

HOW TO BUILD A COLLABORATIVE BLOG: THE JOURNEY OF 3 SHARED PATHS



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The Seeds of Collaboration: The Beginning of 3 Shared Paths



When you wake up with an idea flowering from your subconscious, follow this inspiration. It comes from something essential within you.

- Rebecca

3 Shared Paths came to be from an “aha” moment Rebecca knew had to be explored. She tells the story like this:

“On a sunny day in April 2009 I woke up with the idea that Carolee and Cathy could join me in creating a website together that fosters discussion about personal growth and self-realization. We were reading Penney Pierce’s book, *The Present Moment*, after Carolee suggested it as a book we could read together as we had done in the summer of 2005 for *The Artist’s Way*. We began a shared discussion by meeting online via Yahoo chat and supplementing the discussion with emails to each other sharing our realizations and insights. I had been mulling over the idea of creating a website to share tips and advice from my own personal experience but creating and maintaining the website alone seemed a daunting project. As often happens, the seed of an idea can grow in great and unexpected directions.”

We believed that other people would also be inspired by the resources and insights we were sharing with each other. Within a month of discussing the idea, we decided to meet for a three-day weekend to create the blog.



Clarksdale, Mississippi appealed as a midway-point for us to meet because it has a rich blues music history and Carolee found an adorable house to rent for the weekend. Cathy researched things to do and suggested we have dinner at Madidi, the restaurant, co-owned by the actor Morgan Freeman, and check out Ground Zero, the nearby blues club. A few Hollywood actors and Nashville musicians were visiting that weekend to celebrate the anniversary of Ground Zero’s opening, which gave an unexpected zing of excitement to our weekend of creativity. We also got to meet and talk to Morgan Freeman during dinner at Madidi! A year later, during a working retreat in Oxford, Mississippi, we came across a photo of Mr. Freeman in an exhibit while touring

After creating my first website alone, AffirmationsToGo.com, I was excited about working on 3 Shared Paths with friends. Sharing the site and our commitment removes some of the stress of going it alone and amazingly enhances the creativity! I am always surprised by how much our creative juices flow when we work on developing ideas together. I inevitably find myself energized and excited even when I show up for our meetings feeling overwhelmed and tired.
- Carolee

the writer William Faulkner's home. It was a lovely connection to our first creative meeting for 3 Shared Paths and seemed to signify we were on the right path with this project.

The birth of 3 Shared Paths unfolded around a quaint 1950's Formica and aluminum table. All three of us had experience developing and managing projects and approached this collaboration by brainstorming themes, developing a purpose statement, discussing the vision, and coming to an agreement on goals. Carolee had experience working with a web designer for her personal business site, AffirmationsToGo.com, and Rebecca had designed her own business website, but it was Cathy who researched formats and blog hosts and showed great aptitude for determining the platform we should invest our time and learning curve into. Wordpress has turned out to be the right choice for us to build our site and well-worth learning how to use.



We initially designed the blog with separate pages for each to use as a blog, and a separate page for the joint effort. This design resulted from discussion about content without yet knowing exactly what we would specifically write about and share on a regular basis. We decided we wanted to get a feel for what each of us would write regarding the guiding theme of self-empowerment and personal growth. This approach proved to be labor-intensive and confusing, and ultimately provided less content for the joint site. We soon realized it was taking away from the main focus of our blog, which was sharing our paths with everyone.

Within three months, we got together again in New Orleans over a weekend and redesigned the site. Our experience writing for and maintaining the blog over that short period of time helped us refine our expectations. We agreed to boost our content by posting directly to the site and not maintain separate "feeder" blog sites, which signified the trust we had built with each other.



The three of us had been recommending books to each other for many years. It was a natural progression for us to share the resources through the blog as well. I know as I'm looking at books, magazines and websites, I think, is this something that inspires me to create a blog post, or would Rebecca or Carolee have an interest in this book, article or blog.
- Cathy

We wanted more graphics to represent us and our theme, so we took photos. The pictures of our three hands and the three metal hearts came from that weekend of collaboration.



We share a passion for personal growth and the blog provides an opportunity to explore our creativity individually and together. 3 Shared Paths continues to inspire us by keeping us continually focused on self-discovery and fulfillment. We each post at least once a week about our own personal journey, and we talk often, usually monthly, to plan and discuss new ideas. We share books and resources, and we read at least one book together every year.

Books we've read together:

- 2005: *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron
- 2009: *The Present Moment* by Penney Peirce
- 2010: *A Year of Living Consciously* by Gay Hendricks
- 2011: *One Year Hook Book* by Smash Cake Press

3 Shared Paths grew from a foundation of shared interests, discussions and friendship. Rebecca was the catalyst for the friendship that has developed among the three of us. She tells that story here:

"I met Cathy in Nashville while working together at a car dealership in 1988, which was a second job for both of us. We became fast friends and spent many hours talking about religion, spirituality, relationships, creativity and the meaning of life. I introduced Cathy to tarot cards and was with her when she met her (former) husband. After I moved back to Louisiana, we visited each other at least once a year, often meeting up for fun weekends to explore new places, and our friendship grew stronger. I was fascinated by her study of healing touch and continued commitment to writing a novel each year during National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo). I am in awe of her beautiful singing voice. Through marriages, divorces, career changes, and moves to other states, Cathy has remained a constant touchstone.

She is an expressive writer and open to sharing the joys and challenges of her life.

“I met Carolee in 2001 at a facilitation class and we quickly became friends. Carolee was going through a divorce and I had recently divorced so there was a kindred feeling. We spent many good times together, including memorable trips riding in her dad’s 1969 Camaro convertible I dubbed the ‘dude magnet.’ A year later, I joined the Peace Corps and afterward went to graduate school. Our friendship endured and grew when I returned to Louisiana. We both love listening to live music, particularly blues music, and it makes me very happy to share that with her. She’s always ready to travel and we’ve enjoyed great weekend trips exploring cities and parks together. I appreciate her consistent reminder that we have choices in life. She is slow to judge others and I value that example of living. I have learned a lot from Carolee’s commitment to becoming a life coach and her passion for personal growth. She freely offers her training and coaching experiences in blog posts.

“I am the gypsy of our group. I’ve lived in several places and appreciate how our friendships have endured despite the physical distances. My passion for public service and volunteering guides my perspective. Sharing practical tips from my experience when I believe it could help someone else is what most influences my writing for this blog and I enjoy the challenge of writing from the heart.

“During one of Cathy’s visits to Louisiana, I introduced her and Carolee. Mainly through me, Cathy and Carolee kept up with each other. When we decided to do *The Artist’s Way* together in 2005, a stronger bond formed as we discussed our various life experiences and insights from the lessons in the book. Despite the upheaval from Hurricane Katrina that Carolee and her family experienced, she kept the commitment to working through *The Artist’s Way* with us and it helped her process that experience with support from our discussions. All this led to stronger connections and a collaboration that represents how sharing passions and the commitment to follow those interests can lead to mutually-beneficial growth and support.”

I love how this project has grown and evolved, and the continued possibilities we see with it. We have all become more thoughtful and better writers. I love knowing it has been a labor of love for all of us.
– Cathy

Through Rebecca, these friendships have grown and this blog was born.

To celebrate two years of blogging together, we decided to share the story of our journey as friends creating 3 Shared Paths and how blogging together continues to inspire us. This e-book comes from our mission to inspire others and offer what we've learned. You will find practical tips on working with others to create and maintain a blog and helpful comments from our personal experience collaborating around our shared interests.

Planting and Growing a Collaborative Blog: Getting Started



I advise anyone doing a collaborative blog to have a discussion about what their blog is – and is not – about.
- Rebecca

Your First Three Steps

When starting out on the path of a collaborative blog, there are several steps to consider. These steps might seem obvious or overly simple, but they need to be considered seriously if you want to be successful in your endeavor.

First, determine if you can make the commitment.

A blog is a substantial time commitment. There are many things that go into the creation and maintenance of doing a blog even if you are sharing the work. You have to recognize how much of your own time you're willing to commit to the blog. It's important to be honest about that to yourself and your collaborators. Once you're sure you have the time and wherewithal to commit, then you're ready to get into the nuts and bolts of creation and maintenance.

Second, what do you want to blog about?

When we sat down to discuss the creation and collaboration of 3 Shared Paths, we knew for certain we wanted the blog to be about personal growth and fulfillment. We knew it was a subject we had a lot to say about, drawn from our own

personal journeys. Everything else was built from that foundation.

Whether you're the idea person, or the idea for your blog came out of a brainstorming session with your potential collaborators, clarity about your blog focus is critical. This one step is the catalyst for all the others.

The following are a few questions to ask yourself to be sure you've come to the right conclusion about the blog's subject matter:

- ✓ Are you passionate about the subject?
- ✓ Do you have a lot of experience or knowledge in the subject?
- ✓ Are you continually learning more about the subject?
- ✓ Can you translate the subject into interesting and engaging content?
- ✓ Do you have something original to say about the subject?
- ✓ What areas of the subject are off limits?
- ✓ Where are your parameters?

Third, determine who you want your collaboration to include.

When doing a collaborative blog, your partners are the next important decision you make. We knew from the beginning we each had a passion for personal growth, writing and sharing. We had already collaborated together through reading and sharing the same books, so we had a foundation upon which the blog could be built.

As Cathy has said, "We don't always agree with each other, and, at times, it has been a frustrating process trying to work through various thought processes about what kind of content we should have on the site, or ways to handle some of the opportunities that have come up."

Collaboration requires you to be open; and be direct and honest about your thoughts, commitment level and willingness to share. Though our collaboration came relatively easy for us, it required respectful discussion and compromise about our shared vision and purpose.

If you want to supercharge your commitment, commit to a project like this with other people!
- Carolee

Your choice of partners might be as obvious as ours was, or you might need to identify potential people with whom you want to collaborate. A few things to consider when choosing your collaborators include:

- ✓ Ability to meet commitments and follow-through
- ✓ Passion for or knowledge of the blog subject
- ✓ Time available to offer to the project (with consideration of other commitments)
- ✓ Good communication skills
- ✓ Ability to disagree in a productive and respectful way
- ✓ Writing skills

Your Next Big Steps are Planning, Creation and Maintenance (with lots of little steps in between)

Planning is the underpinning of everything else.

Your first planning session can be a conference call by phone, in a chat room or even in a Skype session. We strongly recommend designating a large chunk of time and coming together face-to-face for your first collaborative session. The synergy created by being physically together is hard to duplicate in any other format. It's also an opportunity to truly bond as you make decisions together about your blog.

What You Decide to Name Your Blog Illustrates the Focus of the Blog

In our first planning session together, we sat around the table discussing, crafting and designing 3 Shared Paths. Rebecca initially suggested calling it "Three Women" but that was already taken. We liked using the number three, and Carolee suggested "path." The word "shared" represented the idea of sharing and moving together toward similar ideas. Through discussion of the name, we were able to debate what the site would be and what it would not be and that was very helpful in understanding different perspectives through collaboration. We candidly talked about concerns over content and ground rules because we wanted posts on 3 Shared Paths to support our intention and theme for the blog.

We started by establishing our vision and expectations for the blog, which turned out to be our first encounter with the magic of working together. We immediately experienced the feeling that blending our creativity produced much richer ideas.
- Carolee

Through our discussions about the name, we remained open to changes and we suggest you do the same. Try not to be wedded to a name or an idea. Our willingness to bat around ideas for the name led to better ideas throughout the process.

A few things to consider when naming your blog:

- ✓ Does the name give a good idea of what the blog is about?
- ✓ Does it support the purpose?
- ✓ Is it already taken?

Create a Purpose Statement for the Blog

The discussion around the name of 3 Shared Paths made us realize we needed to have a purpose statement to guide us as we continued to define our blog. (If you've never gone through the process of creating a purpose statement, a Google search will offer you several options for learning how to do it.) This step is very important because it is the framework that you'll use to make decisions about your blog going forward, particularly regarding content and resources.

This process, though, will continue to require you to be open and not steadfast in whatever name you've established. Once you have a solid purpose, you'll want to check it against the name you've selected. You may find the name needs to be tweaked.

3 Shared Paths' purpose statement: Three women creating a venue of shared experiences to inspire self-discovery and fulfillment.

Determine the Blog Mechanics and How You Will Share Those Responsibilities and Expenses

Register your domain. Once you have named your blog, you'll need to register it as a domain. You'll want to decide which URLs you feel are the most advantageous to purchase (.com, .net, .us, .biz, etc.). This may be the first expense you'll incur. It's a good time to talk about how you're going to share the expenses of the blog.

We rotate paying the annual renewal fees of the URLs we decided to buy.

Set up a document to collect all your important information. This is a document where you will track who has paid for what and when. It will also contain other important information, such as passwords and codes you all need to know and have access to.

Set up a file sharing method. We decided to use Dropbox, which is a file-sharing service that updates all our computers whenever any changes are made to our files. There are several different methods available. You can research options to decide which one works best for your needs.

Decide on the platform you'll use. When we started 3 Shared Paths, none of us had a lot of savvy about building websites, so we initially looked at simple, free blogging sites. It didn't take us long to realize those sites were not going to give us the depth we needed to fulfill our vision for the blog. Each of us had talked to different people about blogging sites, and the one that all three of us had been told about was Wordpress.com. We finally settled on it because it appeared to be richer and more sophisticated in what we could do. It was a huge learning curve for all of us to learn how to use it, but it has served us well.

We suggest going through the same process to determine what will work best for you. If you have someone in your collaborating group who already has some blogging or website building experience, this may not be an issue.

Decide what email service you'll use. When you start setting up your blog, offer a way for people to contact you in addition to leaving comments on the blog. If you use a hosting service, you'll more than likely get at least one email account with that service. But, if you use a free blogging tool like we did, you'll need an external email address that you can all access. We chose Gmail for its ability to archive and track. You may decide you want to use a different one.

Decide what other social media you will use to support and promote your blog. The only social media we used initially was Twitter. We set up an account under the blog's name

I love knowing it has been a labor of love for all of us.
– Cathy

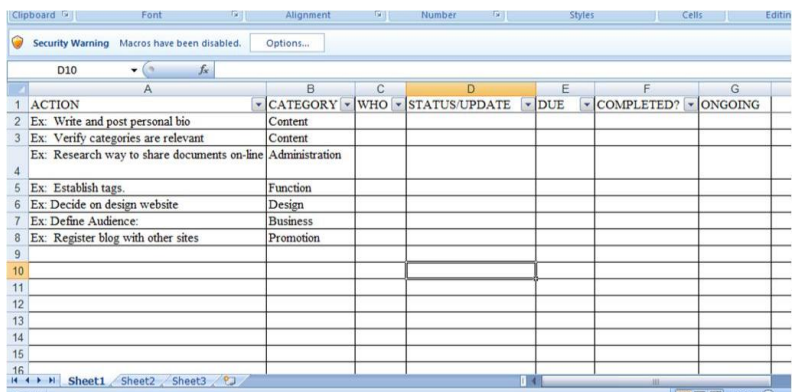
with a shared password. When we added content, we tweeted on the blog’s account to promote the blog post and on our individual Twitter accounts. Later we set up a Facebook account and now use it as a method to promote the blog and connect in another way with our readers.

Setting up social networking aspects at the beginning is optimum for promotion. Ultimately, your promotion efforts will depend on what you want to accomplish with the blog, and what your goals are for growth. What you set up and when you set it up will be unique for your situation.

Decide how you will divvy up the maintenance of the site.

Once you “go live,” you will have various maintenance issues to handle such as comment moderation, statistics tracking, ensuring posts go up timely, and email monitoring. We rotate this responsibility monthly; however, you may find another method works better for you.

We track our ideas and the actions we want to take for promotion, content development and web design in an excel document. This is separate from the maintenance document we use. We suggest you set-up a list to collect ideas, goals and tasks. We currently use a spreadsheet, shown below:



	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
	ACTION	CATEGORY	WHO	STATUS/UPDATE	DUE	COMPLETED?	ONGOING
1							
2	Ex: Write and post personal bio	Content					
3	Ex: Verify categories are relevant	Content					
4	Ex: Research way to share documents on-line	Administration					
5	Ex: Establish tags.	Function					
6	Ex: Decide on design website	Design					
7	Ex: Define Audience.	Business					
8	Ex: Register blog with other sites	Promotion					
9							
10							
11							
12							
13							
14							
15							
16							

Decide how often you will post to your blog site. This might seem trivial, but it’s not. When we first started, we decided to post whenever the mood struck us or when we had something to say. In those first few months, we were posting inconsistently. Sometimes there would be two posts in one day, but sometimes there might only be one post in a week. We were building content; however, it became clear we each needed to commit to a particular day each week for posting

Building content was one of the most overwhelming thoughts about the blog. We realized very quickly that sharing the load of creating content, and posting on a regular schedule would help us manage that piece of the puzzle. By designating specific days that each would post, it meant that we would have fresh content three times a week – in line with our blog title, 3 Shared Paths. It also meant that our content would build quickly and be rich.
- Cathy

then solidify that commitment by announcing it on our site. Our readers now know what days to expect fresh content, which we feel has had a positive affect on our product and increased our readership.

Create the Site

Now that you have a name, a purpose statement, and have identified how/where you're going to create your blog, it's time to start building it. A few things to keep in mind during this phase are:

- ✓ Keep your design clean and uncluttered
- ✓ Keep colors and fonts pleasing to the eye (yours and your readers')
- ✓ Choose images that reflect what you want your blog to convey
- ✓ Decide on your "go live" date (before or after you have written content?)

Content, Content, Content!

Let's face it – your blog is all about content. But before you start filling it with your blog posts, there are other elements of content to consider.

Will you be using your real names or will you write under a pseudonym?

There are all kinds of reason to write under your given name, and just as many reasons not to.

There are work considerations. Do you want someone to be able to Google your real name and read what you're blogging? Could information communicated on your blog affect your career?

Are you trying to create a writing portfolio for a writing career, so using your real name is best? Do you have a pseudonym?

We talked at length about this particular subject. Carolee was comfortable using her real name because she was building a new career in coaching. Rebecca wasn't

comfortable giving her full name, and Cathy already had a pseudonym she wrote under. We decided to use our first names only.

Perception and reputation are considerations to be made when you are blogging. We advise you to consider how much you want to reveal about your personal life, not only for safety concerns but also for privacy since everything on the internet is recorded in perpetuity.

Whatever you decide, make sure you're comfortable with it because it will have a direct impact on your ability to be authentic. If you're not comfortable with your choice, it will show up in your writing and that is a detriment. For your readers to truly connect with you, they need to feel you're being real with them.

Will you put up a bio on each of your collaborators?

We decided to add a bio for each of us from the beginning. We thought it was important to give our readers an idea of our backgrounds and what led us to create a blog. We wanted to help them find a connection to our perspectives. To a great extent our bios tell our individual stories in a concise way. Rebecca and Cathy decided not to share about their personal careers, but Carolee gives some information about hers.

Public identity is a deeply personal decision, so be understanding and patient with yourself and your collaborators through this process.

Trust



Now that you've decided what your blog will and won't be, you need to determine your level of trust with your collaborators in terms of content. We initially decided to create our own individual blogs that would be in the blog roll on the main blog, 3 Shared Paths, and each of us would contribute to the 3 Shared Paths blog that way. This method quickly became cumbersome, and it didn't take us long to decide to simply contribute to 3 Shared Paths directly. In hindsight, if we had decided to write a few blog

I really wanted to talk about content and what we would and would not discuss via this forum. It led to candid discussion about expectations and criteria we needed to air out.

- Rebecca

posts and share them with each other, we would have saved a lot of time and effort and created some good initial content!

Our suggestion to you is this: If you're not already writing a blog of some kind that your collaborators can read and get a feel for your writing style, then each of you write a couple of posts based on your shared vision and purpose for the blog. Pass them around to each other then decide if you need to discuss expectations about content and what you will and won't say in a post. It will also give you an opportunity to see grammar and spelling skills, style, voice, etc.

We aren't suggesting you squelch each other or voice the exact same opinion on everything. Diversity and varying opinions are interesting and essential to developing richer content on your topic. However, we strongly believe grammar and spelling are crucial to credibility. If you're uncertain, or have some issues with either, write your posts in a word processing program like Microsoft Word where you can check those things. It's very simple to cut and paste from those programs into most blog sites. Be willing to allow your collaborators to correct anything they might find. We try to be very diligent with this. Mistakes are going to happen, even in the best publications, but they truly need to be rare. We are committed to correcting any issues we find in each other's posts and have given each other permission to do so. This, once again, goes back to trust.

Even with those considerations, it's not time to get to the good stuff. Several other items pertaining to content should be created and added to your blog site. We realized early on we needed the following for the site:

- ✓ Terms of use
- ✓ Disclaimers about who and what are represented by your content
- ✓ Comment rules
- ✓ Contact page
- ✓ Guest post guidelines
- ✓ Copyright

Now, you're ready for the good stuff! It's time to start writing your blog posts.

Titles, Tags and Pictures, Oh My!

When you start writing your posts, make them as well-written and interesting as possible. Consider how the title and tags will help search engines match your posts with word searches so potential readers will easily find a link to your blog. Offer pictures or graphics that illustrate your post to entice them to read it.

Titles: Your titles should be catchy and interesting as well as relevant to your post.

Tags: Think key words. Any word that describes your post or is a common term within your blog becomes a tag. Some blog sites offer suggested tags and you can create your own as well. For instance, if a post is about enjoying the rain then some of the tags might be rain, storms, weather, or seasons. Remember to include a tag that is relational to your blog as well. 3 Shared Paths is a personal growth blog, so that's a tag we strive to use with every post.

Pictures: You don't have to be a photographer to use really good photos that give your blog post some punch. Find a friend who is an amateur photographer, and ask to use some of their best photos and give them credit. Look for copyright-free photos on the internet or use wiki where photos have usage consents as long as you credit them in the way the owner has stipulated.

Another consideration when writing your blog is length of any given post. You want to get your thought across without being too verbose, although some bloggers are known for writing lengthier posts. This is another aspect that depends on personal preference and writing style. We aim to keep our posts between 400 and 1000 words.

Connecting With Readers

When you have a blog, you want to connect with your readers as much as you can so they will keep reading. The following suggestions are just a few ways to do that.

Respond to all legitimate comments on your posts.

Acknowledging people is a good way to connect in all areas

Because we are always reading something, and each of us has our eye on personal growth in some way, we have the ability to selectively introduce new ideas to our audience. We're also reading like-minded blogs and are able to introduce those blogs to our audience as well. We love to share any kind of resource, or method that spoke to us, and helped us see something more clearly.
- Cathy

of life, including a blog. We made a commitment early on to personally respond to comments made on posts from readers. Sometimes the response is simply a "thanks for commenting" and sometimes it's an in-depth response.

Comment on like-minded bloggers posts. We found pretty quickly that other bloggers were reading our posts. We clicked through to their blogs, read them, and commented as well. Through that process, we have connected with several bloggers, and not all of them are what we'd term "like-minded."

Ask like-minded bloggers to guest post. If you find someone whose blog you connect with, ask them to write a guest post. Not only are you creating a connection with that blogger, but you also have the potential to create a connection with that blogger's readers as well. Consider inviting guest posts from others who share your interest but may not yet have a blog. Your blog can offer a publishing opportunity for them while diversifying your content.

Add those like-minded bloggers to your blog roll. There are plenty of readers to go around, and if you recommend other bloggers your readers might like, they will likely continue to come back.

Write reviews for books that connect to your blog theme. Online bookstores offer ways for readers to write reviews of books. So, when you've read a book that is a good connection to your blog content, write a review and post it on book sites such as Amazon. If it's allowable, put a link to your blog in the name line of the review, then write a blog about the book, and connect the two.

Recommend other sites. Other sites to recommend to your readers may include other blog sites, resource sites, or a favorite author's site if relevant to your blog.

Promotion

Promotion is something you can spend a lot of time on or very little. When we first started 3 Shared Paths, we knew next to nothing about how to promote a blog. What we found, though, is that with just a little diligent effort toward promotion, you can get your blog noticed.

Use Social Media. Once you write a blog post and add it to your site, post a link through all your social media outlets. If you have a personal blog, Twitter account, and/or Facebook account, post a link to the new blog. Add it to Digg, StumbleUpon, and any others that are relevant. There are also free tools available that support posting to multiple social media accounts through one service, such as HootSuite. A quick search will offer up several options.

Offer ways the readers can subscribe by email or RSS feed.

All your readers may not want to visit your website daily to keep up with fresh content. Those people will welcome other ways to keep up with what you're posting. Feedburner is one way of adding an email component.

Make it easy for your readers to promote you. Add email, Twitter and Facebook buttons to the bottom of your posts at a minimum.

Talk about your blog. Share your blog with any and everyone you feel comfortable sharing it with. We made business cards with the web address to give to people and post on bulletin boards.

When Cathy spent some time at an Alabama beach during the summer of 2010, she was there in the aftermath of the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, and in the middle of the sea turtle nesting and hatching season. She was fortunate enough to be involved with a nest of turtles that hatched and witnessed their journey to the sea, which she wrote a post about. She posted a link to it on the Facebook page of one of her favorite authors who had recently helped rescue a sea turtle. She also shared it with the volunteers who worked with the turtle nest she saw hatch. Because of that sharing, [the post](#) became one of our most viewed.

The bottom line for creating a blog, collaborative or otherwise, is this:

- ✓ Be committed to your topic. Do research, read and stay informed on your subject; and consistently post new material.
- ✓ Choose your partners well. Be sure they share a commitment to creating great content.

- ✓ Be authentic in your words and representation of yourself.
- ✓ Offer your readers valuable and engaging content with your unique writing style; and by adding pictures, resources and links.

If you do these things, you will garner a following and your blog readership will thrive.

Enjoying the Bloom and Battling Weeds: Our Rewards and Challenges



Because I made a commitment to Cathy and Carolee, I am motivated to meet the deadline to write a new post each week. Without this commitment to friends, I would probably become chronically late posting. Okay, I know I would!
- Rebecca

Reward: Commitment and Collaboration

We have created a place where collaboration is essential and beneficial. None of us work in a vacuum on this project. We are thoughtful of each other's perspectives. If one of us finds something questionable, we contact each other and discuss it either through email or a conference call on Skype. We don't always agree with each other and at times there have been frustrations, but we always resort back to our purpose statement to consider whether or not the idea or opportunity supports that vision. Sometimes the result may be that we don't follow up on an initiative that sounds cool or interesting, but our vision keeps us focused.

Sharing the duties of building content for the site is a big benefit of collaborating. Because we share three different perspectives, we are able to build content with diversity and share the work of posting. The three of us adding a variety of stories and perspectives on a routine schedule keeps the blog interesting and fresh. It's not just one of us trying to keep a blog going. Learning Wordpress was also easier by sharing the learning curve.

We are also more thoughtful about what we share in terms of a post for the blog. If we're discussing topics with each other, anything goes, but we are more selective when considering blog topics. We don't want to write about things that just caught our eye and are of interest, but rather topics that actually speak to us in some way.

Establishing expectations and defining some structure have been keys to creating our flow and achieving personal satisfaction with our progress.
- Carolee

Reward: Figuring Out How to Manage a Collaborative Blog While Living a Full Life

Sharing the blog has solved some blogging challenges for us, especially because we are all also committed to our careers and active in the community and other organizations. Committing to a schedule of each posting on a certain day every week was essential to building our content and planning a theme for each quarter gave us a focus for developing content. Setting up structure gave us the opportunity to develop mutually-agreed upon guidance and removed some of the frustrations we had been experiencing.

Reward: Fabulous Opportunities Emerged

Book reviews for Hay House Publications

One of the first surprising opportunities that came our way was being asked by Hay House to review new books and write a blog post with our impressions. We were very excited about this opportunity since Hay House is one of the leading publishers of personal growth and self-discovery books.

Encouraging guest posts

Offering a publishing opportunity to others is a special treat we did not anticipate when we started the blog. One of our early guest posts was from Cassandra Fedrick who is in a writing group with Carolee. When Carolee heard her read her piece titled [Magic Eyes](#) in a meeting, she immediately wanted to share it with others and was excited to be able to through 3 Shared Paths. It is amazing how the internet offers such an open venue for people to share their writing.

Inspiring the *One Year Hook Book*

When Cathy helped out at the 2010 Southern Festival of Books, she and Tracy Lucas, owner/operator of Smash Cake Press, were discussing the *Hook Book* Tracy created for the festival. Cathy noted to Tracy that doing 52 prompts as a one-year journal would be a great use of the incredibly creative Hook Book. Tracy loved the idea, and created the *One Year Hook Book*. We were fortunate to have a copy to give away in February and are using it as our inspirational book for 2011.

Challenge: Setting Goals and Measuring Progress



Carolee and Cathy wanted to set big goals for our blog from the beginning. Rebecca was reluctant to agree to goals she didn't think we could achieve in the timeframe suggested. She didn't want to be disappointed in our blog effort by setting unrealistic goals. Of course we want to have lots of followers who like our content and learn something from the site. However, we are doing this for the enjoyment of writing and working on a project with friends we respect and trust. An overarching goal is to gain more readers but we debated what a true measure of that could be for our kind of blog.

For example, a goal of 20,000 hits by December 2010 was suggested and though Rebecca thought it was very aggressive, she decided there was no reason not to aim high. We were incredibly excited to have more than 39,000 views in 2010! We learned with a new project like this it is difficult to define realistic expectations because there are so many unknown factors, so why not dream big?

We continue to think big as long as our journey remains fun and inspiring. Big things can happen with this blog. We weigh each opportunity to decide whether it fits with our vision. This is a personal project. We will be grateful if it eventually creates a monetary reward; however, that's not our motivation for the blog.

Setting goals is important because it keeps us focused and moving forward. When we set a goal and share it with our readers, we are even more diligent about meeting that commitment.

Challenge: How to Be Real While Protecting Our Identities and Careers

There was some reluctance in the beginning to use our full names. Cathy chose to use the pseudonym she writes under. Rebecca wanted to use her first name only because she was

concerned about revealing too much personal information and the attitude some of her professional colleagues might have about raising the topics we are interested in. We all work with some fairly politically and religiously conservative people who may not be open to our ideas and what they may perceive as a challenge to their views. Rebecca's training in public relations makes her more conscious of perception and reputation. Carolee respected our wishes but had less concerns about this in general. She was already voicing her interest in personal growth widely to others by building a career in coaching and promoting the principles of Heal Your Life®. 3 Shared Paths was a complement to those interests. We found a way to agree to respect each other's interests by using only our first names on the blog and accept how extensively each of us would choose to promote the blog through personal and professional accounts, such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn.

Along with deciding not to use our last names, we did not use photos of ourselves in the beginning because of the personal identification aspect. But after a year, we were ready to personalize the blog with photos of ourselves. We wondered if we were truly practicing what we were preaching. As with many of our decisions, this was an "easing into it" process. We talked about wanting some photos to commemorate our time spent together working on 3 Shared Paths at our first anniversary retreat, which led to discussion about adding a photo to the site. We decided to find someone professional to photograph us for the site.

Carolee identified a photographer, Jeff Cox, who lived near the location of our retreat in Oxford, Mississippi. We spent a fun afternoon in Hernando being photographed nearly 200 times and afterward had ice cream shakes from the fabulous Velvet Cream aka "The Dip."



As you might guess – only two or three photos were deemed acceptable! Are we our own harshest critics? We now have a few photos of us on our site and personalizing the blog

with our photos was the right decision. We feel emerging from our anonymity strengthened our connection to readers.



Reward: Our Personal Benefits

Learning Wordpress has benefitted me in my professional development as has practicing promotion and marketing skills to encourage more traffic to the site to build readership. Through this project we traveled to new places and I love to travel, especially with friends. We make it an adventure! I am proud of creating a blog with two friends and of the quality of our content. It's been great to connect with more people and build a greater circle of friends. I am amazed at the creativity that has come out of each of us and together through this blog. I don't know what it is leading us to but so far, it has been ten times more beneficial to me than the investment. - Rebecca

Aside from the experience of working with Rebecca and Carolee on a heart-driven project, one of the biggest benefits for me is to be consistently writing. Having that weekly deadline for a post keeps me looking for things to write about and keeps me on my toes. - Cathy

Collaborating on 3 Shared Paths gives me another opportunity to pursue my passion for personal growth through writing and sharing. I hope that sharing my journey will inspire others to pursue their passions and live their best life. I believe the path to inner peace and happiness comes from connecting with your inner voice and following your heart and I hope by doing that I encourage others to do the same. Our collaboration has also turned out to be incredibly inspiring – we inspire each other and find that our creativity is enhanced by working together. – Carolee

Sharing the Harvest: Inspiring Action



We continue to be inspired by each other's posts and perspectives, our readers' comments, and guest blog posts on our site. Collaborating on 3 Shared Paths led us to write this e-book and has generated other book and product ideas we are developing together. Ideas and opportunities emerge in unexpected ways from the feedback we get as we share our personal growth experiences with more people through

the blog. We highly recommend a collaborative approach if you're inspired to share your passions and interests. We hope you will enjoy the wonderful benefits that this kind of shared experience can bring.

If reading this e-book helps you on your collaborative blog journey, we would love to hear from you. Please share with us what you've created through email or comments at www.3sharedpaths.com.