

CONFERENCE

2023 Harold Swanberg Distinguished Service Award

Joan Affleck / Associate Vice President, Medical Writing, Merck & Co, Inc, Rahway, NJ

Joan Affleck received the 2023 Harold Swanberg Distinguished Service Award, named in honor of one of the founders of AMWA. This award is presented to an active AMWA member who has made distinguished contributions to medical communication or rendered unusual and distinguished services to the medical profession. At the 2023 AMWA Medical Writing & Communication Conference, Joan Affleck accepted the award at a plenary session and presented a MedWrite Talk entitled “Living Your Legacy.”

SWANBERG ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

Thank you so much. This is a wonderfully humbling recognition for me. You know, in my heart of hearts, I’m a writer. And I can personally now attest to how great it feels when a writer gets good reviews.

The Harold Swanberg Distinguished Service Award feels like a starred review or maybe a lifetime achievement review. But as some of you know, I’m still living my legacy. Receiving this award from AMWA, from all of you, is one of the greatest highlights of my 25-year career. It’s deeply touching to be honored here because the Swanberg Award recognizes distinguished contributions to medical communication. That means, to me, distinguished contributions to healing, to saving people’s lives, to relieving people’s suffering. What greater purpose could we have in this world?

This writer, Joan Affleck, stands a little in awe of the research, medicines, and treatments that have come to be in the time that I’ve been a medical writer. In the sweep of medical progress, I have also witnessed AMWA’s progress. I have seen AMWA grow into an organization with astonishing openness to raise our game with innovations, training, credentialing, and a ceaseless quest for improvement.

We’ve become a vibrant and healthy neural system for our profession, moving medical information and messages between a myriad of stakeholders. Today, for me, AMWA is a professional organization like no other that I have ever experienced. We enjoy overwhelming support and endorsement from many companies; you’ve seen our wonderful sponsors. Our people know that their work is worthwhile, important, and life-changing.



We have won relevance. We have won a seat at the table. I sincerely thank AMWA and its leadership team. In particular, I thank you, Susan Krug, for your leadership and your friendship. I thank Dr Swanberg and the other founders of AMWA. I thank my spectacular team at Merck—super smart people who amaze me constantly with their devotion, innovation, and creativity. I thank all of you here for giving your hearts and souls to the work we do as writers and as communicators. You’re really the ones who have put the shine on this shining hour. Thank you so much.

LIVING YOUR LEGACY: AN AMWA MEDWRITE TALK BY JOAN AFFLECK

Mark Twain is said to have written that the 2 most important days in your life are the day you’re born and the day you find out why. My talk today is about that second day. The day we find out why. The day we understand our purpose. The day we know what we stand for. And the way we show it to others.

We’re all writers here. We tend to think the way writers think. Like storytellers. Stories have a beginning. They have a middle. They have an end.

When we think of a career, for example, we think of a beginning, and a middle, and an end. Whatever we have achieved at the end—the thing we leave behind for others to (hopefully) admire—that’s our legacy. Right?

We leave behind a legacy. Now, what if I challenge that notion?

What if there’s another way of looking at a legacy? A whole different way of thinking about the purpose of a purpose? What if legacy isn’t something left over after years of work? What if, instead, legacy is ever-present? Real-time? This exact moment? What if all of us are, here and now, actually living our legacies?

I want to suggest today that we stop thinking of a legacy as an epilogue, something we leave for others to stand around and admire. Instead, may I show you a legacy?

Right here. It’s the living, breathing form of Joan Affleck. It’s standing in front of you. Living. In the moment. Vital. Engaged.

This legacy is alive and well. This legacy is a woman, a mother, a medical communicator, a cancer survivor, a public health servant. This legacy is a mad enthusiast of Paris and New Mexico and yoga and running, and great books and raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens and, well, you get the picture.

I believe something today with all my heart. Legacy is not what you leave. Legacy is what you live.

For some, a legacy means things they achieve, palpable things. The buildings they design. The software they create. The records they set. For others, a legacy is much simpler. It can be described in terms of who we are. The qualities of a person.

So, what would happen if we all committed, here and now, to living a legacy? Of being aware that who and how we are influencing other people every single day?

Well, you ask, how? I don’t think it’s that hard. I see 3 simple steps.

First, define what you stand for.

It may be big. It may be small. It certainly may evolve over time. I know that my own purpose has evolved, as my life deepened and matured, and I found new passions and causes.

The point is this: Whoever you are *now*, however you are now, take a stand.

Live who you are. Live how you are. Think of your legacy as the next action you take, the next sentence you speak.

Second, make a commitment to mastering whatever you stand for now.

Do it through devotion. Do it through study and learning. Do it through practice, repeated mindful actions in pursuit of purpose. But do it.

Third (and in my mind most important), *live into your purpose*. Every single day.

Life can change in an instant. There’s nobody in this room that doesn’t understand this way deep down. Live fully committed to what you stand for. Even if it’s really hard. In time it will bring satisfaction. It will also open unexpected paths to explore.

So here’s today’s call to action.

Live your legacy. Don’t aim simply to be remembered by a legacy.

And this is actually far more than a call to action. It’s a *cri du coeur*, a cry of the heart. A cry from my heart. What I’m saying, even imploring, is *to use every moment of your precious life*. You have just one.

There’s a poem I love. It’s by the late Mary Oliver, who left us in 2019. Her legacy?

An extraordinary, vibrant, beautiful life, crystallized in poetry that brought joy and inspiration book after book, verse after verse ... a *living* legacy every day of her 84 years on this earth.

I’ll share the last lines of her famous poem, “The Summer Day.”

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.

I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass, how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,

which is what I have been doing all day.

Tell me, what else should I have done?

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do

with your one wild and precious life?

So, dear colleagues, wonderful professional associates, friends, and loved ones, tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

Whatever you choose, let all of us see it, share it, learn from it, hour by hour. Let us see it now—not later.

If you remember nothing else of my talk, please remember this that I wholeheartedly believe:

A legacy is not what you *leave*. A legacy is what you *live*.

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