

## Writer says journal-keeping is creative, therapeutic

BY KURT ANTHONY KRUG  
CORRESPONDENT



Underwood

Oakland University in 1998, two months before her 50th birthday.

She has kept a journal for 22 years. She says her journal gives her the opportunity to put down on paper what she is feeling at the time. It has been an outlet to vent her anger and frustration in a productive capacity.

"Basically, my journal is my savior," she says. "It's my ultimate friend. It does not judge me. I can write through anything. I can say anything I want, any doubt I have, any fear I have, I won't be judged for it. It's what I'm thinking, be it good or bad."

### STARTING A JOURNAL

Underwood, who teaches workshops in journal writing, wrote her first journal entries when she was 11, after attending the funeral of a neighbor's 9-year-old daughter. It wasn't until the early 1980s after reading Catherine Marshall's novel, *Christy*, that she considered becoming a serious journal writer.

"My grandmother's life was passing away without record. My mother's life was passing away without any record. My life was passing away without

any record. Three generations," she said. "So, what kind of example was I going to set? Would I have just allowed three generations to vanish without any documentation for my children?"

Despite her enthusiasm, there were no books or magazines on keeping a journal at the time. So Underwood just wrote. She took some advice from her daughters' teachers who made their students keep journals. She decided that if a junior high school student could journal, so could she.

Her first journal entries started out as a dialogue with God. "Now my journal is multidimensional because I've grown. I've changed. To me, that is the most marvelous benefit of keeping a personal journal."

Keeping a journal also helped Underwood through a crisis of faith, as well as her redefinition of God and religion. She describes her childhood as an "evangelical childhood." Her faith got her through her parents' divorce in 1967 and hard times in her marriage. But when Becky died, Underwood's faith was shaken.

"Becky died and yet there are women in the inner-city who don't know where their children are from moment to moment and yet somehow they survive. These are things I discuss in my journals. I'm finding my faith through the process of

asking questions and pouring out my grief and my anger."

### TEACHING CLASSES

Underwood relays the story of Becky's passing at her journal writing workshops called "Writing Your Legacy," which are six- or 12-week-long courses, depending on where she's holding them. Since 1996, Underwood has taught these workshops in the tri-county area at book stores, libraries, coffeehouses and on a recurring six-week basis at the Troy Public Library.

Underwood's students are mostly middle-aged women. Only a handful of men have participated.

Her beginning workshops cover the definition of a journal and debunk myths of a "right" and "wrong" way to keep a journal.

"These are all hang-ups I've had and what's prevented me for years from getting really serious about writing a journal. 'Oh, there's a right way and a wrong way.' No, there is no such thing," Underwood said. "Just getting your thoughts down, your feelings, your plans, your dreams, just little mundane things. All that is historical information. It's part of our lives and is very valuable but we don't see it as valuable."

Underwood believes journal-keeping has caught on because of the self-help movement.

### IRIS UNDERWOOD'S WORKSHOPS

■ **Writing Your Legacy:** This is Underwood's most well-known workshop, focusing on writing personal journals, defining journal styles and clarifying the benefits of keeping a journal.

■ **Mission Statement:** This workshop teaches you how to gain a healthy mental and emotional control of your life by writing your personal goals, purpose in life and plans for achieving those goals.

■ **Companions: Grieving & Writing:** Relying on her experience after the loss of her eldest daughter, Becky, Underwood teaches how keeping a journal meets the needs of the bereaved in their journey through grief, offering support and insight.

■ Underwood's Web site is [www.irislee.org](http://www.irislee.org).

"Personally, I could not afford a therapist or a counselor. I also wanted to experiment with the creative process. Creativity is vital to a person's mental health. I can never go through a session of one of my workshops without someone bringing me some kind of article they have read about the healing and therapeutic properties of keeping a personal journal," Underwood said.

### FOR PATIENTS

Frank M. Ochberg, a psychiatrist who specializes in traumatic stress, from Okemos, is a founding board member of the International Society of Traumatic Stress Studies and

teaches at Michigan State University. He encourages patients to keep a journal and "express themselves on themes and issues after they've been traumatized."

"By keeping a journal, people turn their feelings into discussions with themselves on the written page and get it out in the open. As a result, they end up feeling better about themselves and undergo a journey of understanding and self-discovery," he said.

But Underwood adds that writers must tell the truth — no matter how painful — in their journals if they hope to grow.

"If you don't, then you're missing the whole object of writing a journal," she said.

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