

# Keeping a Journal

by Dan Kuhn, Rush Alzheimer's Disease Center

Nineteenth century author, Henry David Thoreau, kept a journal of his reflections for the last 25 years of his life. His devotion to this practice resulted in literary classics such as *Walden* and the essay, "On Civil Disobedience. In Nazi occupied Holland, a young Jewish girl kept track of her daily experiences, thoughts and feelings. *The Diary of Ann Frank* has since touched millions of lives. These writings, although unique and personal, have such a wide appeal because they reveal the strengths and weaknesses of the human spirit. We are drawn to their stories as they tell us something about *our* common search for truth, beauty and meaning.

In a similar vein, there are at least a dozen books currently in print based on the diaries of those who have cared for loved ones with Alzheimer's disease. In each instance, the author did not begin writing with the goal of publishing. On the contrary, these caregivers used their daily writings as an outlet for their feelings and a means to cope with the disease. Their words reveal a wide range of thoughts, feelings and actions under difficult circumstances. Their writings enabled them to learn about themselves and gain some control over a seemingly uncontrollable situation.

Losing a loved one bit by bit to dementia invariably evokes many strong feelings such as despair, hope, sadness, joy, anger, tenderness, guilt and empathy. Keeping these intense feelings bottled up inside can be unhealthy. A helpful tool for identifying these feelings and expressing them on a private level is through a diary or journal.

A running account of one's personal reactions throughout the disease may bear much fruit. One's vague ideas and abstract problems can be made concrete and more manageable. Opportunities arise to unclutter the mind. By charting one's course during a stressful or confusing time, patterns may emerge that lead to problem-solving and self-discovery. The dark side of one's personality may have a chance to become less ominous and the light side better appreciated. A written record may also serve as a reminder of past pitfalls to be avoided and successes to be celebrated. Writing on a regular basis requires some discipline so a few simple guidelines should be followed.

- A journal's most valuable quality is its complete flexibility. It is important to make it your very own forum for self-expression. Let your inhibitions go free and do not bother editing. This is your private project and no one else's business.
- Where and when you write must fit into your lifestyle. Your comfort is essential. If you can write during periods of stress, then do it. If not, wait for those times when you are not distracted.
- The tools do not matter as long as they are right for you. Use a pen, pencil, spiral notebook, typewriter, word processor or whatever. Keep things simple in order to make writing as easy and satisfying as possible.

- Beginning the process is probably the biggest step. It may well develop into a pleasurable routine after a month or two. Ten minutes a day may be a good way to start. As Will Rogers once noted. "Even if you are on the right track, you get run over if you just sit there. "

Keeping a personal journal may be just the kind of safety valve needed to relieve daily pressures. It may not feel therapeutic at first but in reviewing your recorded thoughts after awhile, patterns are bound to emerge that will help you decide to change or stay the course of caregiving. Not only will mistakes be readily apparent but progress will be charted too.