

From the text
Writing & Being
by Lynn Nelson

I

BEGINNING YOUR JOURNEY

"I hope that I shall be able to confide in you completely, as I have never been able to do in anyone before, and I hope that you will be a great support and comfort to me."

— Anne Frank,
inscription at the beginning of her journal

A PRIVATE PLACE

Your journal is your private place, a "room of your own." Your journal can be anything from loose sheets of paper in a folder to a grade-school tablet to a seventy-dollar, leather-bound, gold-embossed, parchment-paper book. The only real criterion for your personal journal — and you need to attend to it carefully — is that it is something you feel comfortable writing in, something that invites you in and does not intimidate you. For this and other reasons, I often suggest to beginning journal keepers, "Let a journal find you."

In the usual hard-eyed, left-brained approach, you would march to the bookstore, commandeer something that looks "appropriate" and "proper," and buy it. All without attending to the process or to your needs and feelings.

Letting a journal find you is quite a different matter. You begin by reminding yourself that you need a journal — but you do not “box up” or limit what you “should” get or what might be proper or where it might find you. You maintain soft eyes (openness and acceptance) and a beginner’s mind, simply being aware that you need a journal. And then you wait for one to find you.

You may have to help the process along a little, at least this early in the game, by “exposing yourself” to some journals — that is, by hanging around places where there are potential journals (bookstores, stationery stores, department stores). But even then you can let the process work by not forcing it, by attending to how each potential journal feels to you, by waiting for one to catch your eye or whisper to you. In this way, before you have even begun to write, you will be practicing new and larger ways of being and knowing and responding.

Your journal will be one that feels good to you, one that “invites you” to write in it. From my experience and needs, here are some thoughts about the physical aspects of my journal that you might want to consider:

- ◆ Since my journal goes with me everywhere, usually in my backpack, it must be hard-backed and durable.
- ◆ For me, a good journal is one that is well-bound but will still open relatively flat without a big roll in the pages toward the binding.
- ◆ I have grown to prefer unlined pages and paper of good quality (and preferably recycled). Check your own feelings about lined pages.
- ◆ I prefer a fairly large journal — at least approaching 8 1/2-by-11-inch pages — for several reasons. I often tape into my journal things I have written or typed

elsewhere. Similarly, I sometimes tape into my journal letters I have received, pictures, notes, quotations, etc. I like to draw, diagram, and doodle in my journal. I like to leave fairly large margins so I can label things. I might want to locate later (dreams; ideas related to an article, story, or poem; an image or memory; references to particular people; etc.). Large margins also allow me to record further feelings and observations that occur to me when I read over my journal entries at a later date.

These are just a few of the things I have come to look for in a good, comfortable, functional journal. You will have your own needs. Attend to them.

NO CRITICS

As you write in your journal, you will need to keep reminding yourself that this is not the time or the place to worry about things like spelling, punctuation, grammar, complete sentences, and so on. These rules and conventions have evolved to assure some consistency in public writing, to aid in our communication with one another. But they should not be a concern in your journal. Attending to such things will only impede the process of your writing — the free and spontaneous flow of words from within you. The only rule for your journal writing is that whatever works for you is valid.

Even though it may be difficult at first, when you write in your journal, do not be concerned about neatness and “proper” mechanics and conventions. These are editing concerns. They need to be applied rigorously only near the end of the writing process, after you have explored and evolved the content in your journal, and only when and if you want to turn it into public writing, that is, to share some of your words with someone else.

And you will want to share them. That is almost inevitable when you enter this process with your heart. For you will begin to see things and say things and know things and feel things that will amaze you. And you will feel your own voice emerging in your words — as unique and distinct as your fingerprints or your DNA pattern. You will want to share your words because you will have something to say, something worth sharing — something meaningful and helpful and careful. Gifts from your heart.

But until that point, until something from your journal wants to work its way out and into public writing, there are no rules or standards that need concern you. Any serious attention to them earlier in the process will only distract you from much more important concerns. In your journal writing, whenever you find "critics" sitting on your shoulder and whispering in your ear ("messy penmanship" . . . "misspelled word" . . . "you forgot to put your name in the upper right-hand corner" . . . "incomplete sentence") — just give them a good whack and carry on.

Looking through my journals, I can find no entries that strike me as "typical" of the kind or style of writing I do there. Some pages contain a stream-of-consciousness flow of words with little punctuation. Many pages are a hodgepodge of notes, observations, and feelings — a jumble of styles and penmanship — a collage of words and drawings.

My journal is more like a storage room or a secret hideaway than like a living room. A journal is "a room of one's own," that private, quiet place we must have if we are to survive and grow. I do not receive guests in my journal, so I do not have to keep it neat and orderly and clean. I throw anything in it — in any form — never knowing what may turn out to be valuable. It is my place to let go of formal constraints, to be crazy and creative, to take off my masks, to be me, to find me.

As we free ourselves from the constraints of correctness, as we knock the critics off our shoulders, we gain greater energy and attention for the real writing-and-being process. We begin to evolve deeper insights, deeper seeing. In my journal writing, the

more I let go of concerns about form and arriving at "answers," the more energy I have just to follow the river of my own being. I sometimes drift into a kind of flow-writing where words are moving out from within me and I am just watching. Often, as I do this, my feelings start to change; I feel a kind of lifting and lightening and opening up. It is hard to explain, but almost invariably I feel better and my words lead me closer to my real feelings and needs and away from what I have been trained to feel.

Here, for example, is a brief excerpt from one of my old journals:

11/5 - early morning

Yesterday rolled by like a dream — filled with shadows and strong feelings — with little time to get to know them. I feel them within me now, pawing at me to attend to them. When I finally got home in the evening, S and J were there — but by then I was moving like the tin man and was not good company for anyone. Later, I took the mat and the Mexican blanket I bought in Sonora — why is it so comforting to me? — and went out in the back yard with my wolf-brother Cody and lay beneath the stars. I slept on and off, fitfully, and felt afraid and alone and watched the stars do their slow dance — and sometime further into the night it all got kind of mixed together — the sleeping and waking — and the stars moved down close to me — and Cody's wolf-ness was there sleeping near me — and all the mixed feelings of the day were kind of dancing with the stars around me. . . .

As you write, remember that your journal is a private place, a safe place, and that there you do not need to impress anyone with either your writing or your being. There is no need to pretend. You can make no "mistakes" in your journal. Your journal is a personal and intimate tool, and each person's journal, like each person, is unique in its ways and its unfolding.

COMMITMENT

Years ago, when I first started keeping a journal — without guidance and following some faraway whisper in my heart — I wrote sporadically, making entries days and sometimes weeks apart. I was still trapped within the small picture of writing I had been taught, so I only wrote when I thought I had something to say — when some profound insight or idea became clear in my mind. That very seldom happened, so I very seldom wrote. I spent most of my time waiting.

Now, I write to find out what I have to say. Such a difference. Now, I write every day. I write in cafes and coffee shops; I write on buses and airplanes; I write in forests and on mountains; I write in the morning and in the middle of the night. I am under no compulsion to be clever or insightful or even to make sense when I write. Now, I am free to write trash, because there is no such thing as trash in my journal — because this is my private place where no critics are allowed. But almost always, when I write freely and without standards, I begin to see things more clearly; I feel better about myself.

The point is: *for things to happen, you must write.* In my classes and workshops, I suggest to beginning writers that they must make more than a casual commitment to their journals and to themselves. This, too, is a change from our usual procedure. Our society conditions us away from commitment and toward the glitter of things that happen "fast and easy." Madison Avenue entices us away from the beauty of the path with promises of "instant arrival." We can buy a body with steroids and implants, buy love with a Mercedes-Benz, buy happiness with drugs and alcohol. We are taught to disdain the path itself and are blinded to the flowers that bloom along it.

Your journal comes with no such easy promises. Rather, its label reads something like this: "A lifetime of hard work toward staying alive and saving yourself."

You enter the writing-and-being process with no illusions of instant riches or instant enlightenment or even of any kind of

arrival, in the sense of being finished with the work. It is not a destination you seek so much as a way of being and becoming. It is "a path with a heart." Once out of their boxes, the wonders of word and self and universe continue unfolding before you. You enter upon the path not to arrive but to see the wonders of the path itself.

Begin, then, with a serious commitment to this strange thing called your journal, with no great or false expectations but with openness and acceptance. I suggest beginning journal keepers make this commitment: *I will spend at least a half hour a day at least five days a week alone with my journal.* I suggest keeping this commitment faithfully for five or six weeks, then assessing where you are with it and whether you want to continue. By that time, most journalers, if they have been true to their commitment, are hooked on the process and well on their way to being lifelong writers.

The word "alone" is an important part of this commitment. In a society that is always calling us away from ourselves, always telling us the answers are "out there" somewhere, and always trying to sell us those answers, we can easily drift into a life where we spend no time alone, where we have no relationship with ourselves. The commitment to be alone with your journal, yourself, means taking time with no friends, no children, no television, no radio, no distractions. Only yourself and your words, your writing and your being.

At first, you may find spending a half hour alone with yourself and your journal every day to be boring or even frightening. If you do, that would be a good thing to write about. If you are bored or frightened by being alone with yourself, do not judge that observation but take it as a sign that it is time to work on that relationship. Talk to yourself about it.

Take your commitment to the writing-and-being process seriously. Set aside a special time each day to be with yourself. Do it as deliberately as you would arrange time to be with a friend or lover. It is the most important relationship of your life. It determines all others.

If you were to spend a half hour a day with your journal, even if you never wrote a word, just being alone in the silence would be healthy. But do open your journal, there in the silence that will gradually become sacred for you, and begin to talk to yourself. Speak to yourself as openly and honestly as you can. Speak from your feelings, from your heart. That is the way all friendships begin. . . .

NO RULES

As you write, remember that you are keeping a journal, not a diary or a log. In a diary or a log, you record the things and events of your life — "Today this happened and that happened." In a journal, you may record some events, but you will also push on to explore your inner relationship to those things. In a journal, you are not writing about the outward events of your life so much as about what you feel and see arising within you. That is where the power is; that is where the choices are; that is where the freedom lies. So, in your journal, ask yourself questions, explore how you feel, look at what is going on inside of you.

In journal writing, the images and words you use, the interplay between language and psyche, help you keep going and help you see possibilities. What follows is a list of images and simple "how-to" advice about journal writing to get you started and nudge you along. Remember: These are not rules. This is not a logical, linear business. Writing in your journal is different from writing a research paper. This is "me-search" into unexplored territory. There is an element of mystery and wonder, an element of "entering the river."

- ◆ Talk to yourself in your journal. Get to know yourself. Go slowly. Go gently. Make your journaling a special time.

- ◆ Find a special place to be alone and quiet. Sit with your journal open and just breathe deeply for a while. When you are ready, write what you are feeling.
- ◆ Sometimes, it is good to start with the facts. But then move beyond the facts, always asking, "How do I feel about that? What is going on inside me?" Write how you feel about one thing that happened today or one thing on your mind, on your heart. Explore your relationships with the things of your life.
- ◆ Remember that your journal is a private, safe place. There is no need to pose or pretend. Be as emotionally honest with yourself as you can. Take off some of the masks you have been trained to wear.
- ◆ Own your feelings. Speak for yourself. Say "I."
- ◆ Use your journal as a "garbage can." Take out your angers, your fears, your doubts, your frustrations, and write them in your journal. Writing about them will lessen their power over you. You will feel better.
- ◆ Remember: No critics are allowed in your journal. You have no need to worry about spelling, neatness, margins, semicolons, and such. That comes later, if you want to move something out of your journal and share it with someone else. Your journal is for spontaneity and creativity and discovery.
- ◆ You do not know where the process will take you. Be like a child playing in the garden, building in the garage, rummaging in the attic. Stay open. Expect the unexpected.
- ◆ Experiment. Write at different times of the day — an hour before dawn, at high noon, at dusk. Find a special time that feels right. Write in different ways, using different pens or a stubby no. 2 pencil. Write in different places.

- ◆ Remember: If you sit quietly with yourself for a half hour and write nothing, the time will not be wasted.
- ◆ Do not try to write "answers" or the big "truth." Small truths, little insights, will be more helpful.
- ◆ Avoid making judgments. Avoid putting things (and people) into neat little boxes and categories. You are not writing to "be done with it." You are writing to keep your mind open; there is always more to be learned.
- ◆ Look for images and metaphors that express what things seem like, how they feel, to you. Go beyond the world of logic.
- ◆ You live in a prison, many prisons. We all live in prisons of one kind or another — of being the children of our parents, of being male or female, of our prejudices, of our cultural training, etc. Write to make the great escape, to save yourself.
- ◆ Carry your journal like a camera. Collect careful little "word photos" — the child's face in the bus window, the morning moon above the rush-hour traffic, the people running from the rain. You will begin to see more than you ever saw before. And it will all become precious to you.
- ◆ Ideas and feelings and images come back. The process is more circular than linear. Let things repeat themselves. There may be more to learn. Something is probably being worked out beyond your full understanding.
- ◆ What if someone reads your journal? If you have written things you don't want others to discover because someone will be hurt, it is all right to tear things out and destroy them. But write them first.

- ◆ Stand back in your mind. Observe yourself. Listen to yourself. Write about yourself in the third person sometimes — as if you are watching someone else.
- ◆ Write freely in your journal without stopping or censoring or judging. Welcome the words that come in. Think of the words as gifts from beyond your small knowing, from your greater knowing.
- ◆ Always treat yourself as if you loved yourself.
- ◆ Wonder about the motion of love. Ultimately, this work is about love. Ultimately, it is spiritual work.

Each time you open your journal, you begin again. You are born again.



You have your journal, and you are under way on this journey of writing and being. If you are new at it and are feeling hesitant and unsure of what to do, don't worry. Just as you learn to swim by entering the water, so you learn to write by writing.

Begin your journal by simply opening it, putting down the day's date (and perhaps the time of day and the place), and starting to write. You enter your journal not to explore what you know but to discover how you feel. At first, this talking to yourself about feelings may seem awkward and uncomfortable, something like meeting a stranger. But it will get easier as you do it and as you explore suggestions and techniques to help it happen.

The Explorations that follow here and at the end of each succeeding chapter are designed to help you with the real work, the work of entering the river of your own writing and being. Follow them carefully. Do them faithfully. As you do the Explorations again and again, they will continue to yield new ways of seeing and saying.

EXPLORATION:

WHERE ARE YOU NOW? PART I

Find an hour or so to be alone with yourself, pen, and paper. You will be writing on loose paper rather than in your journal, so you can seal these pages in an envelope. During this time, reflect on the following questions and write down whatever comes along for you.

Obviously, you could spend hours, days, a lifetime, writing about these questions. But for now, do not worry them too much; just be curious; start looking and wondering. These questions address issues that will be explored in greater detail as you go on in your daily journal writing. Do not try to write answers; just let the questions lead you. Wonder, wander, speculate. Ask yourself further questions. Assume that you do not know, that there is always more to be discovered, more to be seen.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN to write in your journal, take a few minutes to close your eyes and breathe and grow quiet and watchful. Then, when you are ready, just write freely whatever thoughts, feelings, memories, come along in relation to the following questions. . . .

◆ How are you feeling about yourself right now?

What things about yourself do you feel good about? What things about yourself do you feel "unhappy" about right now? In what ways do you feel yourself changing or wanting to change?

◆ How does your past feel to you?

How much "weight" from the past do you feel you carry with you now? Does your past feel "light" or "heavy"? Where is the weight of the past coming from? What are you angry about from your past? What regrets do you have? What would you like to let go of?

◆ What do you value in your life now?

In what kinds of things do you find meaning, value, purpose? What matters? Who matters?

◆ What are your dreams, goals, needs?

In what directions do you need to go with your life?

◆ What are your spiritual beliefs now?

When you are finished with this writing/exploring, fold the pages like a letter, seal them in an envelope, and write your name on the outside. Put the envelope in a drawer where you can find it when you finish your current journal (or at the end of your class or group sessions). You can then read it — like a letter from someone you once knew — and reflect upon changes and growth in your writing and being.

EXPLORATION:

LOOKING AT YOUR DAY

The four questions that follow can help beginning journal writers get a feel for some basic uses of the journal. You can use these questions at any time to help you attend to specific things in your life and look more closely at your day. You can think of these questions when writing alone or when working with a class or a writing group.

You can focus in depth on just one question or ask yourself all of them. And you can respond to these questions again and again, because each of your days is unique.

TO PREPARE for this journal writing, sit quietly, close your eyes, and breathe deeply for a few minutes.

◆ **In your mind, look back over your day.**

(Or work with the previous day, if you are writing in the morning.) Beginning when you woke up, review the day. What were the feelings of the day? What were the happenings, subtle and overt, of the day? Who were the people of the day? For a little while, just watch yourself, your "selves," going through this day.

◆ **In your journal, respond to the following questions about your day:**

When were you angry or frustrated?

Describe a specific time during your day when you felt angry or frustrated about something. What was going on? Who was involved? How did you respond? Where is your anger or frustration now? What did you do with it?

When did you feel good?

Describe a small, good moment in your day — a specific time when you felt good about yourself, when you felt at ease or at one with yourself, when you felt "at home" in the world, when you smiled. Perhaps it was when you stepped out of your house in the morning and saw a fragment of the waning moon in the eastern sky just ahead of the sun. Or when you came home after a long day and your cat purred for you. Or a small, pleasant memory that came to you unexpectedly.

What would you change?

Maybe you would change a choice you made, something you did, or something you said during the day. Rewrite it in your journal the way you would have it go.

Who made your day better?

Describe specifically what someone else did that helped you and made your day go better. Look closely at what they did and how it changed your feelings. See it. Appreciate it. Value it. Thank them.

It may seem ironic, but these "looking back" questions can help you to live more fully in the moment, to be here now, to be more alive. This kind of journal writing slows you down, helps you attend to life rather than rushing past it. Use these questions to keep grounded in the days and moments of your life. Come back to them often in your journal work.