

# *Introduction*

THIS JOURNAL began unexpectedly. I was immersed in another writing project when, seeking help for an ongoing maddening neuropathic pain that was pouring down my sciatic nerve, I agreed to an operation that might free up the frazzled nerve and fix the problem. I was unaware that the pain, which had been present for three years by then, was no longer a straightforward response to tissue damage caused by an accident at Pilates. It had slipped over into a classic neuropathic pain condition originating in the central nervous system. I thought the surgery would help, but instead it exacerbated the symptoms and made my situation worse.

On the day following the operation, my friend visited with a gift. It was a journal. She said, 'Write, Deborah. Write your way through.' Was this possible? I felt fully extended trying to survive the flames engulfing my lower torso. But after she had gone I wrote a few sentences, and the next day some more. Each day I added to the entries, and slowly my journal grew.

As I wrote, I found myself gathering together all the pains that had perplexed me through my life. I was writing about the trauma of losing my brother and my father when I was very young, and the

impact of that loss on my mother whose sorrow has loomed large in both our lives. I was processing my thoughts about a shocking series of powerful earthquakes that had devastated my hometown, Christchurch, starting on 4 September 2010 and lurching through that summer to 22 February 2011, when there was a massive jolt of such violent velocity that buildings crumbled and many people died, while thousands were injured and a major city was brought to a standstill. I was worried sick about my mother and mother-in-law and my family and friends who live in the city. They were witnessing something truly terrible and unthinkable. I wondered how they could go on.

As I grappled with these pains, both physical and emotional, I was casting the net wide searching for help. I was examining the writings of authors, artists and thinkers whose experiences dealing with pain and difficulty offered inspiration. I was reaching deep inside, flashing backwards and forwards, pulling out memories and writing them down, trying to calm myself. I was searching for alternative ways of viewing suffering and bearing up. I was reflecting on the very meaning of existence.

A few years earlier I had written a book, *Her Life's Work*, about five New Zealand artists, writers and thinkers – painter Jacqueline Fahey, educator Merimeri Penfold, anthropologist Anne Salmond, film director Gaylene Preston, and writer Margaret Mahy. Now I found myself returning to their words and reflecting on what they had taught me about resilience. I fell back on my mother, who lives with multiple sclerosis and whose management of her condition is an inspiration. She was talking to me from her bed and was my dearest source of support.

In the process of recording my thoughts, I found that the writing was helping to moderate the pain. When I write I become so absorbed with forming the words and clarifying the meaning that I am released from the pain. This was something I had already observed while teaching memoir. I had noticed how writing about painful incidents helps people integrate their experience and feel more peaceful. Now I was discovering this for myself.

In the early stages of my recovery I found that my life had shrunk to the world on my doorstep, to my garden and the creatures that live there, and to my two cats that keep me company. Writing down my observations helped me attend to the moment and tune into the beauty of Nature and the colour and passion of the passing seasons. I found myself giving thanks for the rich bounty of the earth and appreciating the very many good things that come my way. Writing in this way, a sense of stillness settles on the spirit.

The singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen once said of one of his songs, 'If It Be Your Will', that it is more of a prayer. Journal writing can have that prayerful quality, too. Often you begin with an unpleasant emotion – worry, anger, sadness, hurt – and during the writing there is a shift in thinking upwards to a better place, where you arrive at a deeper level of understanding and find some peace.

Grief is a very common response to chronic pain and suffering. You grieve in reaction to the shocking awfulness of the daily grinding pain and with having to accommodate the raised level of hardship. There is a knock to self-esteem. Some of the earlier ebullient self-confidence is lost. At times you can sink and feel quite low. In one journal entry I observe a solitary leaf falling. That is

how I see my experience of pain. I have been that leaf floating, sinking towards the ground, tossed and carried by wind flurries. Always, though, the journaling has rescued me with a puff of air and sent me up again. And so this journal is an appeal and a song for the value of writing when perplexed.

Initially, I was writing a book for chronic pain sufferers because I could not find the book I wanted. I needed a journal about the immediate experience dealing with post-operative pain. But there was a gap in the literature. While I found a wealth of writing from a medical and health perspective and eloquent memoirs of pain written when the nightmare was over, I yearned for a book that described the experience of pain in the immediate present. I wanted a writer to articulate what it feels like when you are ploughing through pain and hanging on, just, and I wanted that writer to offer hope. And so my journal began from that place, in the midst of severe post-surgical pain; but as I continued, I recognised the broader and universal relevance of the writing, because this book is really about learning how to live fully in the moment in the midst of all of the sufferings we as human beings encounter on a life path.

When I was searching for a title for this journal, one that would encapsulate the celebratory and life-affirming aspect of my discoveries, I discovered the poem 'Love Affair' by The Netherlands-born New Zealand poet Riemke Ensing, about one of my favourite writers. Katherine Mansfield (1888–1923) was a New Zealand writer who lived with debilitating ill health from her early twenties and died at just thirty-four from a heart condition and the ravages of tuberculosis. In the poem, Katherine is sitting in one of the many little hotels in the south of France where she stayed while seeking

a cure for consumption. Her guest has failed to arrive and she is dining alone at a table with a white napkin.

*Love Affair*

You wrote the table  
was laid  
for two  
but nobody came  
so you dined opposite  
a white napkin.

It's called giving yourself  
to life.

Through the window  
a quiet branch  
has the evening  
to itself  
also.

And there it was. In the course of interpreting Katherine Mansfield's experience, Riemke Ensing had captured the essence of how to live in the midst of ill health, adversity, misunderstanding, despair and aloneness. You can find a way to be and to feel alive by being receptive to the beautiful world in which we live, by 'giving yourself to life'.

In retrospect I wish I could have acquired a clearer understanding of my medical condition earlier so as to avoid the unnecessary traumas and disappointments. In sharing this particular story I have wanted to reach out to the reader and pass on my knowledge.

If my journal can help others, then this book has been worth writing. If I have one message to pass on, it is this: always advocate for yourself, if you can. Always question, always search for knowledge, and never give up. Keep on trying.