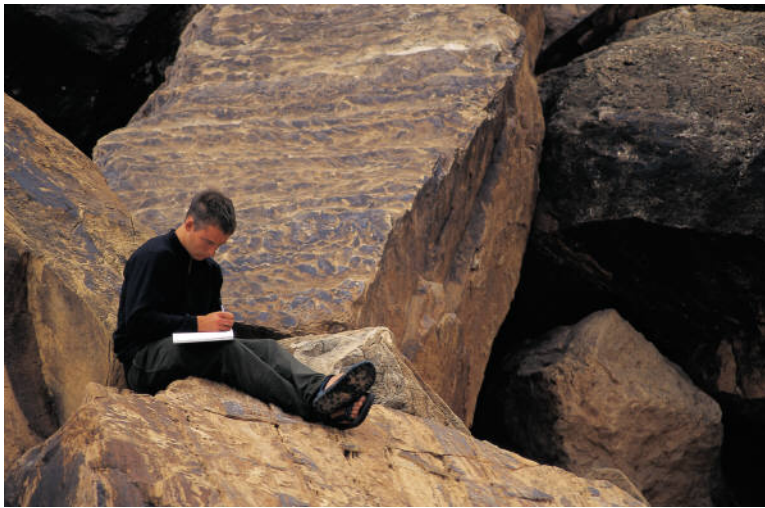


That Beautiful Journal: How and Why to Write in It

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The planet itself seems to be hurrying towards a new world these days. Which can result in stress and imbalance—and the poor decisions which are the result of too much hurry.

A journal can be a place where we learn to slow down and enjoy the view.

Slowing our pace not only enables us to enjoy the view from where we are—but to check in with ourselves to make sure that we are traveling towards the destination that is right for us.

Writing in a journal has an emotional and spiritual dimension as well. It can help us live out of our centered and compassionate hearts.

Your journal is one place to be quiet and to feel deeply. To reflect and to be listened to. To formulate prayers for yourself and for others. To hear the voice of God.

Both Eastern and Western spiritual traditions recommend that a person come to know themselves. "Knowing" involves what we feel as well as what we think. It is good to try to know ourselves in quiet so we can get some distance from advertising and the voices of our tribes and culture, which may not reflect the still small voice which is inside each of us. Writing it down is concrete, leaving a record, and letting

yourself know that you are serious about your spiritual life.

Perhaps we know this at some level already and that is one reason there are so many beautiful journals right now which are beckoning to be brought from the stores into our homes and lives. Unfortunately, many of these beautiful journals will sit by our bedsides for months while we wait to be inspired by something worthy to write in them. Other journals will be written in enthusiastically for three or four days then laid aside until there is a major crisis we need to talk over with ourselves. Each of these crisis times offers us the opportunity to begin a sustained journaling program. But without the intention and understanding of really knowing who we are, we are sucked back into the mindset of the culture or tribe.

A journal works best when it is more than a diary. A diary merely records what happens. Engaging one's honest feelings; paying attention; taking action when appropriate; again reflecting; and--always--looking for our delight--can help us to use a journal in a way that is life giving for ourselves and for others.

Here are some tips to get your started and keep you writing.

First, the mechanics--what to write with and on and how to create a "safe" space so you can allow yourself to be honest.

What to write with?

Pencil fades too quickly. A pen and paper are personal and easy to carry around. A computer is more legible but puts more distance between you and your writing. If a computer is the way it will work for you because you are used to it or your handwriting is illegible, go for it. Whatever you use, too much attention to punctuation, grammar, or legibility will undermine the value of the product. You will not be graded on neatness or literary quality or anything else.

What to write in?

Beautiful books are expensive and intimidate some people who don't want to write until they have something important to say. Try a looseleaf binder or small notebook if this is happening to you. Don't write on loose pages--these will get lost, wrinkled, or torn. Save your journals in chronological order in files or binders. Keep dreams and journal dialogues separate from everyday stuff. Make up other categories of filing, but don't get too complicated.

How to create a "safe" space so you can be really honest?

Keep your journals as confidential as you would therapy sessions! Thinking in advance about privacy can increase your ability to share your deepest self. Keep your journal private from everyone else and write as if your journal is for your eyes only. Resist secret wishes someone will accidentally see your journal and praise

your insights or that someday you'll be rich and famous because of what you've written in your journal. That fosters an agenda of control not sacred attentiveness. After writing something, you may choose to share a portion of your journal with others, but the initiative and authority to do so always should belong to you.

Put your journal away after use. Don't leave it lying around to be accidentally read. Have a talk with anyone you live with who doesn't understand journal boundaries. Or write your journal in code. Simple code would be to change people's names or certain key words or actions. A more complex code would be like the shorthand code of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. Most of his daily journal was kept secret for hundreds of years after his death because it took that long to decode it.

If you're afraid your journal will fall into the wrong hands should something happen to you, leave instructions in your will or with a trusted friend or family member. (Or just don't worry about it. If you journal long enough, you'll have filled so many pages that no person with half a life would be interested in ploughing through your ruminations.)

Now you are ready to get started! Date every entry. Every page is best but at least write the month, day, and year of each entry. Some people write the geographic location where they are writing. Good advice is to number each page; it makes it easier to retrieve your thoughts later.

Here are some ideas to do right now.

--Write what you feel.

Write why you want to journal. Write what the meaning of a spiritual life is to you. Write a history of your spiritual life, using one sentence and a separate paragraph for each significant event. Write about what happened yesterday and how you feel about it. This is not a cosmetic or makeover exercise designed to make you look good to yourself. Write the good things you feel and the bad things you feel. Suppose you don't know what you feel yet? Then try morning pages, suggested by Julia Cameron in The Artist's Way. Morning pages are first thing in the morning, out of bed, butt in chair, write three longhand pages. No matter what. No matter how you feel. Blah, blah, blah, blah. Stream of consciousness. May be a lot of boring "stuff". Silly or weird or immature or worrying or self-critical "stuff". May be complaining or bitching or not consistent with your self-image "stuff". Like a dump--get the garbage out. If you can't think of anything to write, spend three pages writing, "I can't think of anything to write." The idea is that if you write day after day, within a couple of days or weeks blocks will begin to dissolve and real feelings will emerge because the logical and overly critical left brain will give up and the "little kid" brain (the one that feels) can emerge. Works better for you at night? Then do evening pages, but be consistent and write each day. Don't think that just because you put any feelings down that you have to act on them immediately. It is not necessary or

even desirable to tell someone you are angry at them just because the anger came up. That may be appropriate. But it also may be appropriate to work somewhat with what is beneath the anger. Just allow the feelings to come up in a nonjudgmental way.

--Let the written feelings become experienced feelings. Celebrate what you can. Sing! Write a Psalm of praise! Dance!

Let the negative feelings come up to be released in tears or anger, and then move back towards your centered and compassionate heart by turning your distressing feelings into a prayer list. Pray for yourself. But also pray for all of those others who have similar feelings to what you have. Light a candle to let yourself know that you are serious and to reinforce your intention. Or do the Buddhist practice of tonglen, mentioned in Pema Chodron's book, When Things Fall Apart. Breathe in what is painful to you. Then breathe out peace and calm or whatever causes a shift in you. Then remember that others have similar pain on similar issues so breathe in their pain as well. Then breathe out peace and calm or love to all of those in the world who suffer similar pain to yours. For example, if you feel sad because you are lonely, breathe in the pain of all of those who are suffering because they are lonely. Then breathe out love and connection to all of those people. Do this also for people who have hurt you, because they are suffering too. Prayer and tonglen connect you with the broader world, as well as Spirit. You'll be surprised what comes up. And don't forget to write about it.

--Play with Scripture. Great spiritual leaders often read Scripture daily. Gandhi read both Christian and Hindu Scriptures. Thich Nat Hanh reads both Buddhist and Christian Scriptures. Read, and write how you feel about what you read. Try to engage the Scripture and make it real for yourself. One way to do this is to find something that speaks to you and then paraphrase it. Write your own Psalm by paraphrasing a hymn of praise or a prayer for deliverance. Or write a poem. Not necessarily something that rhymes, but a concentrated expression of an idea or emotion evoked in you. Or do this. Read some Scripture--whether Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Tao, Islam, doesn't matter, just something that moves you. Read it out loud if you can. Now close your eyes and let images come. After a while, draw a picture of what you feel or what has been evoked in you. What you draw could be just a blob of color; that's okay; that's your right brain. When you've finished drawing your picture, use your left brain to explain about the picture. You're engaging both sides of your brain--bringing truth deeper into your being.

Of course you can write a gratitude journal. Every day. What you are grateful for. But try to really feel the gratitude! Otherwise it is an empty ritual. Or start a Delight Journal. Write about what delights you! Pay attention to yourself as you go about your daily life. When are you really delighted? Try to have at least one thing that delights you each day. Write what has delighted you in the past. Remember those times and feel it in your body. Notice whether things "flow better" when you are operating out of the consciousness of delight.

--Write about your dreams. Write a summary of your important dreams (you'll know which ones they are) in a separate place in your journal immediately after you have the dream. Later, don't analyze it--that's too left brain and more intellectual than dreams are intended to be--but work with it. Try to let it engage you, even dialoging with it to see what it wants to tell you.

--Write journal dialogues. Have a dialogue with the inner spirit or "person" behind a relationship, situation, or event that has meaning to you. You can even write a dialogue with Jesus or the Buddha or any other figure who embodies love and wisdom for you.

For example, try a dialogue with your body. Write a one paragraph focusing statement of how it is between you and your body right now. Write from your everyday ego perspective. Now write something from your body's perspective. This will be a 10 or 12 sentence summary of the history of your body--but from your body's perspective. Begin with "I was born" and then bring it up to the present day. (In writing these statements from the body's perspective, it is helpful for some people to visualize their body sitting in a chair across from them and speaking to them.) After you have written the short history of your body from the body's perspective, reread everything, then sit in quietness. Allow images to come up. When it feels right, begin a written dialogue, either by just jumping into it or by introducing yourself and inviting a comment. Start a new paragraph when you change characters and consider using initials to indicate who is writing. This process was adapted from Ira Progoff's technique explained in, At A Journal Workshop, which can provide you with further information.

Once you've written something, especially a dialogue, dream summary, prayer, or poetry, reread it. We all need a special friend who really pays attention to us. That kind of friend can help us grow and help us know we are loved. Guess what! You are that friend. You are the one who has the most to learn from paying attention to your life.

Rereading is one of the most important steps. Try to get into a quiet peaceful state, then reread what you've written. Don't judge, but pay attention to what you feel inside as you read. Does something seem a little off? Does something stir in you? Do you get an energy release when you read something? Then write in the margins what you feel and the date if it's a different date than the entry you're reading. Save your journals so you can reread about and become conscious of recurring issues. For example, if you're having trouble in a relationship, reread your entries from the first several months of that relationship or perhaps you may be led to read about a relationship with another person. And then pay attention to the inner stirrings and see where that leads you in terms of subsequent journaling. This is a process. It's a process of using your own words for self referral in the moment. And also later, since we tend to repeat our lessons until we learn them. Having something written from long ago that is similar to the situation you are having now is

very enlightening in terms of helping you see patterns that might not otherwise be brought to consciousness.

Now . . . a few more things that can keep you from journaling or that might give you difficulty. "Resistance" to the spiritual life by someone who wants to be spiritual is a reality. Carl Jung popularized the notion in modern times that we are made up of many selves, including a shadow that operates in the dark (i.e., you don't always realize the motivations for your behavior and sometimes you don't even realize when you are sabotaging yourself).

One of the ways that resistance to the spiritual life can manifest is when we use up all of our spiritual time and energy by buying (and sometimes even reading!) books about meditation, journaling, and others' spiritual lives without having at least equal time for our own spiritual practices. So watch yourself; be conscious. Don't just read about journaling, do it. Read this article, and then write. Later, you can read some of the books that take you through journaling exercises: like Ira Progoff's or Julia Cameron's books or Morton Kelsey's Adventure Inward. But be wary of dissipating all of your journaling energy by reading about journaling.

Another form of resistance is judgmentalism. Remember the value of a nonjudgmental therapist or parent in allowing all of a person's feelings to come to the surface. Be your own nonjudgmental therapist or parent. Be patient with yourself and your journaling. Not every page will be potent with meaning but over time you will come to experience yourself more deeply and what is now hidden will be revealed to you.

A third form of resistance is not taking appropriate action. Maintain a balance between acting on every feeling that comes up and never taking any action at all. Be cautious about what you share with others, but if you never share anything or take an action based on your feelings, eventually they will go away. (What do you do when you feel ignored? After awhile, you stop sharing.) And remember, journaling is to help you lead a better life; it is not a substitute for actually living your life.

The last issue is how to find time to journal. Take your journal with you, and then just write in it. You will find time once you become convinced that this can help you lead a more rewarding, more insightful, life. Try it for three weeks and then take some time to reread what you've written. Pay attention to what you feel inside and be alert to the "connections" you make, any A-HA! experiences, any feelings of answered prayers or being taken care of. (And don't forget to extend your journal reflections out to pray for yourself and others.) Or get together in a group once a week or take a class. There is a deepening of relationships as people write in silence in their own journals and then share their reflections with one another.

If you can keep a journal, you will have a good chance of getting to know your real self--with its contradictions and projections and character defects and giftedness

and neediness and independence and contrariness and sacredness. If you can do this, you will grow spiritually, and . . . you will always have an interesting friend.

If you can combine keeping a journal with attention to what delights you (and eventual movement towards doing what delights you more often), you will help create a world that has more delight in it. As well as being a more delight-full person.

If you can combine keeping a journal with prayer and compassion for others, you will help create a world with more compassion. As well as be more compassionate.

Then you can more easily enjoy the view from where you are—but also make sure that you are traveling to the destination you want to travel.

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