

Rod Farmer

JOURNAL WRITING:

A Mind-Mending and Self-Exploring Process

"If thou art a writer, write as if time were short, for it is indeed short at the longest".

Henry David Thoreau

For the last five years I have been a journal writer. At first I wrote out of a sense of duty; I had read that journal writing was good therapy and my "battle fatigued" school teacher mind needed relief from the stress of classroom pressures. Soon, however, the reluctant writer became transformed into a scribacious (fond of, or addicted to, writing) user of pen and paper; a positive addiction had been born.

I have been most faithful to my new love. My journal has received additions as I sat on a train crossing the Indian subcontinent, as I hiked the Maine coast, as I picnicked in the Himalayan foothills in Nepal and as I waited patiently for a flight at London's Heathrow Airport. But most of my journal writing has taken place in the most ordinary of places, my apartment. Though my apartment be a most humble and unexciting abode, journal writing in this humdrum location has also led to numerous adventures.

Thoreau, one of history's greater journal writers, held that inside of each individual there are: "whole new continents" to which one should be the Columbus of, undiscovered streams and oceans that one must be the Lewis and Clark of, and that in one's own mind "every man is the lord of a realm beside which the earthly empire of the czar is but a petty state". Explore thyself said the journalist of Walden Pond. It is with this new mental mobility and deeper perceptions, acquired through journal writing, that I too can be a Columbus, a Lewis and Clark, and a surveyor of my own inner realms. Aided by journal writing, my mind has become a great way to travel.

At a time when many seek to find themselves through formal programs of self-discovery such as transcendental meditation and primal scream therapy, and through various drugs, it is most reassuring to discover that the much simpler and less expensive pen and paper route can be a fruitful path to becoming self-literate. This vehicle to self-knowledge can be of my own design. I can write short cryptic phrases or full sentences, even verse. I can extensively cover a topic or merely mention it. Wherever I can find a few minutes, a pen and a piece of paper, I can journal write. The process can be used at any time of the day or night; it can be a long diatribe or a quick jotting. The paper need not be of any special size or color; almost any paper will suffice. When writing I neither worry about penmanship nor spelling. The open dictionary would slow me down, it is the open mind which fuels my efforts. Content, not form, is of most concern.

I quickly discovered that I must write with a "nothing is off limits" attitude. I write with total freedom. No inhibitions. The pen must flow with the mind. I can write of my deepest feelings, be they fear, love, frustration, relief or hope. Many times I am surprised at the feelings and thoughts my pen uncovers. Feelings, values and ideas are discovered that, most likely, would have remained hidden forever from their owner, had not the journal found them. Once when Bertrand Russell was asked his opinion on a particular topic, he stated that he did not know his own opinion at that moment, since he had not yet written on the subject. So too have I found writing an aid to my efforts to better understand the world around me and the universe within me. Thus, journal writing helps me clarify, analyze and synthesize my life experiences.

With my journal I clarify my values. For example, I ponder which six books have been most important to me in my life, or reflect on what is my most valuable possession (most probably my journal), or question what it is I want to do with the rest of my life. I engage in goal setting, have imaginary conversations with Lincoln or Voltaire, outline my philosophy of life, unravel perplexing dreams or merely record common daily events to be read by myself, in the future, with amusement and reminiscence. My journal saves that part of me which would otherwise rush away and become lost for ever. In an overcrowded, noise-polluted world, solitude is a rare and precious gem. Thoreau discovered that "a man thinking and working is always alone, let him be where he will". Thus, journal writing has brought me solitude on a crowded Boston subway as well as company when alone in the Maine woods or on a Missouri farm.

In Henry James's short story "The Great Good Place", the major character, Dane, finds he is out of touch with self. To regain touch with his own life and find inner peace, Dane enters "the great good place", a place of deep reflection and of full consciousness. He becomes alone with his own thoughts and finds the power of mind to renew and regenerate itself. He finds that special stillness and sanctuary which resides only in the self. To James each person must find one's own "great good place", one's own process of developing a sense of oneness with self and life, a sense of spiritual refreshment through conscious thought. For me journal writing has been the road to my "great good place". Journal writing has provided the vehicle that has stimulated the needed heightened reflective consciousness.

Erich Fromm, in his book **The Art of Loving**, held that before one can learn the art of love, before one can love others, one must first learn how to be alone, truly alone with oneself. The art of being alone had eluded me until I entered the art of journal writing. It is when I enter my journal that I actualize what Abraham Maslow labeled the *real self*. I become truly myself and no longer hide behind social roles or lose myself in Walter Mitty fantasies. I am naked before myself and this healthy growth-stimulating nakedness becomes comforting. The real self becomes a companion, whose home I enter as I write.

Though each individual must find one's own path to the "great good place", I have offered my personal experiences with journal writing, in the hope that they may be helpful to any who may choose this mode of mind-mending and self-exploration.
