

The pastor as writer

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

October 25, 2011



I'm on a sabbatical right now. The way that our finances work, I still need to be traveling and speaking, but I'm relishing the long stretches of restoration. Before I entered into the sabbatical, I couldn't imagine what I would do with hours of replenishment. I planned a three-month work-a-palooza. I had a book to write, a publisher waiting for it—everything was lined up for ninety days of research and pounding.

When I stepped into the space, my publisher became less secure. I began to drop back into the frenzy of looking for an agent and finding the next house who would take me on. (I love Alban, my current publisher. It's just that my next project doesn't fit in their niche.)

Then I stopped. I gave myself a break from the business of writing—the never-ending platform building, dutiful networking, self-promoting, and strategic planning. I somehow missed out on the days when an author could be a hermit. I hear myths of how big-box bookstores would buy truckloads and simply burn the works when they didn't sell. I entered the publishing market during the digital revolution, and though I'd been on the lucky end of this social-media overhaul, I felt utterly exhausted by it.

So, for three months, I'm immersing myself in the art of letters. It was as if my words needed to breathe and I'm relearning the beauty of the page.

The process reminds me of the first years that I began a writing life. A strange shift occurred. One day, I was sweating and agonizing over every syllable of a theology paper, seeing a 30-page assignment as an impossible mountain that I had to conquer. I regurgitated the thoughts of history. Then I adjusted the margins and picked the widest font in order get a respectable 28 to turn in to my professor.

After a couple of years, I needed the words. I hungered to write them. On vacations, when my family urged me to take a break from my laptop, I become cranky. What happened? As I prepare to go to Austin Seminary to talk about the [pastor as writer](#), I'm thinking about that place where the words began to grow like wildflowers that I no longer had to coddle. I'm trying to describe what took place there.

My identity changed. I

always wanted to be a writer, but I was a solo pastor at a small congregation, and I could barely get my sermons completed. I always felt belittled by this fact, until I looked down at my sermon file, which had grown into a sermon drawer. Seeing a couple of years of homilies, I realized that I had painstakingly written seven pages each week. I multiplied 7 times 50, and came up with 350. I was writing the equivalent of a book each year. *I was a writer.*

Writing became a

habit. I realized that if I could write a sermon on Saturday, then I could rise each morning and write a little bit. Getting up when the house was quiet, I made a pot of coffee and began to journal. I couldn't do housework because that would wake everyone up. No one expected me to answer an email at 5:30 am. There was nothing to do but write. So I began my habit.

I started trusting my voice. I'm

the third and youngest child in my family of origin, and I have a very opinionated and outspoken family. Not only that, but I don't really agree with most of their perspectives on politics and religion. And we only talk about politics

and religion. I do a lot of listening to keep the peace during Thanksgiving.

If I'm in a crowded room, and I'm not the keynote speaker of the gathering, you probably won't know I'm there. There are many contributing factors to this—a hundred ways in which I was conditioned. I'm an introvert. I'm a woman. I was raised as a Southern Baptist where I was taught to be "submissive." I went to college in that environment. It's also because I didn't trust my voice. I didn't quite believe that I was smart enough, or right enough, or enough of anything, really.

I got over this by listening to my side of things. When I wrote, I didn't have to stop in the middle of my sentence to defend my point. I could complete my sentence. I could even construct an entire train of thought. I began to put in black and white what I believed.

I wrote to my church, who had a hard time understanding my generation. I wrote to my dad, who didn't like how I interpreted the Bible. Most of all, I wrote to myself. I concentrated on understanding my own viewpoints as closely as I had listened to others. I constructed my own theology instead of solely relying on the wisdom of the past. I began to love the healing process of writing.

And that's where I am today—I ventured back to that place where the words grow with wild abandon. I'm resting here for a few more weeks, nurturing my identity, my habits, and my voice.