

KEEPING A JOURNAL

Thoreau's entry for December 5, 1856 contained his usual miscellany of writing: simple notes of facts to mark the record of the year, observations of nature and men, thoughts. In your journal put down whatever strikes you. Think of it at once as private and public. You may be showing it or parts of it to others. If you find yourself recording such intimate secrets that you do not want them revealed, you can keep them in the book and copy out only those you want to show to others. The possibilities for entries are endless:

WHAT IS A JOURNAL?

Though a journal may be many things—a treasury, a storehouse, a jewelry box, a laboratory, a drafting board, a collector's cabinet, a snapshot album, a history, a travelogue, a religious exercise, a letter to oneself—it has some definable characteristics. It is a record, an entry-book, kept regularly, though not necessarily daily. Invariably some entries will be scrawled on the backs of ice cream wrappers, envelopes, paper bags, or programs, whatever blank surface available at the moment. Some will be nearly illegible, written in the dark in the middle of the night. These entries can be recopied, pasted in, or dated and kept loose in the rear of the journal, but they are part of it; inspiration settles on one at the most awkward moments, not necessarily as one sits down to write with clean page, sharpened pencil, and open mind.

It is a record kept for oneself. As such, it is fragmentary, allusive, disjointed, uneven in quality. Nor should it be polished and unified; then it would be a collection of essays. What matters is the one entry in ten which sparkles, ready to be set in the ring of an essay or story or poem or letter.

Not only is it a record for oneself, but of oneself. Every memorable journal, any successful journal, is honest. Nothing sham, phoney, false. Who is there to kid? Yet euphemism, the word which hides the fact, is so much a part of the world; to break through the euphemistic mold of thought to honesty is very difficult. A journal need not be a confession, or a psychoanalyst's couch, however. Honesty lies in observing undeceived what lies about, not necessarily what lies within.

Finally, a journal is a place to fail. That is, a place to try, experiment, test one's wings. For the moment, judgment, criticism, evaluation are suspended; what matters is the attempt, not the success of the attempt. In a journal one practices the lines before going onstage.

A journal may be all gems, or all logs, or all plans and blueprints, or all test tubes, or all confession, or all collections of oddments—or it may be a marvelous hodgepodge of the old-fashioned general store. What follows are some ways of seeking, of thinking of a journal, and some suggestions of what to do with it. You may follow one suggestion consistently, or try all, or none. At least you will become aware of what is possible.

1. Think of your journal as a treasury, a jewelry box for gems and gold nuggets, for quotes (others' or/and yours), pithy ideas, epigrams, turns of phrase, insights, analogies, puns, aphorisms, nutshell wisdom. You will write little, but think much.

2. Think of your journal as a storehouse into which you pack canned goods (others' ideas), fresh fruit, nuts, corn, string, straw, K-rations—almost anything edible and useful, in preparation for a rainy day, when you can browse through your storehouse with delight and constant amazement at what is there. Like a pack-rat or the Collier brothers, don't stop to be discriminatory in your salvaging and collecting.
3. Think of your journal as a collector's cabinet in which you place or mount butterflies and moths, or glass figurines, or . . . What will you collect? salt and pepper shakers? stamps? model ships in bottles? oddments, little ironic quirks of life? Do you collect for others to see, or just to have?
4. Think of your journal as a snapshot album and you a roving photographer clicking a shutter on life. Light and dark contrasts, color, texture, angles, and circles, portraits, landscape: what will you photograph? Steichen chose faces and hands; Ansel Adams chose the Sierras. See life through a lens, telescopic, microscopic, or wide-angle, but a lens. In focus.
5. Think of your journal as a laboratory for experiments, blank pages waiting to be tried. Dissect. See what the insides are like, how it runs, how it's put together. Examine minutely; see with a microscope. Mix test-tubes. Weigh. Trace patterns; fix laws. Ask questions and set about to find answers.
6. Think of your journal as a giant wardrobe which you can step into and try on marvelous clothes. Put on others' styles, look in the mirror, see and feel how they fit. Wear what you like; change with the seasons; try on 49 hats and buy none. Be Parisian, Ethiopian, or Hindi: experiment, experiment. Even poetry, though by phrases, not rhymes.
7. Think of your journal as a drafting board. Blank pages will become blueprints, plans for a house to live in. Or are you drafting just window sills, or a whole cathedral? Accuracy, careful detail, sharp lines, no smudges on the pages. If you are an idea-person, what will you build? Watch your idea-house grow, as you add on bedrooms for the birth of new thoughts.
8. Think of your journal as a psychoanalyst's couch, a confession. Lie down, and talk, talk, talk. Ramble on about irrelevancies, or else list in order your sins. Repeat, go over and over as you peel away each layer of onion skin to the core. Explore your depths. Dreams, Fantasies, Truths.
9. Think of your journal as a tape recorder attached directly to your brain. Record your stream-of-consciousness, your associational thoughts. Don't fuss for words; write as fast as you think. Use dashes, dots, skip lines and spaces for "punctuation." Replay: can you find a coherence in your thoughts? Emphasize and clarify such associational leaps.
10. Think of your journal as a continuous but unmailed letter to a specific, real person. Preferably of the opposite sex, highly interested in you. Make every entry a love letter,

every entry an act of love. Or choose to write to a close confidant. Or to your mother. Or possibly to your yet unborn children. What would you tell them? no moralizing, no mush.

11. Think of your journal as a letter to yourself. What would you have yourself know? Or remember ten years from now? Which self of your many selves will you choose to write to? Or yourself as you were, say, at ten? Or yourself as you will be? Will your other self/selves answer back? Turn your journal into a dialogue or triologue with yourself. Argue, debate, reconcile.
12. Think of your journal as a history—memoirs—and you as a VIP: the average citizen. Write for an extraterrestrial reader, or a terrestrial one of the 22nd Century. Let them know how we really lived and thought. Or else record the current world events, as filtered through you eyes, your consciousness, your concern. Record how history touches you.
13. Think of your journal as a travelogue, even though you may travel only through tunnels from dorm to class, like an underground man. See afresh, as if you were born yesterday, or recently distilled from another planet. Record the quaint customs, lore, folkways, speech patterns, superstitions, magic, and miraculous sights of the local terrain. Be Livingstone, Margaret Mead. Or be Magellan; chart the unknown; fill in the map of your world.
14. Think of your journal as a religious exercise, one which might lead to a religious experience, or religious insight. Write it as a letter to God. A dialogue? Follow St. Ignatius' meditative methods: application of the senses; composition of scene. But write it down. Become all tongue, all eyeball, all nose; only hands; the world's ear. Be at the place, fly back to the time. Put yourself in other's feet; especially try those you can't stand, those who seem foreign to you. Use these meditative principles in areas not considered religious; meditate on the secular. Write prayers, personal prayers; write litany; write secular prayers, secular litany. Search for metaphors, new metaphors, for the ineffable, the wordless, the inexpressible. Reach out into the void, reach down, reach up, to find ways of telling others what you believe.

An essay on journals is not a map, merely suggestions. Take one, take several, as you wish.

The great journal keepers have always distrusted their memories. When an idea strikes them for a piece of writing, they write it down even though it is only an idea, so far without the materials to give it body. Samuel Butler, whose published *Note-Books* are widely quoted, made such notes for writing he hoped to do some day.

From: Writing to be Read, by Ken Macrorie.