it takes two and the equation always involves a man, also of the same loose morals? Could that be? However, there is no such story spun about the astronomer, or the geographer, or even the music teacher. Rather than enhance the enjoyment of these art works, this kind of storytelling only diminishes it for me. With difficulty the contemplative shakes off these learned conclusions and simply goes back to gazing, to revel in beauty, in genius, to behold with love what undoubtedly Vermeer himself beheld with love. And I am so grateful that he did.

I would like to think that I could love universally, but obviously nothing of the sort is true.

Antoinette Voûte Roeder grew up in a household in which classical music and art were a given. Her mother painted in oils, and Antoinette remembers the first time her mother planted her in front of Rembrandt's "The Nightwatch" in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

Antoinette made her career in music, married a musicologist, and all along the way wrote letters, essays, and poetry. Her latest volume of poetry available on Amazon is called *The Space Between.* She has had poems published in various anthologies and other literary resources. Antoinette is passionate about music, poetry, people, and the Earth, our island home.

LABOURS OF LOVE

Katharine Weinmann

Today as I tap out this piece, it is February 1, in the Celtic tradition the celebration of Imbolc, marking the midpoint between the Winter Solstice, our last issue, and the Vernal Equinox, our upcoming one. A time that hints at the first whispers of spring, though hard to hear in Alberta, with snow and a cold wind blowing in from the west, a chill factor taking the temperature down to -27 Celsius. Right now, cozily ensconced in my writing studio, with the portable heater blowing on my back, I imagine our founder Karen and various of my friends, each basking with the sun shining on theirs… Caribbean breezes wafting through elegant palms… the surf rolling in accompaniment. The gift of imagination. The sweet anticipation for spring and summer sunshine and warmth. The deep gratitude for the creative possibilities inherent in each.

It's been over a year since I began working with Karen as her co-editor and thinking partner – widening the field from which to invite and catch stories; polishing them for publication; imagining new ways to engage and create community among our readers and writers. What has impressed me from the beginning of my tenure is The Journal's commitment to making possible, in a simple, straightforward, supportive manner, one becoming a published writer. As one embarking on a next life chapter as a writer, submitting to journals and publishing houses, I've learned that leaning into rejection is a writer's "stock in trade." In our regular, old-school phone conversations to prepare for publication, I've lost count of the times Karen and I have each remarked on The Journal's capacity to make evident a feeling of gratitude for you who risk writing your stories, and to you who read and feel inspired to create, to reach out to a writer, and to us.

I've lost count of the times Karen and I have each remarked on The Journal's capacity to make evident a feeling of gratitude for you who risk writing your stories, and to you who read and feel inspired to create.

With The Journal's full and formal title, *The Journal of Creative Aging, Sageing with Creative Spirit, Grace and Gratitude*, our new manifesto (now always on The Journal's last page) uplifts and amplifies these gifts and qualities:

"Creative aging encourages you to engage with your inner life, to experience the grace of knowledge, to express gratitude for your gifts, *and to share them with others on the same journey. By doing so, you open the door to the creative person that lives inside you, the insights you possess, the lessons you can learn through your experience, the discoveries you can share with fellow creators, and the wisdom you can gift to future generations."*

Recently I shared with a friend that producing and publishing the Journal four times a year is a labour of love for a very small team volunteering their time,

experience and expertise. Each issue is an expression of our creative spirits for which there is no advertising nor subscription fee underwriting our efforts. This simple fact was underscored in the eloquent writing of Maria Popova, the creator of her own labour of love, *The Marginalian*, which she describes as *"a free Sunday digest of the week's most mind-broadening and heart-lifting reflections spanning art, science, poetry, philosophy, and other tendrils of our search for truth, beauty, meaning, and creative vitality."*

In her recent issue titled *The Vital Difference Between Work and Labor: Lewis Hyde on Sustaining the Creative Spirit* (Sunday, January 29, 2023), she references Hyde and his book, *The Gift: How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World (1983)*. Popova writes:

"It is a gladness to be able to call one's daily work a labor of love

The spirit of a gift is kept alive by its constant donation …

The gifts of the inner world must be accepted as gifts in the outer world if they are to retain their vitality."

"It is a gladness to be able to call one's daily work a labor of love, and to have that labor put food on the table the way any work does, dishwashing or dentistry. And yet such labors of diligence and devotion – the kind William Blake called "eternal work" – are somehow different, different and more vulnerable, for they enter the world in a singular spirit and are recompensed in a singular spirit, distinct from dentistry or dishwashing.

That spirit is the spirit of a gift – not the transaction of two commodities but the interchange of two mutual generosities, passing between people who share in the project of a life worth living …

At the heart of the distinction is the recognition that those fruits are offered to the world not as a service or a transaction but as a gift – 'the gift we long for, the gift that, when it comes, speaks commandingly to the soul and irresistibly moves us.'

In a sentiment that gladdens those of us who offer the fruits of our labors freely and are sustained by what is given freely in return, he (Hyde) adds:

'The spirit of a gift is kept alive by its constant donation … The gifts of the inner world must be accepted as gifts in the outer world if they are to retain their vitality.'"

Personally, I delight in knowing that Sage-ing, now nearing its twelfth anniversary, has been ahead of the curve in co-creating with you such gifts. Given freely, in gratitude and mutual appreciation among us who are thriving now as the largest demographic within North America. We who value such expressions of the creative spirit, *"those works of thought and tenderness that most help us live our lives …"* (Popova)

GRACE AND GRATITUDE

Davina Huey

I decided to ask around to see what people thought of this glorious word called grace. Just hearing the word grace, I feel lighter as if reminded of a good friend who drops by, unexpectedly, never to be forgotten, leaving in my home treasures, food and mysterious yet wonderful gifts.

I remember my grandmother sharing her story of women in her community getting together to share laughs, sorrows, food and fabric squares to add to a grand quilt that was being made for a friend's child who needed one. Each woman brought squares cut from favourite old dresses full of memories of dances, or an old blanket that had held a baby's first year of snuggles and sleep. A quilt was made of the memories and love of these women's lives. Recalling the stories my inquiries to friends about grace elicited, I thought of how each person I was asking was adding their squares to this conversation I am sharing.

I heard from an international-level snowboarder who said grace for him was the moment he was in the air flying through space as if everything stood still. For another it was when life flows with ease and acceptance, and mentioned how she felt the indigenous saying "All my relations," which recognizes the connection between animals, rocks, people and all things, is an example of grace.

"All my relations," which recognizes the connection between animals, rocks, people and all things, is an example of grace.

Another spoke of grace being the tuning in to God in perfect pitch, and the deep feeling of gratitude that is evoked when one allows oneself to be an instrument filled by grace. We talked about how grace seems to happen through us, and that the act of surrendering to something bigger than ourselves might be like opening a door to grace. Where I have experienced the welcome company of grace is in my relationship with music. Often words and music come through without effort, just simply spilling out of my heart and into the space around me. I feel such gratitude for these rich experiences that seem both musical and healing in their essence .

*In The Glow of Grace (*Davina and friends)

Grace can also be shared as compassion such as by someone like the Dalai Lama, who lives a life that offers grace to everyone he meets by being the generous, forgiving and spiritual person that he is. I think of the gratitude I have felt when I feel another's compassion.

Without looking into any dictionary definitions, but rather by each of us looking into our life experiences where we've felt gratitude for all that is, we can see so well the qualities of grace defined by both Christianity and Buddhism. In Won Buddhism, grace is defined as "recognizing and appreciating the indispensable relationships in our lives, that not only are we related, but that our individual existence is also indebted to one another." How well

this definition mirrors "All my relations." In Christian theology, grace is described as the "spontaneous, unmerited gift of the divine Favour."

As I considered what my friends shared with me, it appeared that grace finds its way into our lives in many ways, and I began to imagine their 'squares' of conversation and the quilt of grace our conversations were stitching. I suggest you take the time to ask your friends and family about their experiences of grace and gratitude and create your own quilt of 'conversation squares. I think that by sharing our experiences around universal concepts like grace, forgiveness and peace we will discover things about ourselves and understand the people around us better. We will feel gratitude for the warmth of "All my relations."

I'll conclude with a poem about Grace by D Liu:

By sharing our experiences around universal concepts like grace, forgiveness and peace we will discover things about ourselves and understand the people around us better. We will feel gratitude.

I love her like a warm august evening, like the embrace of an enchanted lover, like eagle wings patted on my back by a gentle elder, like a child's small hand in mine as we cross the street
Simply there and everywhere, waves of moments passing through my grateful heart, passing between each other and beyond
She sways and sings, and whispers life into us as we run across the grass and jump into the dark blue heavens
Circling the stars stretching across space and in an instant, returning home at peace in the stillness

Davina Huey has recently completed her Master of Counselling degree and looks forward to being a support for people looking to unwind their trauma responses to life, to dive deep and get to know who they are, and to step into a meaningful and creative life. She has worked for nearly eight years at the Ki-Low-Na Friendship Society and loves working with families and community. Her heart is very grateful and connected to Indigenous people. When Davina was 28 and diagnosed with Lupus and renal failure, a dream guided her to Indigenous healing ways. She feels the Indigenous healers and teachers who were so kind to share with her were an essential part of her healing. She is of Asian and European descent and appreciates the richness of cultural diversity. Davina is on the board of the Kelowna Arts Council and enjoys supporting many kinds of creative projects. She loves singing and guitar and is a member of a band called October Sky. Many of the band's original songs were written by her husband Robert Macdonald. She looks forward to exploring writing, travelling and spending time with family and friends.

LUCKY STARS

Cate Helgeson

My foray into music began like most, with piano lessons when I was in Grade 1. Mrs. Price was my piano teacher. I was dropped off at her home every Saturday morning for a lesson. She had cable TV, so while she was busy with the student before me, I was introduced to cartoons like "Inspector Gadget," "Dudley Doright of the Mounties," and "Underdog."

Musically, I was an underdog. Unbeknownst to me or my parents, I was already myopic. Due to my poor vision, the only note I could read was middle C. So I learned to play the songs Mrs. Price assigned to me by ear. The problem was I missed the rests. They were invisible to my naked eye. This omission seemed an irritant to Mrs. Price. One fateful morning, my lessons ended abruptly when I went home in tears because she scolded me. Piano was no longer an option, but that didn't deter my interest in music.

When I turned eleven, with my birthday proceeds, I bought a guitar for twenty-seven dollars. I thought it was beautiful, with its vivacious curves, long neck and blonde, varnished wood. Even though I had lenses to correct my nearsightedness by then, my parents declined to enroll me in lessons. So I taught myself chords and learned to play songs by The Byrds, The Sandpipers, John Denver and the like. As it is with any child, interests wax and wane, and eventually my once prized possession became a dust collector in the corner of my room.

It wasn't until 2015, when I was fifty-seven, that my interest in music was resurrected with the purchase of a garage sale guitar, bright pink in colour, for five dollars. But the neck was cracked and the action was too high, so it became a toy for my eldest granddaughter. Yet the desire to find some way to express myself musically lived on. Then, to my good fortune, I bumped into an acquaintance who builds guitars. When I asked him about a guitar for me, he measured the size of my hand against his, and said, "Your hands are small ... You'd be wise to purchase a Little Martin, or a Baby Taylor." When I asked him for a cost estimate, he replied, "They run anywhere from eight-hundred to twelve-hundred dollars." The expression on my face must've revealed my sticker shock. So he added, "Or, you could buy a ukulele for about a hundred bucks." The word ukulele instantly conjured images of Tiny Tim, strumming away on Ed Sullivan's stage, singing in a falsetto. I wasn't keen to tiptoe through those tulips, but that lifelong musical urge made me search 'ukuleles' on Amazon.

It wasn't until 2015, when I was fifty-seven, that my interest in music was resurrected ... that lifelong musical urge made me search 'ukuleles' on Amazon.

There were thousands of them in an array of prices and styles. There were several sizes to choose from too: baritone, tenor, concert, soprano and piccolo. I'm tall in stature and didn't want to dwarf the instrument, so I chose a tenor, with a long, slender neck and varnished, brunette-coloured wood. The purchase set me back one-hundred and thirty dollars. I felt the price was

reasonable, considering my musical ability. All I had to do was wait for it to arrive.

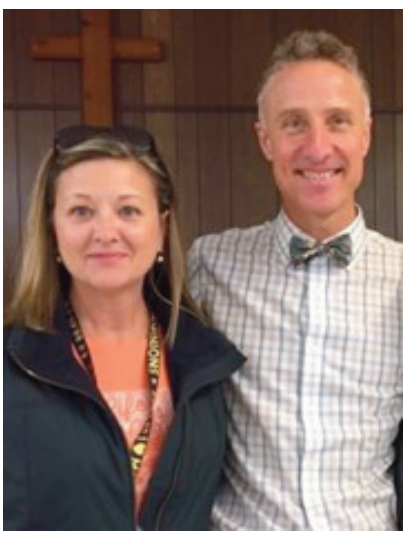
It appeared on my doorstep five days later, and it was love at first sight. I removed it from its box, cradled it in my arms and gently plucked its strings. Even my untrained ear knew it needed tuning. I hadn't thought to purchase a tuner and had no idea how to tune a ukulele. It has only four strings, a guitar has six. After some searching on the Internet I had my new ukulele tuned to GCEA. Next, I went in search of a few familiar songs with simple chords and started playing. Days later, I read a post on the bulletin board where I worked, advertising a ukulele circle startup in my community. The first meeting was just days away, on the first Sunday in September. It began to feel like the universe was working in my favour and my discovery of the ukulele was more providence than happenstance. I was going to join a ukulele circle, whatever that might be.

We sang and played and laughed together without judgement. It felt like a cozy sing-along, all that was missing was the campfire.

On that Sunday, I was welcomed by a group of about twenty cheerful ukuleleists. There were some novices like me, but many more had been playing much longer and had mastered strum patterns and fingerpicking. We sang and played and laughed together without judgement. It felt like a cozy sing-along, all that was missing was the campfire. I attended every month and practised diligently between meetings. Eventually, the circle began performing for live audiences. We played in parks, at seniors' residences, local markets and even greenhouses. The most thrilling performance, I recall, was when all the circles in the area gathered at West Edmonton Mall for World Ukulele Day on February 2, 2016. There were approximately one hundred and fifty of us. It was like being in a giant ukulele orchestra. This innocuous four-stringed instrument was expanding my horizons and taking me places I'd never imagined.

Ukulele Camp was my next adventure. It was hosted by the Northern Bluegrass Society, and was held at Camp He Ho Ha at Isle Lake, Alberta. It was a day and a half filled with music. There was music in every corner of the camp, and the musicians played through the night and into the next day. I was in awe of their talent and lulled by the dulcet sounds of bluegrass music. The Society had hired Ralph Shaw, "The King of the Ukulele," as our instructor for the weekend. I had just finished reading his book, *The Ukulele Entertainer*, so I was a little starstruck to meet him. Ralph was a generous and patient instructor. I learned new techniques, chord shapes and strum patterns under his tutelage. The culmination of the workshop was a performance for all of the attendees at the camp, and we rocked the house, all thanks to Ralph.

A starstruck Cate with Ralph Shaw



Now, eight years after my initial purchase, my collection of ukuleles has grown to ten. Like children, each ukulele has a name and a special place in my uke family. I still enjoy performing. I'm part of a ukulele band called The Leftovers. There were four of us, but life and the pandemic has whittled us down to just two. We've performed regularly in a local grocery store, at curling banquets and even the grand opening of a fast food restaurant. We focus mostly on seniors' residences now. That's where we bring the most joy.

Cate and Miss Prissy, an outdoor uke

Our repertoire of old songs lets the residents take a step back in time. Regardless of the level of cognition, toes tap, smiles spread, voices rise and hands clap. Some, if they're able, even dance. Whenever I can, I spread the gospel of the ukulele and help people get started on their own journey by lending a ukulele, sharing chord sheets and imparting some of what I've learned. Through my musical sojourn, I've discovered there's joy in starting my day making music. It lifts my spirits, and the songs I sing and play carry me through the day.

My affection for the humble ukulele has grown over the years, and my life is enriched because of this. The 'Uke' has opened new neural pathways in my brain and doors to new friendships. For all of it, I count my lucky stars. The rear window decal on my vehicle says it all, "Life is Better with a Ukulele."

Whenever I can, I spread the gospel of the ukulele and help people get started on their own journey by lending a ukulele.

Cate Helgeson was born and raised in Medicine Hat and moved to Edmonton in 1996. She retired from a thirty-year career in the telecommunications industry in 2008. Since retirement, she has enjoyed many artistic pursuits, from jewelry making to zentangle and dot painting. She has written, illustrated and self-published two children's books, as well as a book of blog entries after her mother's death entitled, "A Daughter Remembers."

In 1997, Cate registered with One Match as a potential stem-cell donor. Ten years later, she was chosen as a match to donate stem cells via apheresis. The experience of giving of one's self to save the life of a perfect stranger was life-changing for her.

Cate is devoted to her husband and family and very proud of her two grown children and five grandchildren. In addition to the ukulele, Cate has recently become addicted to pickleball. You'll find her on the courts in and around her community of Sherwood Park.
cate.helgeson@yahoo.ca

SHE SIGHS

Virginia Madeline Stephen

"She sighs at the pleasure of her profession …"
– Hannah Stephenson, "Sending Flowers"

A profession. I profess that there are times when professing is what has become my work, my career, one that is far from the norm. For something to be a profession, shouldn't it involve following a deep, core intent, a specific path, widely recognized as a valuable achievement, like say, a doctor, lawyer, dentist, accountant? Or does one just 'profess'?

But let me back-up here. Let's go back to a first experience that might give some clue to where I've landed. It is a Saturday morning, and twelve children are sprawled on a concrete floor in the 'vault' (I use that term loosely), surrounded by storage racks of the museum's art collection; paper, paint and brushes are strewn around. We've just had a discussion in the galleries about our relationship with animals and how animals inhabited the paintings in the exhibition. Then we heard a story about a particular animal, I suspect an original tale from the teller. Our task is now to paint a picture of an animal we know or wish we knew or fantasize about someday seeing. The place – the Hamilton Art Gallery; the teacher, my Aunt Madeline – artist, docent, puppeteer, magic woman of huge imagination and sense of humour. Curly hair caught up in a wildly coloured scarf, fingers, neck and ears adorned with chunky turquoise and silver, dressed in loose shirt and baggy twill trousers (all the better for hunkering down on the floor with the children).

It is a Saturday morning, and twelve children are sprawled on a concrete floor … paper, paint and brushes are strewn around.

All of this in the '50s, long before the age of hippies – ahead of her time. Was this a profession? Was this just Aunt Madi and what she is and does, not me?

Yes – I took art all through school but never felt that my work was other than ordinary and that I was certainly not infused with the magic that was Madi (although I am named for her). I thought I was on another path, but am ever grateful for an insightful school guidance counsellor who talked me out of applying to nursing school. Instead, I found myself becoming an art historian, an art educator and a researcher. Several years of teaching high school art and drama (and more or less surviving intact) led to shifting to the art museum world as an educator, curator, director and, latterly, a university instructor and administrator in art, creativity and museum studies.

So, what is my profession? Yes, it is about engagement with art and still getting a high from the sight of a new-to-me piece of art (or an old familiar) and diving back into research. It is about having my own art practice. It is about contributing to arts and culture projects and organizations as a volunteer or consultant in arts governance and management. But, what it mostly has been is facilitating – making possible the engagement of others

"My little dog, Sam" Virginia Stephen, aged 9, created at the Art Gallery of Hamilton

Top left: *circa 1957, Easter at Aunt Madi's complete with Easter bonnets just completed, and marionette dance. Author behind the marionette, her mother in blue with sister on her lap.*
Top right: Madeline Stephen Francis, *Northern River,* c. 1960, watercolour
Above: Virginia Madeline Stephen, *Winter Water,* 2022, hooked wool, silk on linen

with art and art making, with museums, with creative living, creative problem solving, and with life-long learning. And yes, occasionally someone asks – is that really a profession, a job?

I was not a child, or for that matter an adult, who would ever have been identified as someone with the confidence, faith in self, to have the ability (or desire) to put myself in front of classrooms, audiences, museum visitors, corporate groups, or to put that most close-held of all things, my own art. 'out there.' It took huge leaps, lots of tears and fears, a firm commitment to overcome the belief that others were doing these things better than I ever could, to jump in and keep going. Were it not for Aunt Madi perhaps it would never have occurred to me that to ground a life in creativity, learning about and facilitating creative expressions in others, as well as making art was even something one could do as a 'profession.'

Thank you, Aunt Madi, for letting me see your sighs of pleasure in what you did and opening the door to me – for the love of making, seeing, laughing, finding the moments in nature, making every event a celebration, and even cooking. It has not always been an easy ride or particularly lucrative, but its rewards – from being a catalyst to 'seeing' – are profound. Sigh.

Virginia Stephen has been engaged in a rich career of facilitating the engagement of people of all ages with art in formal and informal learning situations. As an instructor and consultant, she employs creative thinking activities and processes to build team and personal effective decision-making and thinking dynamics. Stephen's own art practices in fibre and paint underlie her education practice.

Virginia returned to Nova Scotia to live, make art and consult after several years in Edmonton as Director of the Edmonton Art Gallery, Executive Director of Liberal Studies at Faculty of Extension at University of Alberta, and on faculty of the Arts and Cultural Management Program. Previously she was Deputy Director, Head of Exhibitions and Education at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia for 15 years. She has curated over 30 exhibitions of contemporary, historic and folk art, and craft, published several exhibition catalogues as well as art books for children, and published in anthologies and peer reviewed journals.
vstephen.pearse@gmail.com

GRATITUDE GIFTS

Chris Lihou

Gratitude is the quality of being grateful. I'm now in my seventh decade, a time to feel grateful for being both alive and still retaining the many gifts my human body has to offer, despite some inevitable, age-induced decline. One such gift, for which I'm very grateful, is the gift of communication, mental acuity and imagination that allows me to express myself creatively in writing, via poetry and short, fifty-word stories.

Here are two imagined stories involving different gifts, and a poem that describes, in figurative language, the creative act of poetry making.

Gift of communication, mental acuity and imagination that allows me to express myself creatively in writing.

The Gift

The date was neither Christmas, birthday nor anniversary. There was no box wrapped in red ribbon nor a card espousing good wishes. It was simply a piece of paper. Typed thereon was stated, Normal. No abnormal or cancer cells present. A huge gift despite the absence of wrapping and bows.

Writing

John learned to touch-type as a kid. As an adult his novels gained wide appeal. John's later years became comfortable. As he continued writing, they continued selling. Sadly, slowly, his digits froze. Arthritis all but silenced his words and his known world. Technology: audio to text became a life-saving gift.

What is Poetry?

A miner's patient craft
Digging, searching, agonising
over words sifted from so many.
All well used, each with its own back story,
colourful, chaotic,
trash atop a refuse site
waiting to be chosen, repurposed.

Alongside life's swirling, raucous gulls
the Poet works quietly,
patiently seeking out
the most precise of gems –
linguistic diamonds
that when placed cheek to cheek
shine crisp light
on the author's intent.

Word by word, each tested,
introduced, one alongside another
assembling some new piece of art
without brush, tints or hues,
communicating something of meaning
perhaps, with hope, even of beauty.

Chris Lahou, a past contributor to Sage-ing, has dabbled in poetry over many years, but began writing more often in retirement. Following a cancer diagnosis, it became for him a form of therapy. Recently introduced to Flash Fiction, Chris finds the constraint of writing a story limited to 50 words inspiring. cplihou@shaw.ca

PAINT, PASSION AND POLITICS

Karen Close

"Imagine all the people
Livin' life in peace ...
A brotherhood of man ..."

Written by John Lennon in 1971, the lyrics of *Imagine* still call to my heart. I am filled with gratitude for the gift of dreaming/imagining/creating and I hear the words of Carl Jung: *"Often the hands will solve a mystery that the intellect has struggled with in vain."*

I believe creative spirit is its own superpower, which nudges the human heart patiently in many voices. My favourite painting has always been *The Dance*, by Henri Matisse, and I feel its energy when I paint with others. Since first learning about *Tunisian Collaborative Painting* I have eagerly explored its potential with groups large and small. Now is the time to harness the energy of collaborative painting for all.

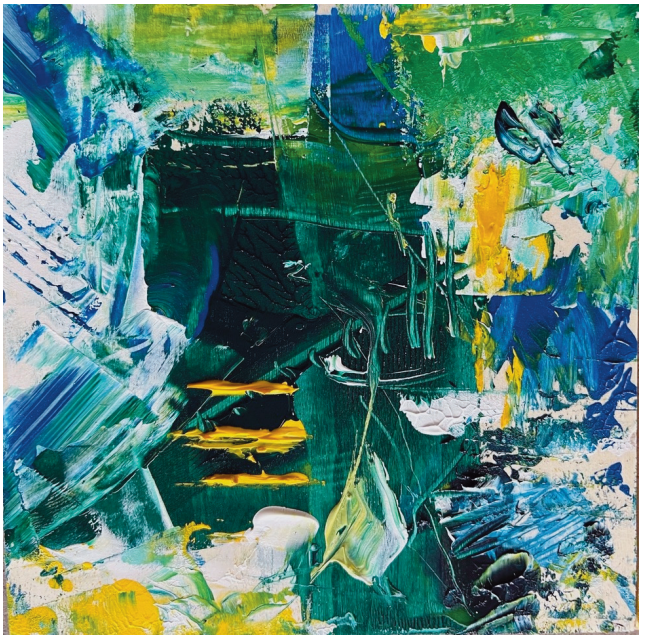
"Often the hands will solve a mystery that the intellect has struggled with in vain."

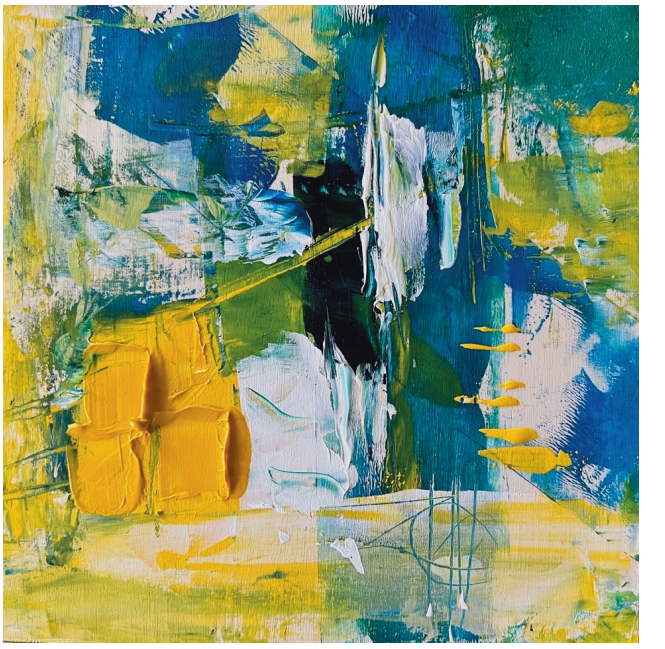
Now is the time to harness the energy of collaborative painting for all.

In 1988, when Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali became president and dictator of Tunisia, Tunisian artist Hechmi Ghachem responded. "Freely expressing yourself in Ben Ali's Tunisia was dangerous," said Hechmi, and he set out to reclaim freedom of expression for Tunisian artists. Hechmi's method is unique in that a group of artists must work simultaneously on a canvas without discussion or planning beforehand. The result is a painting created by a group of individuals that looks like the work of a single artist. To spread the message of his method Hechmi formed groups called Brigades and proclaimed, "The Brigades (like special army units) enabled artists to leave their professional loneliness and work in the same space, and on the same canvas. They created ties built on pleasure, excitement, struggle, jealousy, life, and love and death – the stuff of life that inspires creative acts. Together they produced paintings which mixed the best parts of themselves with the best parts of each of the other artists. One painting represented the individuality of all 'livin' life in peace'." Hechmi took his Brigades all over Tunisia. When a painting was finished it was given to the host who supplied the space where it was painted. Over a period of several years, hundreds of paintings were created. The works became a kind of mass media outlet. Imagine the act of painting as a social media outlet. Through the years many artists participated, some of them well-known and others who were new. The paintings they created together preserved the freedom of artists during the dictatorship of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. Their paintings nurtured a passionate belief in liberty and fuelled Tunisians over the next two decades as they endured dictatorship.

The power and reputation of Hechmi's painting philosophy grew, reaching borders beyond Tunisia. On November 8, 2010, five days of workshops in *Tunisian Collaborative Painting* were held at The Art Students' League of New York City. One hundred and twenty-five artists from 30 countries created 26 paintings, and each one of them looked like the work of a single artist. On December 17, 2010, a month after these workshops, back in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, a 26-year-old Tunisian, Mohamed Bouazizi, was selling fruit to feed his family. He did not have a government permit. Ben Ali's police took his fruit away, beat him and took away his scales, refusing to return them. Later that morning in front of the Governor's office, Mr. Bouazizi poured paint thinner on himself and lit a match. Word of his fiery death spread quickly, beginning protests in the streets. The Revolution

Images 1 through 4





Grouping
Collaborative Piece

ended a month later on January 10, 2011, when Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, the ruler of Tunisia for 23 years, fled the country. Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation, on December 17th, is widely seen as the spark that ignited the Arab Spring. In 2015 The Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet won the Nobel Peace Prize for its work in building a peaceful, pluralistic political order in Tunisia. I "imagine," but have no proof, that this quartet grew up as students of Hechmi's Brigades and their paintings.

"*Tunisian Collaborative Painting* is not about the work. It's about what the work does for you," said artist David Black, who brought the concept to North America. He continues, "*Tunisian Collaborative Painting*, purely by virtue of its simple set of rules, requires the elimination of desire in the creative act. Seeing what emerges without any pre-determination gives the artist incredible insight into what is possible through art. As a teaching tool, with its potential for visual expression, *Tunisian Collaborative Painting* has the potential to be a school unto itself." Exploring this method through the years continues to deepen my gratitude for what the approach does for me as I participate in the works and floods me with a deep appreciation as I look at the results. The brushstroke is a gestural capture of a moment in time. Through our hands we share in the language of art.

In the fall of 2022 I gathered three other women to paint with me. Three of us were familiar with the process. We were joined by a recently retired medical doctor who had just started to paint. We all participated freely and delighted at where the act of painting together led us. To ease into the process we each started on 6x6 inch canvases of our own surfaces with our own three randomly chosen colours on our palettes and painting tools of choice. At about the 5 minute mark we swapped surfaces and turned them around. The process continued almost as a dance as we moved freely between the 4 surfaces and used all palettes until we felt complete. Completeness is sensed through the eyes and a calmness that comes into the hands. The process engenders an enlightening sense of deep sharing and appreciation for the product rather than urgings of personal desire. We rotated and shuffled our 4 small canvases until we felt they worked as one unified expression.

Completeness is sensed through the eyes and a calmness that comes into the hands.

After a short time of sharing our thoughts we decided to work together on one larger canvas.

Again we knew when our work was complete. Directed by freedom of expression coupled with a desire to support each other and the work as it evolves brings confidence and brings unity to the painting. We collaborated through the language of art.

My Christmas gift

I have painted with my grandchildren almost since their births. Painting has become a common language, really the first language between us, and they eagerly run to my studio when they visit. On their last visit, as they looked around they felt the power of these recent paintings. We talked about what they saw. Yes, these are works without subject matter, but our many experiences together have taught them that every mark and gesture imparts the painter's moods and every colour has its emotional equivalent. My greatest pleasure is that now at ages 12 and 13 both my granddaughters have developed the confidence to explore freely in paint with no direction from me. Before Christmas they spent a lot of their time in my studio, and below is their Christmas gift to me. They were very proud, and I was filled with gratitude. They felt the joy that is the superpower of creative expression when individual spirits relax and find direction from within.

I hope this introduction to Tunisian Collaborative Painting may inspire you to gather a group together, give it a try and send The Journal your results and comments on the experience. Our Sage-ing community in harmony with creative spirit can become contemporary "Brigades" showing the way for "Livin' life in peace." This general suggestion of form and a passion for peace in these times is all you need.

At ages 12 and 13 both my granddaughters have developed the confidence to explore freely in paint with no direction from me.

"There must be at least three artists with a maximum of seven. There is no preconceived subject. One artist starts the painting. Anyone can paint at any time and anyone can paint over anyone else's work. One artist is appointed an arbiter to settle disputes. If any artist thinks the painting is finished he raises his hand and the arbiter takes a vote. Only a majority of the artists can declare a painting finished. A painting can take a maximum of three hours. The painting is created in silence."

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tunisian_collaborative_painting

GRASSROOTS GRATITUDE

Lorraine Widmer-Carson

From my earliest memories, I remember talking to myself. Decades later, I still talk to myself, but now I use a pen and paper and, in the silence of the morning, I write longhand for about 30 minutes. I write at least three pages of "Notes to Self," lists, memories, plans, puzzles, urgent concerns, and possible actions. Then, when I have finished waking up, I write emails. I write "Grateful Updates." I write newspaper columns or articles, and some days I post to social media.

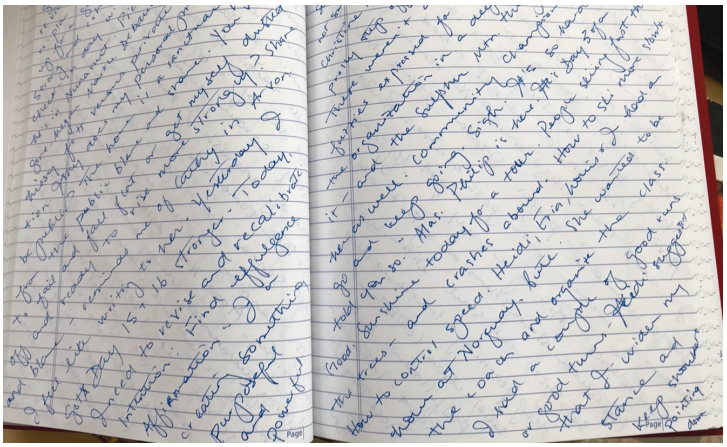
For over 12,000 days I have been writing to myself – usually in the pre-dawn hours, with a cup of coffee and a hazy view of my reality from a not-quite-awake state of mind. Over 150 journals line the shelves of my bookcase. I don't plan on rereading them – but they are a valid testimony to my legacy as someone who tried to pay attention and was thoughtful. Every single day.

In 1994, our four children were ages 3 to 11; I was recovering from a broken ankle, my mid-thirties compass was spinning wildly, and I found a book, *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity,* by Julia Cameron. With this tool in hand, I gave myself permission to anchor my day with a morning routine that made space for my own thoughts and dreams and aspirations. By committing to a practice of writing longhand, I was slowing things down before accelerating into a life of schedules, events, hard work, training plans, aspirational goals and the business of community service and philanthropy.

Reluctantly our family woke up to a world changed by September 9, 2001, to newsfeed foreboding the devastating impacts of forestry practices, resource extraction, financial and social inequities and the burgeoning demands of our global population. Through the turbulence of global upheavals and small-town politics, writing has been my personal tool for figuring things out and attempting to make sense of things that are mind boggling, beyond comprehension and completely alarming. My writing helps me find cracks of light in the chaos as I doggedly search for light, hope and optimism.

Journals on the shelf…

Long ago, I gave myself permission to write on a slant across the page. "Writing to the sky," my friend once said. Writing across the lines seems like a minor act of defiance. Writing on an angle helps to unlock the voices in my head – many of them childlike and silly. Recently, I learned that, according to handwriting analysts, this diagonal writing style is a sign of optimism.



Top: Writing On A Slant
Above: Lorraine showing *An Ecology of Gratitude: Writing your way to what matters* to a child

For thirty years, I have been writing according to three basic rules:

1. Write longhand with a pen and a paper. *Three pages, and at least 20 minutes. Every day. For me, mornings are best. No distractions. No excuses. Whatever comes to mind is fair game – but keep showing up at the page like it matters. It does.*

2. Pay attention. *To life – past, present, future, but in times of overwhelm stick to the moment at hand. While walking in nature, talking to friends, listening to friends. Try to understand the point of view of 'other,' and later you can filter those thoughts through the sieve of your inside voices.*

3. Nurture your creative soul. *Stay open and curious. Deliberately seek and look for the good things that are happening. Write from a place of humility and gratitude. Write with a sense of innocence, savouring your special moments with awe.*

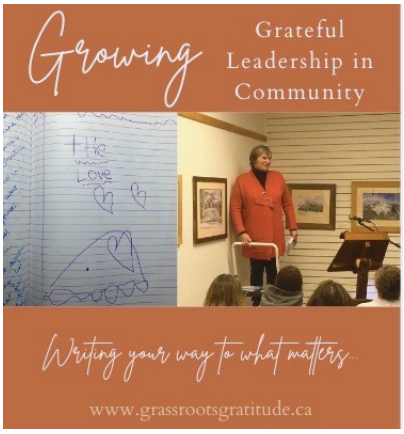
Writing longhand is my best tool for honing my sense of wonder, cultivating a positive mindset, for thinking about my bucket list goals and for motivating myself to take baby steps. When setting goals or making a work plan, the journal reminds me of my supporting characters – the names of colleagues and acquaintances who might help me and yes, take note of those who may hinder.

Often, as I am writing along and a cliché or a familiar pattern of thought appears on the page, I can stop and ask myself: "Is that really true?" or "Do I really believe that?" Then I can challenge myself to paraphrase the statement or say it another way, using my own voice and original language.

In January 2020, I decided to commit to writing a book. Happily, COVID demanded that I stay home and write, and as I worked on my passion project, I realized that, yes, writing helped me with my creativity, gave free rein to my imagination and prevented me from suffering from writer's block. More than priming the pump for publication though, writing longhand is a practice that at times is:

- Spiritual – thoughts, words, prayers, words become a written meditation
- Self-actualizing – writing helps to declare your own ground zero and determine your matters of greatest importance
- Social – in the pages of a journal, names appear and you realize there is a large cast of characters influencing your journey
- Mnemonic – writing things down helps you remember. Ironically, writing can also help you to process the tough stuff and then forget it.
- I have a virtual file folder in my head labelled: "Do. Delegate. Defer. Delete."

In January 2020, I decided to commit to writing a book. Happily, COVID demanded that I stay home and write, and as I worked on my passion project.



Lorraine leading a conversation about Grassroots Grassroots Gratitude's BHAG (Big, Hairy, Audacious Goal): Everyone will shift their relationships to each other and to the planet by building habits that support their efforts to connect and to care – for themselves and each other.

Grassroots Gratitude
https://grassrootsgratitude.ca
is a social-purpose venture that took root as its founder was writing her book, *An Ecology of Gratitude: Writing Your Way to What Matters*. It is the brainchild of community advocate, author and master journal writer Lorraine Widmer-Carson. Lorraine's mission is to encourage others to be curious about and cultivate their self-awareness related to their personal strengths, history, resilience and leadership context. She advocates for the benefits of writing longhand while getting down to basics. In her experience, writing a journal has assisted her understanding of the swirl of life and its variables. It has sharpened her focus and ability to listen, helped her to understand the things that really matter in the short term, while always keeping the bigger goals in mind. For Lorraine, the important things are relationships: to family, to community and to place.

• Reframing - Sometimes, it isn't about finding the right answer but asking the right questions. Over time, by playing with words and ideas, I can write my way to describing my ideal helper, my best next step, or identify my own strengths and weaknesses. Writing helps me deal with the tough stuff and see my role in the story of my life.

Now, later in life, my morning writing practice helps me to define "My Legacy, Life Purpose and Leadership" – with my journal as my personal coach and counsellor, I can begin to identify my priorities and processes for stating, remembering, revising and moving in the direction of "my legacy wishes and noble goals." How do you want to be remembered?

Today, I realize the blindingly obvious – writing is a form of self-mastery and my express route to defining the things that matter. These things? They are the things for which I am grateful. With the hindsight of lived experience, I whole-heartedly concur with the researchers, psychologists, human development specialists, philosophers and theologians: Gratitude is a complex psycho-social-spiritual-physical force that works wonders.

Gratitude is a social glue, an emotional activation agent and insists that we act on our life's purpose. Gratitude is a pro-social motivator. Gratitude grounds me with my priorities and helps to anchor me in place. Gratitude is the rhizome that connects me to myself, to my networks and to my essential matters – as a human being. Unpacking the ideas that have been percolating since I was five years old, I can now talk to myself with confidence, because I have been writing to myself for over thirty years.

By starting in the privacy and safe pages of private thoughts, you can freely explore your reasons to be more grateful, less resentful; you can frame issues with greater clarity, less confusion; with self-awareness and confidence; anxieties and fears lose their power; by valuing your connections to others, you can minimize the risks associated with loneliness and isolation.

Are you ready to soften your gaze and greet the dawn of a new morning? Make your way to your private desk and open your notebook. Take some long deep inhales and slow exhales. Write the date and keep going for twenty minutes: "Today, the most important things are…"

Write about anything and everything that floats to mind. Close the book. Put your journal in a safe place, stand up, sigh deeply and stretch your arms wide, feel a crinkly-eyed smile that extends from ear to ear. Then say to yourself: "Go get 'em tiger!"

ON GRATITUDE

Robert MacDonald

"I would maintain that thanks are the highest form of thought, and that gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder." – G.K. Chesterton

Mary Jo Leddy invites us to imagine gratitude as the most radical attitude to living life.

The 2002 book *Radical Gratitude*, by one of Canada's most courageous writers and social activists, Mary Jo Leddy, invites us to imagine gratitude as the most radical attitude to living life, that gratitude bridges the gulf between our spiritual and material concerns. The growing dissatisfaction bred into us by advertising and consumerism is soul-destroying and dispiriting. Gratitude arises in that space where our deepest longings find the glass of life to be half-full rather than half-empty. By coming to appreciate the earthy things around us that give true and lasting joy, we open the path to greater authenticity and discover what is most real in ourselves. She writes:

I believe that at least once in our lives, perhaps once in a year, maybe even once a day, we are recalled to our true selves and to the meaning of our lives. Such revelations are given to each of us in generous recurrence. These invitations can be missed, denied, accepted or rejected – life impresses but it does not impose.

Mary Jo Leddy is not a pop psychologist offering placebos or platitudes, as much of the current blather about gratitude seems at first glance. Her insights are garnered from her active life divided between university teaching and co-managing a four-house refugee sanctuary in downtown Toronto. Her insights are both accessible and authentic, such as appreciating that what we have already been given by the sheer fact of life provides more real satisfaction than endless cravings for more things and more experiences:

There is a moment each day when it is morning before it is morning. Darkness still hovers over the deep. Those who wait for the dawn can hear it even before they see it.

Mary Jo Leddy

Leddy believes that ingratitude is "ingrained within every social class within the culture of money" and that it lies at the root of our "difficulty in loving God beyond guilt and in loving others freely." In contrast, she salutes the exemplar of radical gratitude, the American social pioneer Dorothy Day. Of course, Jesus is the prime example of radical gratitude.

And she has a parallel from an unusual place, the progressive Ameri-

can writer and social critic Barbara Ehrenreich, who in a *New York Times* article in early 2016 stated: "Gratitude is hardly a fresh face on the self-improvement scene." By the turn of the century, Oprah Winfrey and other motivational figures were promoting an attitude of gratitude. Martin Seligman, the father of positive psychology, which is often enlisted to provide some sort of scientific basis for positive thinking, has been offering instruction in gratitude for more than a decade. In the logic of positive self-improvement, anything that feels good – from scenic walks to family gatherings to expressing gratitude – is worth repeating."

Ehrenreich insists that positive thinking was in part undone by its own silliness, glaringly displayed in the 2006 best seller *The Secret*, which announced that you could have anything, like the expensive necklace you'd been coveting, simply by "visualizing" it in your possession. She continues:

"So it's possible to achieve the recommended levels of gratitude without spending a penny or uttering a word. All you have to do is to generate, within yourself, the good feelings associated with gratitude, and then bask in its warm, comforting glow. If there is any loving involved in this, it is self-love, and the current hoopla around gratitude is a celebration of onanism."

Gratitude begins in our hearts and then dovetails into behaviour. It almost always makes you willing to be of service, which is where the joy resides.

Gratitude begins in our hearts and then dovetails into behaviour. It almost always makes you willing to be of service, which is where the joy resides. It means that you are willing to stop being a jerk, a shallow, vain, and empty version of your true self. When you are aware of all that has been given to you, in your lifetime and the past few days, it is hard not to be humbled, and pleased to give back. A different and utterly inspiring voice in the gratitudes fest is the essayist Anne Lamont, whose book *Help Thanks Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*, appeals to our best angels:

"Gratitude runs the gamut from shaking your head and saying, 'Thanks, wow. I appreciate it so much,' for your continued health, or good days at work, or the first blooms of the daisies in the public park, to saying, 'Thanks, that's a relief,' when it's not the transmission, or the abscess, or an audit notice from the IRS. 'Thanks' can be the recognition that you have been blessed mildly, or with a feeling as intense as despair at the miracle of having been spared. You say Thankyouthankyouthankyouthankyou: My wife is going to live. We get to stay in this house. They found my son; he's in jail, but he's alive; we know where he is, and he's safe for the night."

Alan Jones, Dean of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, and John O'Neil, President of the Center for Leadership Renewal, in their book, *Seasons of Grace: The Life-Giving Practice of Gratitude*, write: "Gratitude – as conviction, practice, and discipline – is an essential nutrient, a kind of spiritual amino acid for human growth, joy, and creativity." They are convinced that this spiritual practice must not be viewed as an exercise in etiquette or as just another virtue to cultivate, but rather as a wholehearted response to the bounties of life, as a way of keeping alert to what is happening inside and all around us, as a practice of attention. Take away the daily experience and expression of gratitude, and life is quickly diminished. Like a weakened immune system, the spirit is left vulnerable to the diseases of cynicism, anger, low-grade depression, or at least an edgy sense of dissatisfaction. Gratitude-deprived, we suffer a relentless loss of vitality and delight. Gratitude is a vital dimension of mature spirituality that celebrates the ties that bind us to others:

Going live involves deciding where to focus our attention. Human beings, suggests the poet and translator John Ciardi, are what we do with our attention.

Every day the world offers itself to be seen. Seeing things with a grateful eye requires attentiveness and engages our imagination; imagination is a way we take part in the world, not escape from it. We can train ourselves to see the immensity of the commonplace, the world offering itself to our imagination every moment. A poem, a piece of music, a particular smell: if we pay attention, these can open up new worlds.

Such ordinary experiences not only affect the present moment but also shape our sense of the future. In other words, they give substance to hope. Sometimes it's as if a piece of music or a painting or a book takes possession of us, and we feel amazed and honored to have such guests inside us. We become the host of the undreamed and unexpected. The genuinely new becomes possible. Springtime returns.

Going live involves deciding where to focus our attention. Human beings, suggests the poet and translator John Ciardi, are what we do with our attention. Or as the mystics would say, we are what we contemplate. If we give our best attention to things that ultimately fail to satisfy us, we get into trouble. Going live, then, may be the act of attending to what's really going on inside and around us. This can be unnerving, because it sharpens our awareness of life's fragility and difficulty. But it also awakens us to life as a gift and starts the wheels of gratitude turning. The positive feedback that gratitude produces is what allows us to stay live, to not shut down.

In attempting to pick a "first tier" virtue, Jonathan Last, author of the 2014 book *The Seven Deadly Virtues*, tosses chastity and temperance out first, along with thrift, simplicity, fellowship, justice, curiosity, prudence and courage. Not valid, not realistic, not of our times and temperament. He then makes the case for gratitude. Cicero declared, "Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others." It is the alpha, the point from which all virtues must begin. Gratitude allows us to appreciate what is good, to discern what should be defended and cultivated.

Our first instinct in all things must be gratitude: for opportunity, for creation, for love, for mercy, for understanding, for grace. We must start

from gratitude: that a universe grown from randomness could have turned out so fortuitously, with such miracles as mathematics and medicine, poetry and opera, boogie and beer. We value these things not because they are triumphant and invincible but because they are precious and vulnerable, because they weren't fated to happen, and they're not certain to survive. They need us – and our gratitude for them should move us to defend them and to build on them.

That is what creativity is all about: honouring and using the past to build a better future, however we can.

That is why we have grandchildren, that is why we feel awe in the forests and wetalands, that is why silence, and solitude, is not emptiness.

Gratitude magnifies the sweet parts of life and diminishes the painful ones. It is the wellspring of humility and ambition, the magnetic pole for prudence, the platform for courage, the inducement to charity and mercy.

We create not because we are dissatisfied with the world as it is, but because we are grateful to all those who have created it to this point, and wish to repay them by making our own contributions to their inspiration and work. In awe of the giants, especially those from not that long ago – people like Aldous Huxley, G.I Gurdjieff, Dorothy Day, Rudolf Steiner, Jane Jacobs, and E.F. Schumacher, for instance – we add our contribution to the greater good. We pay, and pray, and play it forward.

Our first instinct in all things must be gratitude: for opportunity, for creation, for love, for mercy, for understanding, for grace.

OUR KIND OF INTIMATE

Photo by Mike Hensen

Penn Kemp

What could be more intimate than
constant streaming on our screens,
images plastered on the occipital
nerve, imprinted, planted, permanent?

What more intimate than a tiny cell,
replicating green and reptilian-spiked,
one that multiplies in our bodies as
Covid spreads, as familiar Omicron?

What more intimate than a deep love
roping in family, friends, and foreign
faces on the Web to our known orbit?

In the knowledge that we are all one
multi-armed huge beast we call humanity.
backed for or against, wholly, alone.

What could be more intimate than
a marriage under siege, the bride's
bouquet between her and him in
camouflage, weapons at the ready?

A sharp pang of metal piercing flesh,
the rude intrusion of steel into bone.
Sounds haunting the bloodstream
linger along what once were halls
of the bombed maternity hospital,
children still under the walls, not to
speak of infants, mothers in labour.

What more intimate than the time
when thought coalesces into form
between pen and paper, text onto key
board? Before words arise and fall

in place, the sacred alphabet arranged
just so in orderly progression that never
before has taken shape, as the poem is
birthed? Its aftermath, crimson placenta

of relief, grief given way to gratitude
that something remains while entire
civilizations collapse and fall. The fall
resounding rings hollow down our ears.

In our time and beyond, throughout
the barriers of history being broken,
the current kind of intimate intimidates
us not into submission – but to action.

Penn Kemp has participated in Canadian cultural life for 50 years, writing, editing and publishing poetry and plays. "Our Kind of Intimate" was published on https://poets.ca/npm22-blog-penn-kemp/ for National Poetry Month on the theme of intimacy for the League of Canadian Poets. The League of Canadian Poets acclaimed Penn as a Foremother of Canadian Poetry, their 2015 Spoken Word Artist, and the League's 40th Life Member. Recent collections are *A NEAR MEMOIR: NEW POEMS* (Beliveau Books) and *P.S.*, a chapbook of poetry in collaboration with Sharon Thesen (Gap Riot Press). *POETS IN RESPONSE TO PERIL*, an anthology in support of Ukraine, edited by Penn and Richard-Yves Sitoski. See www.riverrevery.ca, www.wordpress.com, and www.pennkemp.weebly.com.

"A poem begins in the deep intimacy of pen to paper, fingers to keyboard. Hunkered down in cosy comfort, I listen to the quiet between the lines. I wait for the word to drop into a poem. One word, then the next, and the pause between. I feel immense gratitude for time and space in which to write the poems that come as gifts as well as those I work hard for – what a privilege. The greatest intimacy is with oneself, alone, and finding freedom in full expression, on one's own. For me, this new solitude is literal in the isolation, aloneness that the poem requires. No matter the cost, I am thankful. During this time of crises on so many levels, I'm grateful too for community." – Penn

NO REGRETS

Jacques G. LeBlanc, MD, FRSC

"Creativity is the most fundamentally human characteristic."
– Edward O. Wilson, *The Origins of Creativity*

I have often heard aging people say either, "I have had a good life. I have no regrets," or "If I had known, I would have travelled more or done things differently." Like many people, I would have liked to have done more travel, to have made different decisions as a surgeon, as a leader in my field, about my investments, and probably others. Despite what I have not done or would do, I can sincerely say I have no regrets. As I explored this internal place of no regrets, I found gratitude, feeling privileged in my life. How did I get there?

I proposed living in retirement to be a new journey, a pilgrimage for reflection and exploration. I discovered my creativity. Transition, I thought, is a passage to something new. I was developing a new beginning, on the threshold of reinventing myself and finding a new way to come into life. I began a process of steps taken one at a time on this new path. Little did I know that I was on a creative pilgrimage. After multiple discussions with my friend, psychologist Rory, I decided to write a book. I laid down lessons I had learned from my father that I had applied through my medical practice, and these laid useful guidelines for new upcoming doctors. This writing was a great exercise for understanding my path in life, and the process led to further writing where I began to put my feelings, emotions and memories into words. I had a hard time expressing my emotions and feelings in words, but writing became an outlet for opening to myself. While my journey after leaving my surgical practice challenged my identity, it has also increased my awareness to question my priorities. I have opened, or liberated, my creative spirit and I have reviewed and renewed myself. Perhaps what is emerging for me, and for society in general, is an awareness that there are many paths to knowledge, self-discovery and self-growth. Here lies my creative pilgrimage.

Writing my books has led to an appreciation of what personal gratitude is.

How did this newfound creative spirit lead to gratitude? Exploring this intricate relationship was a new discovery for me. Writing my books has led to an appreciation of what personal gratitude is. I would not have reached this discovery without enjoying my retirement as a beautiful journey, a period of change and even uncertainty, finding a sense of myself beyond being "Dr." Seeing more of myself as I emerged in my writing was a gift.

Wisdom, resilience and a well-rounded, mature perspective on life are often credited as the hard-earned rewards of aging, and growing old itself is an accomplishment not everyone is able to enjoy. Looking and feeling good past the age of sixty requires a fine-tuned combination of aging gracefully, a touch of defying the laws of nature, and developing the power of our

In Gratitude

creativity. There is a growing consensus that creativity has the power to change lives, perspectives and the world around us as we express our fuller selves, challenge norms and build something new and exciting. This powerful tool can be harnessed by anyone with the imagination and courage to explore new possibilities and their own creative potential. Gratitude can arise from our creativity because we discover previously dormant possibilities within waiting to be appreciated. Our sense of self expands. It certainly did for me. Deepak Chopra says that "The best use of imagination is creativity, while the worst use of imagination is anxiety." Anxiety is another subject that one should explore. Gratitude is the antidote to anxiety and fear, allowing feelings of grace and well-being. Showing gratitude and appreciation improves not just happiness and productivity, but also creative thinking. One reason for the connection between creativity and gratitude is that being grateful reduces stressors in our lives. When we are stressed, we are more rigid in our thinking, resulting in less creative thinking. I certainly have experienced that myself. The less anxious I am, the quieter I am, and therefore receptive to the world and to my own creativity.

Deepak Chopra says that "The best use of the imagination is creativity, while the worst use of imagination is anxiety."

I will relate a small story. On my last drive to Palm Springs to see friends, which I make as a pilgrimage of reflection, I noticed that, in the morning, I had a coffee, driving slowly, enjoying the scenery and having light thoughts about my life. As it got later in the afternoon, my driving was taken over by my thoughts of 'how far do I want to go,' and 'what specific destination do I want to reach.' I was getting anxious, driving faster and didn't think much about my pilgrimage, the real purpose of my trip. Why did I let my pilgrimage become diverted?

Just a word about the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a clarifying effect in many respects, such as making us more aware of priorities and lifestyle. One of these awarenesses is the new direction of creativity and art at this moment when people worldwide have found authentic meaning in expressing themselves creatively, whether through painting, singing from the balcony or baking. The coronavirus-induced isolation, which we have all experienced to some degree, reveals the importance of this type of psychological creativity. I am somehow grateful to Covid-19 for inadvertently giving me time to pause. While this period challenged our needs for social interaction, it also gave me a chance to reflect on my priorities. It allowed me the space to reflect on my life, to become more open and willing to explore my creative spirit, while leading to a new level of gratefulness. In practical ways, this pandemic allowed me to focus on my writing, giving me ample time for introspection and self-examination.

My journey in finding myself and in reinventing myself is not over. I know a lot more about myself, my feelings and my emotions. I am not a new

person, but I hope I am becoming a more evolved person, a more grateful person. Once I had completed the first book, it seemed much easier to delve even further into understanding the path I had chosen in another book. The process has allowed me another way of understanding my uniqueness and how I fit into collective humanity. I became grateful for how my discoveries about myself have pushed me forward.

We believe creativity is important to everyday life because it nourishes us and gives us life that is infinitely interesting and fulfilling. Creative engagement offers a way of living life that embraces originality and individuality. Allowing myself to perceive my life with no regrets leads to a depth of gratitude that truly nourishes my well-being.

Jacques LeBlanc retired after being a paediatric and adult cardiovascular and thoracic surgeon at B.C. Children's Hospital in Vancouver. Realizing that he had a lot to give back to his profession in the way of experience as a doctor, a teacher, a student of life, a husband and a human being seeking wellness in this rapidly changing world, he created leblancwellness.com. For the last few years he has been a regular contributor to *The Journal*, sharing a belief in recovering the connections we have lost and engaging the new skills we have gained to mitigate loneliness and create wellness.

The Journal
of Creative Aging

SAGE-ING

WITH CREATIVE SPIRIT,
GRACE & GRATITUDE

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Our Manifesto

This journal (and our associated website) is about you, and the possibility of you creating the next chapter in the book of your life.

You're familiar with how the other chapters worked: early, childhood, teenage, tempest, tragedy, trial, temptation, partnering, breaking, birthing, making, solving, earning, learning, building, growing, mentoring, celebrating, wising up, and ending up here after all that.

The road of life goes on from where you now find yourself, you're still on it, and the vistas that open before you promise more and maybe better rewards, but only if you engage in the possibilities.

You now get to decide if this next chapter will be a rich and fulfilling one for you, or only the last.

Rather than fading into that good night, might we offer an alternative?

Creative aging is a powerful social and cultural movement that has stirred the imaginations of many communities and people. Also referred to as sage-ing, creative aging takes many forms, and elevates people in many ways.

Most importantly, creative aging encourages and facilitates individual and collective creative pursuits, including writing, crafting, painting, dancing, and an almost unlimited number of other ways to express your creative energy.

It encourages you to find your inner artist, to discover the opportunity to celebrate and elevate, to make the most of the wisdom you've accumulated through the lessons of your life. It pleads for you to speak the truths you've learned, to share your wisdom, to be wise, to sage.

Creative aging helps you discover the source of wellness, which is in your spirit, your will to be, to be well, to share your gift, to explore, to create, to be whole.

Creative aging encourages you to engage with your inner life, to experience the grace of knowledge, to express gratitude for your gifts, and to share them with others on the same journey. By doing so, you open the door to the creative person that lives inside you, the insights you possess, the lessons you can learn through your experience, the discoveries you can share with fellow creators, and the wisdom you can gift to future generations.

Sage-ing: The Journal of Creative Aging exists to help you document your creative pursuits with care and integrity, to honour your truth. It's time for you to join us. Tell your story, make your next chapter.