

Osher Lifelong Learning Institute

JOURNAL WRITING AMONG OLDER LEARNERS

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Journal Writing Among Older Learners

Introduction

The journal or diary is a literary genre with a long, albeit unclear, history (note: while some writers and critics perceive minor technical differences between “journal” and “diary,” these terms are used interchangeably in this article). In fact, “investigating the history of personal journal writing is akin to tracing the development of self-consciousness” (Lowenstein, 1987, p. 87). The practice of keeping a journal or diary dates at least as far back as 56 C.E. when, in China, journals were written and then archived as historical documents. In the west, the Fourth Century bishop and theologian, Augustine of Hippo, is often credited with having invented the literary genre of autobiography. St. Augustine’s classic work, *Confessions*, represents this prolific thinker’s effort to trace his own religious conversion and growth in Christian spirituality and in many places “provides a very early example of diary-like writing” (Berman, 1991, p. 33).

A well-documented diary-like form created in tenth-century Japan was the pillow book, so named because it was placed in the bed chamber or perhaps in drawers of wooden pillows. Written primarily by Heian court ladies, these records incorporated factual accounts, dreams, fantasies, and poetry (Lowenstein, 1987). Plutschow (1973) notes that in Japan the diary has long been understood and respected as a way of recording history. Within this tradition is the travel diary, categorized by Japanese critics as a separate genre from the other forms then used. These travel diaries were, in good part, comprised of poetry.

In contrast to its earlier Japanese ancestor the western travel diary is primarily a narrative emphasizing the factual, i.e., what the traveler has done and seen. During the European Renaissance such chronicles were often written by privileged young men taking continental tours. In his essay “Of Travel,” Francis Bacon actually instructed these men on writing travel diaries, encouraging observation of “the courts of princes, the courts of justice, the churches and monasteries, the walls and fortifications of cities and towns . . . “ (Bacon, 1958, pp. 113-114). Thomas Mallon notes that “the earliest travel diaries were kept less for reasons of sentiment than geography . . . The ship’s log – like the household account and the commonplace book – is one of the forms to which the diary probably owes its murky start” (Mallon, 1984, pp. 42 – 43).

Evolving much later, but derived from a combination of earlier diary types, is the personal journal. This specific genre of writing emphasizes the self, often in relationship with other people, events, and ideas. Entries were characterized by immediacy and self-reflection. Samuel Pepys’ diary, written between 1660 – 1669, is a well-known early example. Among the hallmarks of Pepys’ diary are optimism, concise character sketches, love of gossip, and enjoyment of small detail. In nineteenth century French diaries, known as “journals intime,” the development was toward greater intensity, self-preoccupation, confession, and passion. Emerging around the time of the French Revolution, the journal intime often questioned traditional values, existing literary forms, government, and even the relationship between the sexes (Lowenstein, p. 93).

By the twentieth century, journal writing had taken hold as a common practice among both professional and non-professional writers. In fact, within the past 100 years the message has become widespread that anybody can write and benefit from keeping a personal journal, not just those individuals who happen to write for a living (Cameron, 1998). There is indeed a wide recognition today that journal writing is a vehicle for self-understanding, self-guidance, expanded creativity, and spiritual development. Thomas Mallon, in his popular *A Book of One's Own: People and Their Diaries* (1984), organizes the general world of diary writers into seven broad and often overlapping groups: chroniclers, travelers, pilgrims, creators, apologists, confessors, and prisoners.

Three important movements in the twentieth century have played an especially influential role in nurturing interest in diary writing among the general population. First, the growth of the fields of psychology and psychotherapy has encouraged people to look inside themselves, to analyze and document behaviors and feelings, and to explore dreams. Many individuals involved with Jungian and related therapies include journal-based writing as a part of treatment. Secondly, the Women's Movement has encouraged personal writing as a way for women to achieve power and voice (Heilbrun, 1988; Metzger, 1992, Belenky et. al., 1997). And thirdly, growth in interest in personal spirituality dating from the 1980's has linked personal journal writing to creativity, expansion of consciousness, and the deepening of spiritual awareness and growth (Santa-Maria, 1983; Solly and Lloyd, 1989; Baldwin, 1990; Wakefield, 1990, Cameron, 1992; Rainer, 1997).

Kerka (1996) and Hiemstra (2001) describe various types of journals used by people participating in adult education programs. Benefits derived from this writing may include being able to see tangible evidence of mental processes, having a safe place to practice writing without restrictions of form, enabling the articulation of connections between new information and what they already know, and making meaning. Types of diaries adults use in both formal and informal learning situations include dream logs, autobiographies, spiritual journals, theory logs, and interactive reading diaries.

Berman (1991), working in the context of gerontology, carefully examined the content of personal journals published by four older writers: Florida Scott-Maxwell, Elizabeth Vining, Alan Olmstead, and May Sarton. The ages of these diarists ranged from 59 to 84. All of these published journals provide rich descriptions of the interior lives of their authors and each represents a singular narrative stemming from the authors' unique life experiences and personalities. Berman, however, concluded that common themes exist: the sense of individuation (a Jungian term designating the development of the self), the need to structure time in later age and to re-direct one's energies toward useful activities, coming to terms with impending death, and detailed descriptions of the experience of later age itself.

The purpose of this empirical study was to explore past and current journal writing practices of older learners with special attention to questions of the perceived benefits of keeping a journal in later age.

Method and Sample

Fifteen members of an Institute for Learning in Retirement in Portland, Maine were interviewed about their past and current journal writing practices. Prior to recruiting subjects into the study the entire research protocol was reviewed and approved by the university's Human Subjects/Institutional Review Board. A notice was posted in the University of Southern Maine's Osher Lifelong Learning Institute monthly newsletter inviting members who were experienced journal writers to participate in this study ("experienced" was defined as currently keeping a journal and having a minimum of three years of consistent practice). A semi-structured interview schedule included questions related to personal history in journal writing, current practice, and the benefits achieved from the regular practice of keeping a diary/journal. The two authors jointly conducted the interviews. These averaged 45 minutes in length and were tape-recorded. After data were collected, tapes of the interviews were transcribed. Each of the authors independently read the narratives using an analytic induction approach to theme development (Ely et. al., 1991; Krathwohl, 1993).

Only three socio-demographic variables were collected in this study: gender, age, and educational background. Of the 15 subjects, three were men. This represents a smaller ratio of men to women than in the general membership of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (= 28 % male). The average age of subjects in this sample was 69.2 years - as compared with an average of 72 years in the general membership of the institute - with a range of 57 – 81 years. And this was a highly educated research sample with 13 of the 15

Individuals holding a college degree and eight also having a graduate degree (seven Master's Degrees and one Certificate of Advanced Graduate Study). This self-selecting sample was even more highly educated than the overall institute community (Fall 2001 membership survey found 36 % holding bachelors degrees and 32 % graduate degrees). The sample included people with backgrounds in nursing, teaching (K-12 and college), ministry, school guidance, business, library science, public administration, and psychotherapy.

Personal History of Journal Writing

Eight of the 15 subjects began keeping a diary in their youth. However, only three of these individuals maintained their practice with a degree of consistency across the years into late age. The more common pattern was to interrupt writing for long periods of time and occasionally re-enter the practice of maintaining a diary because of a critical incident occurring in their lives. Such incidents include marriage, the birth of children, divorce (or separation from another special relationship), one's own or a family members' illness, a significant travel experience, the death of a parent, and taking a new job.

Although the older writers in this sample looked back nostalgically at their youthful diary-keeping activity, they were not complimentary about the quality of their youthful practices and the general pattern was that they chose to destroy these narratives not long after they were written. People commented about shallow "Dear Diary" entries that described high school romances and fights with best friends. These were often written in

the pages of small books that had a padlock and key. One 65-year old woman described her early diary-keeping experience this way:

I was raised in a poor household and things like diaries were luxuries. But I received one as a birthday or a Christmas gift. I wrote about boys . . . and mundane everyday interactions, you know with my mother and father and siblings. I remember one of the things I used the diary for was to deal with my anger. I ran to the woods and I had a big rock I would go and sit on and I wrote there . . . I was always afraid that my brother or sister would try to find the diary and read what I had written.

Three individuals in this sample began keeping a journal in their 20's or 30's. Important events were taking place in their lives during these years and they wanted to chronicle and process their feelings about them. One 62-year old woman told about how her father's death, which took place when she was in her late 30's, was a causal factor for her interest in journal writing. "I didn't know how to get rid of all the sorrow and one day I just started writing in a notebook." This woman then went on to tell the story of how she learned, upon her father's death, that he had been a journal writer. However, her mother refused to let her read those journals. This incident further fueled her interest in writing. It was only recently, upon the occasion of her mother's death, that she has obtained her father's journals.

The remaining four people were late-onset journal writers, beginning their practice after the age of 50. Once again, the experience of a critical event (or multiple events) helped to stimulate the act of journaling. For one man it was retirement. “I decided in January of the year I was planning to retire – I was 60 at the time – to keep a journal of that year as a kind of recording of how I felt, whether things happened the way I wanted them to . . . “ He is currently 75 years old and has continued to keep a journal. For another individual journal writing was not so much a planned occasion as a reaction to surprising family news: “What happened was that my daughter confessed that she was gay and this was a jolt to me. I didn’t know how I felt about it and I didn’t know how I felt about her and these feelings precipitated my writing . . . “This woman went on to say that writing her feelings in a journal helped her to realize “that she was my child, and that I loved her, and what difference did it make anyway as long as she was safe and happy . . . That’s basically what I needed – I had to get from point ‘a’ to point ‘b’ which at times was really rough.”

Characteristics of Current Practice

One of the open-ended interview questions asked about current journal writing. There were a wide variety of practices among the 15 subjects with few distinct patterns of behavior. Some people write their journals on paper in longhand, others use a wordprocessor/computer, and several write both ways depending on the situation. A number of older journal writers choose to work early in the morning which allows them

contemplative time at the start of their day and is temporally closer to last night's dreams, thus facilitating their memory and documentation. Others prefer to write at night and assess the day they have just experienced. Several subjects primarily use their journal as a personal chronicle, eg., a mere documenting of what they did, who they met, etc. Others chronicle very little and prefer, instead, to write mostly interpretive and reflective material. Several subjects prefer to keep separate journals for selected experiences: one for dreams, one for family matters, one for travel. One woman maintains a separate "Christmas Journal" that she takes out each December and in which are documented the family gatherings and festive events that take place at that special time of the year. Other older writers in this study, however, integrate all of their personal writing into a single medium.

One pattern of current practice that did emerge was that older journal writers tend to link journaling with other writing practices. A majority of the subjects (nine) expressed keen interest in the genres of autobiography and memoir and their regular diary writing serves as grist for larger narratives about their lives that they have already written or have plans to write. Several of these people have taken courses specifically designed to help write one's life story or participate as regular members of a writing group. In addition to these nine, three subjects expressed an interest in writing poetry. These people often use their journals as a forum for working out ideas for poems or experimenting with phrasing that may eventually be used in poems.

There was an overall expression of satisfaction among older journal writers about the quality, depth, and truthfulness of their writing now as compared with earlier years. “My journals used to be filled with platitudes,” commented one writer, a 66-year old retired teacher. “Now they are more truthful.” When we probed about why this change, this woman responded: “I am more willing to accept who I am . . . It’s fine to let it all hang out. That doesn’t bother me any longer. I’m not worried about the sordid details, but I want to get it right. I want to be able to express things so that somebody else reading {the journal} will really get a sense of who I was.”

This comment about somebody else reading one’s journal addresses the important question of audience, an issue we raised as part of the interview. Two thirds of this research sample (N = 10) reported being favorably disposed toward sharing their journals with others or have already done so in fact. Typically, those with whom journals have been or will be shared are children and grandchildren, other family members (siblings, nieces and nephews), and friends. Those subjects who are participating in writing groups are already working in a culture where the sharing of personal writings is normative. These people enjoy the experience of sharing their work, benefit from having others share writing with them, and in some cases are interested in locating wider audiences. In situations where families are the targeted audience, the older journal writer typically selects content from their larger corpus and distributes it on a selected basis. However, one individual reported that she keeps her journals in volumes

lined across a bookshelf in a conspicuous place in her home. Family members who visit are welcome to select from these diaries at random and read them.

Three persons were ambivalent about whether or not they wanted others to read their personal writing. A 69-year old mused about this in the following manner: "I'm having a debate with myself. Do I let my family read everything I've ever written? Do I burn them? Do I go through and edit them? I haven't yet decided what I'm going to do."

Another expressed her ambivalence about this issue in this way:

I've written so much about my mother and our relationship in the negative and prior to her death I wouldn't have wanted anybody to pick up my journals and read how frustrated I was with her. But now that she has gone and five years goes down the road and maybe my grandchildren should see what I went through . . . maybe. So I don't know the answer yet. But I'm not destroying them.

There were two people in this sample who were clearly against having others read their journals. One responded with two words to our question about what she wanted to have happen to her diaries upon her death: "Burn them." Another couched her feelings humorously by placing them in the context of a famous child's nighttime prayer: "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake. Throw this journal in the lake!"

The Benefits of Journal Writing

One of the core questions in this study involved asking older persons about the benefits they have experienced and - presumably as current practitioners - continue to experience from keeping a personal diary or journal. In most cases this question occupied more than half the research interview as people became animated about the implications of their writing and wanted to share details. Essentially our findings were that older persons who keep a journal experience three general areas of benefit. We have named these *coping*, *the joy of discovery*, and *the nurturing of voice and spirit*.

Coping refers to a number of functions that assist, in a practical manner, the day to day lives of the journal writers. One of these functions, which in fact was specifically named by 13 of the 15 subjects, is self-therapy. "It's almost as though my journal were my psychiatrist," confided one subject. This 62-year old woman later went on to describe something of the clarification such therapeutic writing often brings: "Say I'm feeling anger. If I get in touch with that emotion then I can start thinking of the pros and cons of the cause of that anger . . . It's as if all the words were inside the body and they got all jumbled up and they don't make any sense to me and I write them down and I read them and say, 'Oh, now I see!'" Another person put it this way: "I am able to work things out on paper." And another subject related this self-therapy to the desired outcome of feeling healthy and whole: "I really think after I journal, even though the content may be something unsettling, there is a sense of well-being. There's something about sitting

down and writing down your thoughts – for me anyway – where I feel more relaxed. I feel more whole, if that makes sense . . . “

Another way journal writing helps people to cope is to offer a venue for sorting out issues in relationships. People talked about clarifying feelings through their writing about important relationships in their past (eg., with their mother and/or father) and coming to a greater sense of both awareness and reconciliation. Others shared stories about difficulties they are currently having with a spouse or child and how their regular practice of writing helped them to achieve both perspective and insight. And in the case of one elderly man, who keeps a journal in good part for the purposes of record-keeping, these texts occasionally serve an adjudicative role: “I write things down and sometimes, when my wife and I will argue about something that we thought we did, I’ll look it up and it straightens out family arguments.”

Two other ways journal writing enables older persons to cope are as a way of helping to make decisions and as compensation for poor memory (which is also reflected in the above quote about adjudicating family arguments). Writing down one’s ambivalent thoughts and/or feelings about a decision and laying the evidence before one’s own eyes has long been a benefit of journal writing. People in this study have sorted through issues as consequential as the timing of retirement, moving to another state, and whether or not to seek reconciliation with a long-forsaken relative by way of writing.

Using a diary to chronicle experiences as an antidote to failing memory was a frequent theme. Several people mentioned not wanting to lose precious observations or sayings

uttered by their grandchildren and therefore writing became an act of preservation (more developed journal narratives may at times accompany these captured quotations). One 75-year old man spoke about writing and memory in the following manner:

I think documenting helps. The reality of the situation is that it sort of implants things in your mind. Memory is a problem. It's a problem for a lot of us. So I write things down. By documenting it fixes it in my mind and there is something there that I can locate if I need it in the future.

Writing as an aid to memory also came up in the context of re-reading one's journals. Several people talked about how much they enjoy sitting down with their old diaries and reviewing events and reflections - even ones that were painful at the time - and bringing these past experiences to life in the present. One retired librarian said this about re-reading old entries: "I found some really important things that I would have lost had I not written them down."

The second major category of benefit relates to the *joy of discovery* that journal writing can and often does bring. More than half the research subjects in this sample (N = 9) made explicit references to this factor, including numerous comments about journals being milestones-of-a-sort for measuring one's own progress in the journey of human development. "I've watched my growth, my maturing . . . and it tells me how far I've come in my journey." Our oldest subject (81-years) effused about this matter:

“I love it! I love it! I love reading {my own journals} because it makes me reflect and see where I am and how far I’ve come and you learn a lot about yourself.”

Increasing one’s powers of observation is an important dimension of the joy of discovery. People spoke with us about how they pay more attention and see greater detail because of their practice of writing things down. “I see a word or I see a beautiful picture in a magazine and I will cut it out and glue it into my journal and write what it is . . . “

And later in the interview this woman, who in her late 50’s remains a practicing psychotherapist, related this beautiful image about her relationship with a family of cardinals that lives in her yard:

Writing in my journal has helped me to see the wonders of walking out one’s front door, you know, letting the day greet me and me greet the day . . . Every single snowstorm I cannot wait for the morning because my cardinal is going to be out in this particular bush. I mean he’s just . . . there’s nothing but white and this cardinal. And I say to him, “Why can’t you be smart like your partner? I mean, she’s got a little brown on her. She doesn’t have to be quite so flamboyant . . .

I am constantly in awe of the ordinary.

Sometimes powers of observation grow by way of chronicling someone else’s experience. One woman told us the story of spending time with her own mother during

the older woman's terminal illness. Experiences and observations were documented and the daughter came to understand more of "what it is like to be 84 and dying." Another subject put it this way: "I really think journal writing is a process of discovery, self-discovery or discovery about others."

A third and final category of benefit derived from keeping a journal is *the nurturing of voice and spirit*. Part of the achievement of voice is developing confidence that one has something meaningful to say. Writing regularly can build such confidence. "Journal writing helps me to see that I really have some things to say and that I need to get down on paper," commented a retired minister. Among those in this sample who have risked sharing their writing with other people, there was a sense of gratitude about the feedback they have received. One person, a member of a mixed-generation writing group which he joined soon after retirement, said this: "I'm really a novice and probably the poorest writer in the group . . . Now they're starting to recognize me and saying, 'You're doing well – keep this up; you're on the right track.'"

Numerous subjects made explicit reference to the "quiet time" journal writing requires and how these contemplative moments have helped to nurture their spiritual lives. "I go back to that concept of quiet time," a 68-year subject said. "It's a way to reflect. I think it is really important in my spiritual life to just stop whatever I'm doing and spend time thinking about my life. And this is a way to do it; it's also a way to record it so I can go back and see where I've been."

Writing helps people work through difficulties and transitions, and what often occurs on the other side of this change is the realization of a new level of consciousness. One subject called this process moving from one “spiritual plateau” to another. And she characterized the current place in her own journey being one of “a great spurt of writing” that has edged her along into another level of consciousness. “I am reaching a deeper understanding of myself. One would think that at my age I would be close to a complete understanding! But I don’t think we ever reach that.”

A poetic expression of the quest for voice and spirit - and the sense of freedom that accompanies these - came by way of a sonnet one of the subjects had been working on and brought with her to the interview. Here is the opening quatrain:

Oh, how I yearned to be a butterfly,
To molt the shell that bound my eager wings,
Unfurl my mummy wrappings, touch the sky
And ascend alone on a wind that sings . . .

Discussion

In a contemporary novel about an 81 year World War I veteran living in a nursing home, Jonathan Hull writes these words through the mouth of his journal-keeping protagonist, Patrick Delaney: “At a certain age you realize that living life is only the

first step, then you've got to figure out what to make of your experiences, which is actually much more critical than the experiences themselves" (Hull, 2000, p. 282). The centuries-old practice of writing down ones thoughts and feelings into a journal or diary can be and often is the very tool elders require to help make sense of their experiences.

One of the most compelling challenges of aging is the quest to derive significance from years of lived experience. Experiences do not themselves have meaning until a person reflects on, recollects, and interprets them. Writing has long been and continues to be one of the most useful tools at the disposal of human beings to do this important reflective and integrative work.

Implications for gerontology practitioners working with older persons are apparent. Since this research revealed that both early and late-onset journal writers benefit substantially from keeping a diary, educators working with elders in institutes for learning in retirement, public school adult education, continuing care retirement communities, and elsewhere may serve these older learners well by encouraging personal writing. A wide range of journal writing options might be tried. These may include the heretofore mentioned formats of dream logs, autobiographies, and interactive reading diaries. Expanded formats for personal and reflective writing may include memoirs (focusing on a specific incident in one's life), creative expressions (poetry, music, visual art), and letters addressed to loved ones.

Florida Scott-Maxwell's *The Measure of My Days* is one of the most quoted memoirs in the gerontological literature. In her 84th year, and in the throes of debilitating illness,

this talented writer, suffragist, actor, and Jungian analyst took up what she called her notebook, her “dear companion,” and set about the crucial work of reflection and meaning-making through a personal journal. “Age is a desert of time,” Scott-Maxwell mused, “hours, days, weeks, years perhaps – with little to do. So one has ample time to face everything one has had, been, done; gather them all in: the things that came from outside, and those from inside. We have time at last to make them truly ours” (Scott-Maxwell, 1968, p. 41). The author then went on to make a compelling argument on behalf of the integration and synthesis such reflective writing facilitates: “You need only claim the events of your life to make yourself yours. When you truly possess all you have been and done, which may take some time, you are fierce with reality. When at last age has assembled you together, will it not be easy to let it all go . . . ?” (p. 42).

Learning to cope with life’s realities (which are frequently harsh), the joyful discovery of triumphs and trajectories of growth, and nurturing one’s own voice and spirit are three fundamental ways the 15 older subjects in this research study benefit and derive meaning from their practice of journal writing. As one of the interviewees, a 69-year old retired teacher, commented: “I think journal writing gives reality and meaning, a sequence somehow . . . When you write you see how events and conversations are related. I do believe that we become what we think and what we write.” The compensation accruing to the elderly, wrote the philosopher Thomas Rentsch, is to

genuinely become oneself (Rentsch, 1997). Older persons who keep a journal are enabled along the way to make their claim to this benefit and blessing.

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the personal history, current practice, and perceived benefits of keeping a journal or diary among 15 older learners (average age = 69.2 years) who are members of an institute for learning in retirement in Maine. Interviews revealed that there are three primary areas in which older persons benefit from journal writing. Keeping a journal assists older persons to cope with day-to-day situations, it enables them to experience the joy of discovery, and it helps to nurture their own voice and spirit. Implications for educators who work with older learners are discussed.

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