

Travelbyjournal

The words of one of my favorite authors, Willa Cather, are often used in references about the journey of life: “When people ask me if it has been a hard or easy road I always answer with the quotation ‘The end is nothing, the road is all.’”



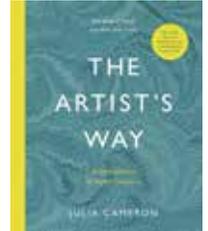
LORI VAN PELT

My journal is the road I’ve traveled as a writer for quite a few years now. Sometimes it’s a rutted two-track leading up a steep, grassy hill that brings me breathless to a rocky windswept top with dainty golden wildflowers at my feet. When I raise my eyes, a splendid panoramic view offers me a refreshing change of perspective, and every so often a bald eagle or a great blue heron sails across the sky. Sometimes my journal feels more like trudging along on a flat, dusty graveled road that leads to other paths that I can choose or reject. Sometimes this journal road is paved and allows me to speed ahead to destinations: poems, articles, stories, books.

Most of the time, though, whatever physical trail beckons, the journal gives me a safe and private place to conduct experiments with words and thoughts and story ideas. Much like walking brings into my view cottonwoods and

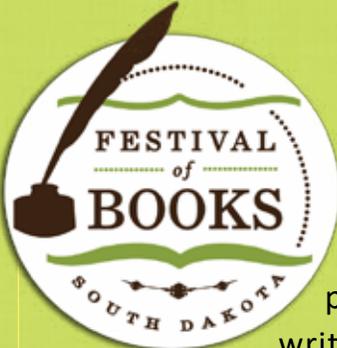
spruce trees and the nuthatches and ravens that perch in their branches as I stroll around the lake at Laramie’s LaBonte Park, I see details or come to conclusions that would not have come to my attention if I had not written my pages.

When Julia Cameron’s book, *The Artist’s Way*, was published more than 25 years ago, I began following her advice to write three pages longhand each morning upon waking. This exercise that she has referred to as “brain drain,” does function that way for me, and my pages can become chore lists and daily concerns as frequently as they yield intriguing titles, gripping leads, and captivating characters. In other words, a lot of my journal is written just for me.



But like daily walks, the benefits have stretched me and made me more fit as a writer. I adapted Cameron’s morning pages into what I called an “idea journal” when I wrote my book, *Amelia Earhart: The Sky’s No Limit* (Forge, 2006) several years ago, and I still use this method for writing projects of all types. Each day as I worked on that book, I started with three longhand pages about the segment I wanted to focus on that day. This accomplished two tasks: The familiar pen-in-hand writing eased my blank page stage fright and clarified my thoughts so I could better communicate with those who

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would be my readers. This also helped me write an article for *The Writer* magazine (“Six Steps to Making Your Biography Snap to Life,” January 2007).

My journal-keeping practice actually began in western Nebraska when my high school English teacher gave our class an assignment to write a certain number of pages in a spiral-bound notebook each week. She did not read the notebooks for content but thumbed through them to see that we had produced the pages. She knew we might tire of the obligation, and once in a while, she allowed us to ask others to write a few pages in our journals. Mrs. Edens also introduced us to the books of Mari Sandoz and Willa Cather. This inspired me because both Sandoz and Cather were women of Nebraska, and I believed, while reading their work, that I – a young woman reared on a wheat farm and cattle ranch in the same state – could become a writer too. Cather also wrote, “Where there is great love, there are always miracles.” Fortunately, I did become a published writer. I still correspond with Mrs. Edens.

Cather again: “There are some things you learn best in calm, and some in storm.” My journal pages both shelter me and plunge me into soul-shaking downpours. They can create calm, for example, when I recall after-school conversations with my mother, who always gave me good, straight-forward, and comforting advice. The pages can also make me shake my head at myself when I’m confused and can’t find my way beyond the punishing wind and fierce rain that pummels my mind and stops me in my tracks. I make myself write on those days, and if nothing else comes, like the high school assignment, I draw on the words of others, jotting quotations that inspire me. I have come through job hunts and other periods of excitement, uncertainty and grief in my life and quite probably have grown into a more empathetic and capable person by writing those daily pages.

Another variation served me well. When my church choir was selected to perform with other choirs from throughout the nation at New York’s Carnegie Hall in the autumn of 2019, I did not take my 8½-by-11-inch notebook because I felt it would take up too much space in my luggage. I don’t like to keep my morning pages in the smaller size notebooks. Instead, I jotted my notes in pencil on the pages of the musical score. I scribbled singing tips at rehearsals and penciled in my remarks and those of other choir members. We noticed, among other things, that there were not many (if any) pickup trucks in the city. Every street corner was crowded with people walking to various destinations, and we marveled at the exceptional driving skills of cabbies and other drivers as they maneuvered their vehicles within inches of us. I included descriptions of the adventures we had in the city: a relaxing, long walk in Central Park; a sobering visit to the 9/11 Memorial; an intriguing subway ride during which another passenger sang a pretty good rendition of “Stand By Me,” and then asked if anybody had a cigarette to give him; an entertaining evening at the Broadway musical *Wicked*; and my birthday dinner celebration at a pub near Times Square. We watched a policeman riding horseback

down the street while nearby a white stretch limousine that appeared to be half the size of the block eased into traffic. This keepsake I will always treasure.

The day after we returned home, I drove to work in Laramie. On that day, there were no other cars anywhere near me, and I stopped at a crosswalk for a single pedestrian. There were, however, numerous pickups parked downtown, and not many (if any) cabs.

I do not let anyone else see my journal, and I do not look back at my journal pages right away. I let them sit for a few weeks, as Cameron suggests, and then I review them, maybe one notebook or two at a time. What caught my attention? Why? Did I resolve whatever problems troubled me? Do I need to try again? Were there phrases or topics that I especially like? Can I make them into an article or a story? And, after I’ve gleaned what I can, I usually let them go. They have provided the insights I needed, and so the bulk are destined for the shred pile.

At that point, I’m left to heed the instruction given by another favorite writer and walker of the shores of a local pond, Thoreau, whose words Mrs. Edens wrote in neat cursive in white chalk on the green chalkboard those many years ago: “Go confidently in the direction of your dreams. Live the life you’ve imagined.”

What are the roads you travel in your journal? What trips will you take with your words?

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