KEEPING A HEART JOURNAL

Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D.

offers this exercise to the Nancy's List community.

*The voyage of discovery lies not in seeking new vistas but in having new eyes.*

— Proust

Most of us live far more meaningful lives than we know. Meaning is a function of the heart, an organ of vision that allows us to see below the surface of things. Our training does not encourage us to explore the deep river of meaning that is the undercurrent of our being. Our habitual way of seeing things and even our expertise can blind us to the meaning of even the simplest of our daily interactions and relationships. Meaning is the antecedent of enduring satisfaction and fulfillment in our lives. This simple little journal may be all that it takes to give us fresh eyes.

Keeping a Heart Journal draws on the wise work of Angeles Arrien, author of *The Fourfold Way*. This exercise requires a notebook and 10-15 minutes every day. It is best to do this exercise at the same time and place — every evening if possible — and find a quiet place to reflect and write.

Begin by sitting in silence for a few minutes and paying attention to your own breathing. At the end of each out-breath, there is avery brief moment of rest and peace before your next in-breath begins. See if you can notice this tiny natural space of stillness. Pay attention to it. Each time you arrive there, let yourself be in that moment and surrender into the stillness as fully as you can.

When you feel ready, begin the exercise by slowly reviewing your day BACKWARDS, going from the present moment back to the time that you awakened in the morning, recalling the events and conversations you experienced and the people you met as you moved through your day.

Review your day backwards THREE times, each time asking yourself a different question.

Ask yourself the question:

*What surprised me today?*

As soon as you find ANYTHING that is an answer to this question, stop your review and write it down in your journal. It is not necessary to write a great deal or to find the MOST surprising thing that happened all day – the important thing is to re-examine your day from this new perspective and not how much you write about it.

Now begin a review of your day once again, going from the present moment back to the time that you awoke in the morning, recalling the events and conversations you experienced and the people you met.

Ask yourself the question:

*What moved me or touched my heart today?*

As soon as you find ANYTHING that is an answer to this question, stop your review and write it down in your journal.

Now begin a review of your day backwards a third time, going from the present moment back to the time that you awoke in the morning, recalling the events and conversations you experienced and the people you met.

Ask yourself the question:

*What inspired me today?*

As soon as you find ANYTHING that is an answer to this question, stop your review and write it down in your journal.

This finishes the task for the day. Put your journal away until tomorrow. As time goes by, re-read your journal to yourself.

Often when people first start this journal, they find the same answer to all three questions

*Nothing. Nothing. And Nothing.*

Do not be discouraged if this happens to you. Meaning is an innate capacity but also an acquired skill. If you do this exercise daily, before long, answers to all three questions will come to you.

Sometimes you may notice that you were not surprised, touched or inspired as you lived through your day, but that you are only surprised, touched and inspired as you reflect and do this exercise. Do not be discouraged! Most people experience this time lag at first. After a while, you will begin to grow in your capacity to find that more and more things surprise, touch, and inspire you at the time they actually occur during the day. When this happens, notice any changes in your attitude towards your life and those around you.

This exercise has many creative applications for couples, families, friends, and colleagues. Children are able to do this exercise and many enjoy it immensely. Doing this exercise and sharing what has been written once a week can have surprising results – revealing one's inner life and the many ways we matter to one another. Sharing parts of your journals will give everyone a far deeper appreciation of each other.

Disclaimer: I did this exercise throughout my healing from stage 4 ovarian cancer. I truly believe this process 'opened my heart' to the many 'angels in my midst' and the generosity of my friends and family AND total strangers. Most importantly, it deepened my relationship to my cancer, my 'attitude of gratitude' and my compassion for everyone I met on my journey, and my understanding and empathy for myself.

Rachel Remen M.D. was my friend and mentor throughout my cancer experience. So you may know a bit more about this eloquent and elegant healer ...

Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D. is Clinical Professor of Family and Community Medicine at University of California San Francisco School of Medicine and the Founder and Director of the Institute for the Study of Health and Illness at Wright State University Boonshoft School of Medicine in Dayton, Ohio. She is one of the pioneers of Relationship Centered Care and Integrative Medicine.

*U.S. News and World Report* Best Graduate Schools has called [*The Healer’s Art*](http://www.rachelremen.com/learn/medical-education-work/the-healers-art/), her groundbreaking curriculum for medical students, “A profoundly innovative curriculum on reintegrating the heart and soul into contemporary medicine and restoring medicine to its integrity as a calling and a work of healing.” *The*[*Healer’s Art*](http://www.rachelremen.com/learn/medical-education-work/the-healers-art/) is now taught yearly in more than half of American medical schools and in medical schools in seven countries abroad. Dr. Remen has been awarded three honorary degrees in recognition of her contribution to medical education and has been the invited speaker at more than two dozen medical school graduations.

Dr. Remen was one of the first to recognize and document the psychological and spiritual impact of cancer on people and their families. She is Co-Founder and Medical Director of the [Commonweal Cancer Help Program](https://www.commonweal.org/program/cchp/), one of the first support groups for cancer patients in America, featured in the groundbreaking 1993 Bill Moyer’s PBS series [*Healing and the Mind*.](http://billmoyers.com/series/healing-and-the-mind/) Through her television appearances and lectures, she has reminded many thousands of people of their power to grow beyond their current challenges and heal themselves.

Dr. Remen’s *New York Times* best-selling books [*Kitchen Table Wisdom*](http://www.rachelremen.com/books/kitchen-table-wisdom/) and [*My Grandfather’s Blessings*](http://www.rachelremen.com/books/my-grandfathers-blessings/) have sold more than a million copies and have been translated into 23 languages.

Dr. Remen has a 60-year personal history of Crohn’s disease and her teachings and writings are a unique synthesis of the wisdom and courage of physician and patient.