

"THE KEEPING OF A JOURNAL OF REFLECTIONS" for YMN Field Placement - Eastern University

Adapted from an unpublished paper by: Reverend Russell Carlson, Chicago Heights, Illinois

...It is surprising to discover how little material is available about the practice of journal-keeping... The keeping of a journal is a fairly common custom, of course, and many such documents have been published, but only rarely are references found regarding the procedures followed in keeping a journal.

My research involved a fairly exhaustive search in four libraries (including available catalogs of periodical), contact by letter with three persons using some form of journal-keeping in their work, and discussions with a number of persons who have kept a journal for personal edification. My own journal-keeping added another dimension to the research.

I. Values in a Journal-Keeping

Across the centuries people have kept a personal journal for a variety of reason. Pope John XIII was primarily concerned with spiritual development. One of his earliest journal manuscripts was captioned "The Journal of a Soul."

For John Steinbeck it served the purpose of "priming the literary pump," causing the creative juices" to flow. Psychiatrists suggest the practice to patients who experience difficulty verbalizing their feelings in one to one situations.

But whatever the primary motivation may be, the witness of experience seems to be that the disciplined journal-keeper gains more from his efforts than he anticipated.

Thus Soren Kierkegaard, after struggling over whether or not to begin a journal, later wrote with appreciation about the self-knowledge which had come to him, and the greater fluency in writing he had gained, through his journal-keeping. Anne Morrow Lindburg speaks of her journal as having preserved her sanity, while at the same time enriching the experience about which she wrote. And Ira Progoff says that journal-keeping allows a person to enter into the deeper meanings of his/her existence.

Anais Nin, with characteristic sensitivity, recognizes this interrelatedness:

The Diary, creating a vast tapestry, a web, exposing constantly the relationship between the past and the present, weaving meticulously the invisible interaction, noting the repetitions of themes, developed the sense of the totality of personality, this tale without beginning or end which encloses all things, and relates all things, as a strong antidote to the unrelatedness, incoherence and disintegration of the modern man.

Though the uniqueness of individuality necessarily affects the values which journal-keeping may contain for any one person, it may fairly be said to **at least provide:**

- (1) an opportunity for the free expression of feelings, (releasing tensions, and allowing otherwise hidden thoughts and attitudes to surface)

- (2) an opportunity for growth in self-understanding, (developing insight into unrealized potential, and unrealized impoverishment) and

- (3) an opportunity to integrate, and give continuity to that which is experienced (helping to discern the direction of the ebb and flow of one's existence).

II. Procedures for Journal-Keeping

Neither the careful observation of one's own self, nor thoughtful reflection about the persons and events which touch upon our lives, is easily accomplished. *If taken seriously it is a demanded task, requiring a fairly high level of commitment.*

Once the use of a journal has become habitual, however, and its value clearly established, some are able to write eagerly in it. Anais Nin speaks of being anxious to get to her journal so that she could faithfully record the spontaneity of her feelings.

Such eagerness is exceptional though. Even when present it is developed only after many months of disciplined labor. The crucial element is the decision to **make regular entries in the journal**, preferably on a day by day basis. *There is broad agreement that it is much more helpful to make brief entries regularly, than to make lengthy entries spasmodically.*

Sensing this, John Adams carried his tattered journal notebooks with him as he traveled from place to place (as did John Wesley and Francis Asbury of course). Nonetheless, in the Adams' notebooks, there are a substantial number of gaps during which no entries were recorded. That such gaps are quite common within published journals is in itself evidence of how difficult it is to be faithful in recording one's thoughts and feelings.

To assist persons in developing the technique of "free-writing," (as he refers to it), Charles F. Kemp at Texas Christian University suggests that **these guidelines should be followed:**

- (1) Set a time and place to do the writing and keep it faithfully like any other appointment.
- (2) Continue over a fairly extended period of time - results can come quickly but they are more likely to come after some time.
- (3) Do not worry about penmanship, grammar, or punctuation -- this is an experiment in free expression, not authorship.
- (4) Be frank, honest, and specific - it does no good to evade issues.
- (5) Include your concerns and problems but also your goals and aspirations.
- (6) If you are seeing a counselor (or Field Placement Supervisor), share what you have written with him or her.
- (7) Be positive - never complete a statement without listing some of your strengths.
- (8) When you have completed a statement, lay it aside; return to your tasks or pleasures with a

new freedom.

In an non-academic setting, the Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C., has made extensive use of **journal-keeping as a spiritual discipline**. Elizabeth O'Connor, whose several books have grown out of her assignments within this intentional community, encourages a similar procedure.

A most profitable discipline to adopt...is the keeping of a journal. Keep it for your own sake and your own eyes so that you write in it without reservations. Let it be a description of your inner world and what is happening there. Put in it all the feelings you are aware of - feelings of love and hate and fear. Include what you unearth by your meditation. Write in it your prayers, your resolutions, the little dialogues you have with yourself, your dreams, your fantasies, your response to events and people. Let it be representative of both your spiritual and your psychological odyssey, if you separate the two. Always include what you have observed about yourself.

These and other sources underscore the importance of making regular journal entries, allowing ideas and feelings to be freely recorded without concern for style or structure, and in the confidence that what is written is for one's own eyes.

III. The Use of a Journal

Kierkegaard, after debating the matter for some time, determined to deliberately ignore any possible use to which it might be put and to record his thoughts and feelings for the sole purpose of giving expression to them. Many others, however, have discovered that such a journal could be made use of in very specific and quite helpful ways.

For Max Frisch and Anais Nin, the journal was the womb in which much of their work was conceived and developed. Out of the "lived moments" recorded in their respective journals, they were able to create the descriptions and events depicted in their fiction. The journal was the laboratory for their creative labors. To those interested in the encouragement of personal and spiritual growth, reading and reflecting upon earlier journal entries is often found to be exceedingly helpful.

When properly used, *the journal can become "the individual's own laboratory in which the trial-and-error experimenting of personal growth is recorded, studied, and grappled with until the goal of a transforming experience is reached."* So speaks the behavioral psychologist Ira Progoff. Dr. Progoff has developed the process of journal-keeping into a highly refined psychological tool. He sees the journal as:

...an active instrument, not simply a passive recording instrument like a diary. The interplay of exercises and techniques that have been developed for its use builds a movement within the person that propels him forward in his outer life. The intensive journal thus enables a person progressively to restructure his life goals at his own tempo and in his own terms.

Whether a person may choose to make limited use of the journal, or utilize it as a means of facilitating inner dialogue, the process of self-discovery which it opens up remains a life-long possibility.