Keeping a Journal: A Path to Uncovering Identity (and keeping your sanity)

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When I was a graduate student, I kept a journal in which I wrote about my desire to be more organized (from Cooper, J. (1991) Telling Our Own Stories, p.96):

Five bananas rot on top of the cookie jar. I realize I have two choices—make banana bread or write…my body is shot, my children feel neglected, the food in my kitchen is rotting and my partner has moved on to God and a new wife…right now I wish my God (or my wife) knew how to make banana bread. No such luck.

Here, you can see me grappling with my own growing sense of professional identity and how it conflicts with my roles as head of household and mother. Keeping one's center amid the conflicting demands of various roles is tricky to say the least. I know a faculty member who described her life as trying to keep a series of spinning plates in the air (Stevens and Cooper, 2009). She reported that when she kept a journal, her plates were less chipped or broken. I didn't keep a professional journal in graduate school, I kept a dissertation journal. Does that count? but I began to keep one as a faculty member after watching my colleague, Dannelle, do the same. A journal can help you to be more organized, clarify your identity, and help you grapple with your own sense of belonging in the often bewildering world of academe.

Journal Keeping and Identity

The central question for most journal keepers is, "Who am I?" We write to discover who we are or at the very least, what we think. Most writers report a sense of discovery and surprise when they write. "Oh! That's what I think! I didn't realize that." Journal keeping is a way to read your own thoughts, to mine them for understanding. Peter Elbow (1998) says people wouldn't keep writing if it weren't for the surprises. Writing in a journal keeps us going and adds to our understanding of who we are.

Understanding who we are is crucial to the development of the self. Parker Palmer (2004) claims that one of our most important tasks is connecting who we are with what we do. Writing in the journal can help us understand both who we are and what we are doing with our lives. This task is even more complex because, as we write, things change. This is a compelling reason to write regularly…in order to keep up with changing events. As Barbara, a former university president put it, "When I want to know what I really think, I write in my journal…It is an evolving me; it is an organic process; it is discovery work. Writing in my journal changes me. I am growing and evolving as I write" (Stevens & Cooper, 2009, p, 37). Thus, journal keeping not only helps you to get in touch with who you are, but helps you to track your evolving identity.

The understanding of your evolving identity helps you to make more informed decisions about your life. Journal writing cannot make your problems magically disappear, but it does heighten your awareness of those problems and helps you to find a way to grapple with them. Writing about your problems gives you perspective on those problems and helps you to reframe them in more positive ways. Jeffrey Berman asserts, "…by changing our stories of ourselves, we change our lives" (1994, p. 40).

Benefits and Uses

Getting Organized

While I have kept a personal journal for over thirty years (Okay, I'm an addicted journal keeper, I admit it.), I have found that a professional journal is quite different and keeps me much more organized. My professional journal goes with me to all the meetings I have attended as a faculty member, as well as the year I served as Associate Dean of the College. It holds the notes to all the meetings I attend, states the dates of those meetings, who is in attendance and what is decided. It also holds lists of all the phone calls I receive and check marks after I have returned the calls. It contains musings on the contents of the meetings and on the business of our department. It is a place to hold new ideas that pop into my head while I am in those meetings, whether the ideas are related to that particular meeting or not. It holds plane schedules, class schedules, notes from my meetings with advisees and what was decided. In other words, it holds my sanity in a crazy world that often feels like it is spinning out of control.

Before I kept a professional journal, I used to spend frantic minutes right before a meeting looking for the folder that held that particular committee's notes. Now I just blissfully pick up my ever handy journal and waltz out the door, confident in my ability to answer any questions about what the heck we did last time the committee met. I've got it all in my trusty notebook…probably more than the committee members want to know.

Finding Your Identity and Sense of Belonging

Another advantage of writing in a professional journal is that it provides an emerging portrait of who you are as an educator. Richard, a doctoral student, stated it clearly in our book on journal keeping (see Stevens and Cooper, 2009) when he described how he wrote every day at noon during his lunch and then, when funding opportunities came up, he was ready with a beautiful collection of ideas gleaned from his journal musings. An image of his emerging professional self was right there on the pages. Richard wrote that he first started the journal because he didn't feel as if he belonged in a doctoral program. Everyone seemed smarter and cleverer. But regularly writing his thoughts in his journal helped him to see, over time, how his confidence and sense of belonging grew.

Stephen Brookfield (1995) has described the sense of inadequacy as the *imposter syndrome,* stating that everyone has it— doctoral students, faculty, and even famous academics like Brookfield. We all feel a little like we don't belong, and he believes that this is normal. The journal can be a way to write yourself into greater clarity about such anxieties.

Writing journals has been described as a way of reading your own mind. It is a way to make concrete the ideas that often float in your head without ever being written down. Journals are especially useful for students who are studying a particular profession and feel the need to connect with that discipline and their future professional community.

For example, outdoor educators Dyment and O'Connell (2003) have described seven types of entries they want to see in their students' journals. They include personal reflections and self-discovery, group dynamics, professional development, sense of place/connection to place, transfer of academic theory to field course, transfer of field course to academic theory, and factual information. In truth, almost all of these types of entries will contribute to a growing sense of identity and of belonging to a particular academic community or discipline. These seven will help you to get started as a novice journal keeper who wants to use the journal to clarify who they are and just what they are doing in their chosen profession —questions, I think, we all grapple with.

Techniques

Some basic techniques will help you get started on your journey. One of the most powerful is freewriting. The only rule in freewriting is that the pen hits the page, produces words, and does not stop for a set period of, say, five to ten minutes for beginners (Stevens & Cooper, 2009). You need not worry about punctuation or spelling, your central task is to see what emerges. You do not even have to stick to the same topic— this is the place to see where your writing takes you. That is part of the discovery process I mentioned earlier. This process is most effective

if it is private (few want to share their raw words off the page); but freewriting can help you discover what's on your mind and what your concerns are, and it often enables solutions to emerge as you write. Some people think this is just "writing garbage," but the process is like cultivating fertile soil that can yield positive results if you keep it up. As William Stafford, the poet laureate of Oregon, states, "A writer is not so much someone who has something to say as he is someone who has found a process that will bring about new things he would not have thought of if he had not started to say them" (Stafford, 1964, pp. 14–15).

Another powerful technique is dialogue. Dialogue is a "conversation" between people, parts, ideas or things (Rainer, 1978, p. 103). You can write a dialogue with yourself, with your boss, with your colleagues, your family, etc. These dialogues are private. There is no requirement to share them with anyone unless you want to. They are a way for you to distance yourself from others and write out an imaginary conversation with them. They help provide fresh perspectives on situations or people and allow you to mine your innate wisdom about issues. Dialogues allow you to speak, but also to listen to one another, to see another's point of view simply by writing out their part in the dialogue. You can also write dialogues with inanimate objects, such as a dialogue with your thesis or dissertation or with a particular project you are working on. Your project may yield valuable advice for you, which can be uncovered through dialogue.

Another important journal technique is metaphor. Metaphor describes one thing by comparing it to something else (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Metaphors tap our holistic sense of a person or situation and help us to see issues, people, or work from a fresh perspective. They draw on your intuitive knowledge of what is going on. Metaphors can be created over time to get a sense of how things are changing. As we say in our book on journal keeping, "Metaphor is the back door into deeper understanding…and a way to understand the self through the extension of ideas in new directions (Stevens & Cooper, 2009, p. 97).

Drawbacks

The biggest drawback to journal writing may be time. Many people say, "Yeah, it sounds great but I don't have the time." But there are some tricks to squeezing time out of your busy days. You could write, as Richard does, during your lunch hour. You could write during meetings, during lulls in the conversation, or only when someone makes an important point. Having your journal handy often helps you to find those moments when you have time to write.

You can also make a ritual out of it. I get up early in the morning before everyone else and write in the quiet of dawn. It is soothing and centers me for the day. Or you can write just before you go to bed, reflecting on the day you've just had. Journal keeping takes time, but it also saves time. You are more efficient when you know what happened in the last meeting, who was assigned to which tasks, etc. You can also create to-do lists during the meeting as issues emerge. Then you are ready for the work ahead.

Another possible drawback is the issue of privacy. Each person needs to work out their own system for feeling safe. I know one woman who kept all her old journals in a safe deposit box in the bank. Others find a secluded spot to keep their current journal where people are unlikely to find it. If you carry your journal with you all day, you are less likely to worry about this.

Closely related to this is the need for solitude. Hal Bennett (1995, p. 41) states, "However we define it, however we get it, we need solitude." If you are to turn your mind inward, you need to eliminate distractions that might pull you back to the outer world. You need room to reflect, to dream, to find the surprises in what you have to say. Solitude can nurture us. Finding it can be tricky, however. Some people discover, to their dismay, that they have no solitude in their lives. Try to think back to a time when you had even a fleeting moment of solitude, such as the time when you were running alone on a dirt road. If you have no such recollections, you can dream about a place of solitude you might want in the future — a room of one's own, as Virginia Woolf put it. It doesn't have to be a cabin in the woods or a café in Paris, think

about your own life and where you find the most solitude. It might be in the bathtub or in the garden. These moments nourish your soul and help you to be clearer about who you are and where you are going.

Conclusion

In whatever way you decide to keep a journal, the process will help you to carve out what Lewis Thomas, a famous biologist and essayist, describes as ". . . your indisputably, singular, unique self." (1995, p. 130). This self is precious and needs to be cherished. Journal keeping can help you both to understand and to nourish your unique self. Your task is to shape and discover ideas about your relationship to your work, your world, yourself, and your loved ones. Journal keeping provides a rich tool box of ideas for you to ponder. As one journal keeper stated, "My brain is like a treasure chest filled with gold and silver and the way to get it is by unlocking the lock. The key to opening the chest is the journal" (Stevens & Cooper, 2009, p.33).

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