



**INSPIRED
BY A
BLANK SCREEN**





For
my fellow members of the
Scottish Fellowship of Christian Writers





INSPIRED BY A BLANK SCREEN

RE-BOOT YOUR SPIRITUAL LIFE

Irene Howat

CHRISTIAN
FOCUS





Irene Howat is an award-winning author who is accomplished writer in writing for children and adults. She has many titles to her name, including *My Beloved Russia* (ISBN 978-1-84550-062-7) and *A Week in the Life of MAF* (ISBN 978-1-84550-940-9). She is married to a minister and they have a grown up family. She is also a talented artist and lives in Argyll, Scotland.

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FOREWORD
BY
HELEN ROSEVEARE

A fascinating idea - that by familiarising myself with the workings of a word-processor document on my computer, I can understand better how to live the Christian life!

From the first comment, 'the intimidation of the **blank screen**', I felt at home. When I obtained my first computer, over twenty years ago, I called it my Beast - it intimidated and terrified me. Without doubt, 'it' was the Boss, and I was its slave. An hour's tutorial with a kindly friend assured me, that if I called 'it' my Friend, I would gain a psychological victory! That was my start.

Likewise, to live the Christian life may seem a frightening impossibility to a new beginner, until the assurance is given that God is our Friend, and freely gives us His Spirit to guide and direct us through all the difficulties and problems of life.

I loved the chapter on learning to **file** everything - what a blessing to learn how to tidy up the mess of one's study, and equally of one's Christian life: and how to **delete** what doesn't need filing - holding no grudges, forgiving and forgetting, whatever occurs that is not pleasing to our





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Lord. Then **saving** and **printing** all that is of value - how easy to forget, and then there is a power cut and all the day's work is lost! Is it not the same spiritually - that all He teaches us day by day be saved in our hearts and printed out in our daily lives. **Copy** and **paste** has been the life blood of thousands of us writers, saving endless hours of re-typing and re-arranging - and should provide us with a clear picture as we think of our need to 'be holy as He is', imitating our Lord and Saviour, being humble and meek, obedient and compassionate as Jesus.

Then the **ruler** and **toolbar** to guide us into making the fullest possible use of all the program's facilities, so as to produce work of the highest possible excellence - living by the Ten Commandments, and understanding them as rules to help us imitate Him. I confess the **help** button has often left me more puzzled than before - as Irene says 'swimming through mud!' - but how wonderful to know there is always the Helper on hand for our spiritual needs, when we acknowledge our need of Him.

Shut-down at the end of a hard day's work is a marvellous moment, and so we can each trust that our own passing on from this life into the nearer presence of our Lord will be a good 'shut-down - a falling asleep in Jesus. Yes, and the final chapter on **Restart** - how thrilling to start again, the next chapter in our eternal life in the presence of the Master, 'the eternal joys of heaven'!

Over the course of twenty years, I have learned to use my word-processor fairly efficiently: as I read this book, I felt deeply challenged as to whether I had learned equally thoroughly how to live the Christian life - not merely efficiently, but more importantly, as a humble 'copy' of the life of my Lord and Saviour.

Helen Roseveare





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INTIMIDATED OR INSPIRED?

Every writer knows the feeling, whether they write long books or short letters, whether they write thank-you notes for Christmas presents or complaints when a product fails to live up to expectations. And the feeling? Intimidation. It's brought on by a blank sheet of paper or a blank computer screen. Our minds go as blank as the paper and screen. What do we want to say? How do we want to say it? Where do we begin? How often I've been there!

It was not always so. I remember when, as a child, I was given a new exercise book at school. A new book always seemed so clean, white and fresh compared to the dog-eared one it replaced. Resolving to write more neatly, to draw more carefully and to make fewer mistakes, I would launch into the pristine blankness of page one. The first couple of sheets were often models of what was possible. But before long the writing deteriorated, the page corners began to curl and the teacher's red corrections discouraged me. By the time I reached the staples that marked the middle of the book it had become just like every previous one. Perhaps that experience repeated book upon book,





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year upon year, was what changed a blank sheet of paper from being a treat to being a challenge ... to being plain intimidating. And a blank computer screen is just an electronic version of the same.

I love writing books; it must be one of the best jobs in the world. Being a biographer allows me to spend as long as I need researching someone of interest before committing a single word to a page. All those about whom I've written have been Christians and researching their lives is often a great blessing, so much so that there is sometimes a very fine line between work and recreational reading, in the real meaning of re-creational. I search out sources from all sorts of places, read book after book and spend hours on line. Before a word is written down I need to feel that I am the person about whom I'm writing. And a trick from my childhood helps me to do that.

When I was a little girl I had my very own supersonic mode of travel, and that was some time before Concorde first zipped through the skies. It was my tick-boat. For years my tick-boat was my secret; I told nobody about it, even my nearest and dearest. I guess I thought that they would have laughed at me. They would! But over the last few years I've been asked by many people how to develop their writing skills, and it seems to me that a tick-boat is an invaluable tool. So, at the risk of being laughed at, I'll unveil my childhood's nocturnal transportation.

At night, when I went to bed, I decided where I wanted to go to and who I wanted to be. The place could be anywhere in the world, or beyond – for this was in the days when space travel was the stuff of my brothers' weekly comics. And the person could be anyone at all, past, present or future. As my favourite book was *The Girl's Book of Heroines*, I often





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chose to be one of its characters. So, with the light out and my eyes tightly closed, I imagined I was in a tick-boat. I've no idea what it was meant to look like, but it derived its name from the 'fact' that it could transport me to wherever I wanted to be in a single tick of the bedroom clock.

Come with me on one such journey. Just one tick from reality I was in the Crimea, walking through a hospital hut with Florence Nightingale. I would hold out my hands – quite literally – and imagine that I could feel the rough blankets that covered the soldiers and the warmth of their fevered foreheads. Then I went through my other senses, trying to smell the combination of heat, illness and boiling cabbage; to listen to wounded soldiers moaning, men snoring, Florence Nightingale ordering nurses around and comforting her patients, and all against the distant sound of war; to taste the food they ate and feel the dust of the Crimea in my mouth. And I would 'look' all around myself taking in the tiniest details that my childish imagination conjured up as the Crimean War.

That was all a long time ago. Yet now, when I'm writing biography, I do exactly the same. Having discovered as much as I can about my subject, I use my old tick-boat technique and try to feel, smell, hear, taste and see what he or she experienced. When I was writing one book I phoned the subject twelve week-nights in succession, reading a chapter of the book to her each night. At the end of nearly every call she said, 'That's right, but how did you know? I didn't tell you.' And my answer was that when I was writing the material I felt as though I *was* her and could imagine her feelings and reactions even though she hadn't discussed them with me.





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This brings me right back to the beginning. Why is it that however much research has been done, however much I 'am' the subject, I'm still intimidated by the blank computer screen? It still bullies me into inactivity. It was on one such occasion that I spent some time looking at the screen for inspiration ... and realised it wasn't blank at all! All sorts of prompts were trying to give me a kick-start. And, when I scrolled down the prompts on the various tool bars I realised that the 'blank' computer screen was providing me with inspiration, not for the book I was working on, but for this one!

Computers are nothing if they are not well organised. My earliest encounter with a computer was a programming class I attended in the days when the computer took up a whole room in our local college. Probably the only thing of lasting worth I remember was that computers behave logically and that to make the most of them we have to try to think in a straight line. That is no criticism of the course I attended, rather a tribute to the speed with which technology has moved on. Users of computers no longer need to understand how they work! In fact, I have found it a helpful exercise to use my computer prompts – its blank screen – to examine how I work, how I think and, from time to time, what I believe.

