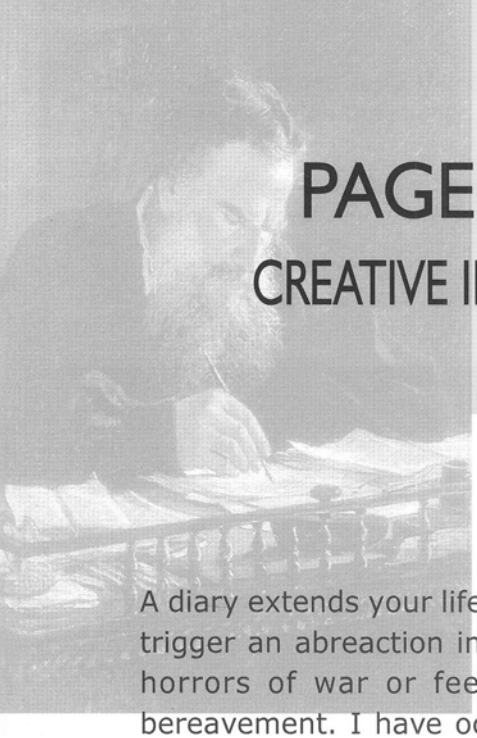


# PAGES FROM MY PAST:
## CREATIVE INTROSPECTION IN OLD AGE

A diary extends your life. Turning to a page in the past can for me trigger an abreaction in which I find myself re-experiencing the horrors of war or feeling the emptiness and desolation of bereavement. I have occasionally experienced for the first time emotions I had repressed long ago, even traumas of the past which go back to pre-natal experiences, birth and infancy. (The *infans* of infancy means not speaking, and these memories, the most traumatic, are pre-verbal). They are recalled as nightmares later in life. Much of what I am doing when studying the pages of the past is, in fact, like primal integration. I find myself constantly being taken back to the very beginning.

Later anxieties in my life bear resemblances to earlier ones and sometimes feel like the re-living of the ordeal or separation of birth. Or they may be memories of the 'good womb'. I tremble with fear in a field hospital in Italy or weep at the loss of someone who was once dear to me, which my 'masculinity' wouldn't allow me to do in the past. On the other hand, I can re-live peak experiences and transport myself to a beach on the Costa Bella (the good womb) or to a small cottage called Ty-Bach in the Black Mountains where I spent several months in 1941. Prelude to war; prelude to the tribulation of birth (Tribulation is derived from the Greek *thlipsis*, which means 'strong crushing pressure')

I can go on living my life again and again and every time I look in my diary I understand a bit more about myself: the parts begin to connect, going back and back. I fill in the gaps - the unfinished business - and allow myself to live those parts of my life that I had failed to live in the past. Then it is a bit like living the fullness of a life postponed, and I am reminded of Oscar Wilde's words: 'Your real life is the one you never lived.' Mostly things went wrong in early

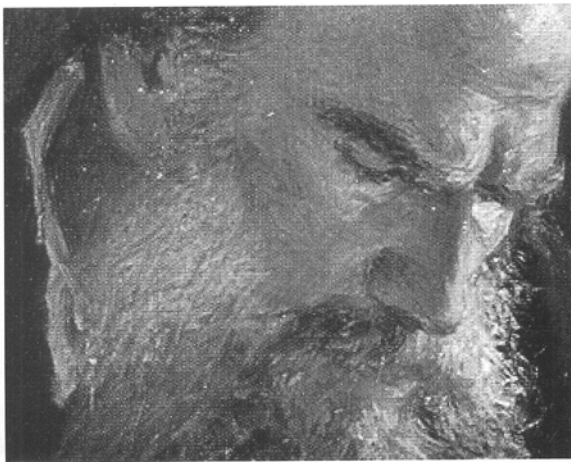
development, so when reading about my childhood I am discovering the life I hadn't lived, which again is like primal integration, as I trace back where and how and when problems began.

The diary tells a story, usually very badly, but with some glimpses of an inner life. My diary also describes the way I was guided by a fiction imposed on me in childhood when my parents were the principal authors. The story was theirs at first; but became very much mine as I grew older, and into my anti-script.

A diary captures the moment. Without it our memory tends to play tricks, falsifying the past to buttress up the present. My diary, which goes back to I926, describes my way of perceiving the world at different times of my life. It is different from the way others see the same world, the same events. It is essentially a story, but a true story describing my moods, fears, hopes etc at different times. I have described the fantasy world of a child, rebellion in my teens, a young man's romantic and adventurous way of looking at things and an old man's world of dreams and reminiscences. Though many of the psychological fears and hopes were brought about by misperceptions or delusions, they were real in the sense that their effects were real.

Now the main story is over and I am living in the epilogue, which is a sort of *summing* up and preparation for death. My diary can help me through these years.

A diary keeps you focused, helping you to see and remember everything that goes on during the day: the change of tempo as the day progresses, the



weariness at the end of the day. The words you use can have a calming effect and transform the present moment into a magical moment.

## A page in my diary

A painter sits in front of a canvas and sees a picture gradually taking shape which consists of some kind of re-ordering of his inner and outer worlds. And so it is with a page in my diary. It is my canvas. I try to create some kind of order out of the multitude of sights, sounds, thoughts and actions that make up my day. I select just a few to fill the page. What I select tells my story. It is a re-ordering of events to make a meaningful pattern out of the chaos we call reality.

My wife Dorothea stuck this quotation from Emerson on the kitchen wall:

*Write it on your heart that every day is the best day of the year.*

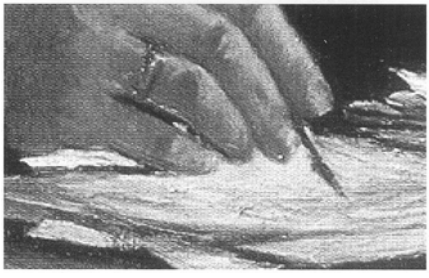
*No man has learned anything rightly until he knows that every day is doomsday.*

*He only is rich who owns the day, and no-one owns the day who allows it to be invaded with worry, fret and anxiety.*

Finish the day and be done with it. You have done what you could. Some blunders and absurdities no doubt crept in; forget them as soon as you can. Tomorrow is a new day; begin it well and serenely and with too high a spirit to be encumbered with your old nonsense. This day is all that is good and fair. It is too dear, with its hopes and invitation, to waste a moment on the yesterdays.

## Wednesday, 23 June. 1999

My diary petered out three months ago, mainly because I've been very busy running a charity. At the end of the day I feel drained and find it difficult to



concentrate and often go to sleep watching the box. It's a combination of old age and the expectation that I will be able to fill my day with plenty of activity as I did with such ease twenty or thirty years ago that is responsible for my lack of energy and inability to concentrate for long.

Someone once said that 'too muchness leads to not enoughness,' and this is particularly true as you grow older. Working for long hours without a break leads to inefficiency and impaired concentration. At my age (83) I am painfully aware of a slowing down of thought processes and it takes some sort of shock to wake me up from my dream-like state into which I sometimes drift. So I must be careful to move at my own pace both inwardly and outwardly. The shock opens your eyes to the truth of your situation, but it's so easy to slip back into a semi-comatose state. That's what age does to you.

My inclination is to look for some diversion from the problems I encounter every day in the charity, which take so much of my energy. I found recently that even getting hot and sticky in the kitchen making marmalade to sell at a table-top sale in the High Street was therapeutic.

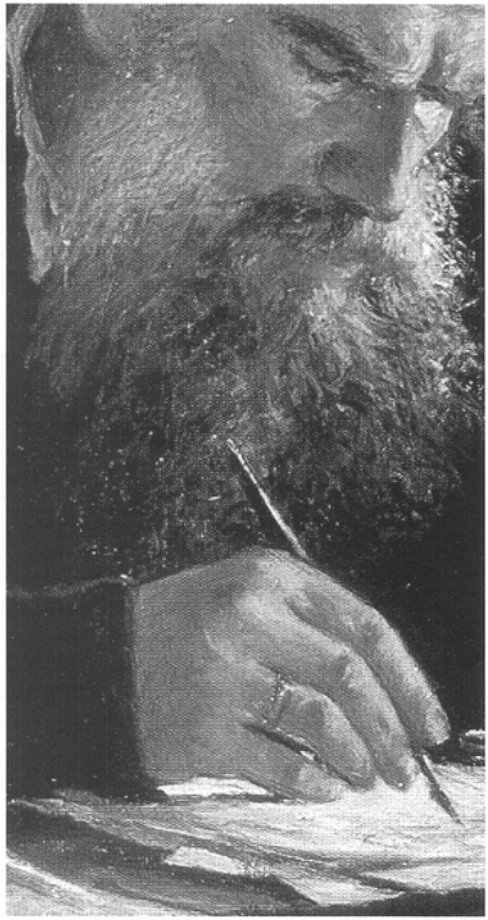
However, whatever your age it's really better to face problems, not to run away from them - and I do this in a creative way by writing about them in my diary. I find, in fact, this restores my concentration and gives me energy because, as I've said before, it turns the problems into stories. In other words, my problems become fictional and writing about them is as much a matter of style as anything else. The pattern you create gives you a sense of mastery over your problems. My own problems, now mainly concerned with growing old, become more interesting less threatening, when they take on the shape of a story.

I've been dipping into a book by Colin Wilson called *The Strange Life of PD Ouspensky.* Ouspensky was a follower of Gurdjieff, who believed that most people were asleep and needed a shock, like an illness or some other misfortune, to wake them up. But I agree with Wilson when he says that being enthusiastic about something will do this for you. Being awake and enthusiastic means looking with the innocent eyes of a child and seeing the magic of ordinary things. I have vivid memories of a time when I'd only been in the world for a handful of years. Everything was new to me then. For instance, I remember being fascinated by the sound of the wind and feeling I had discovered the source of all that whooshing and whistling in an open barn with a corrugated iron roof not far from our home. And today, of all the scents I know, honeysuckle is the most powerful because it takes me back to the age of four when I spent several weeks in a cottage in North Wales and the air was full of that delicious scent.

Ira Progoff, in his book *At a Journal Workshop,* wrote about stretching feelings back as far as they will go. And stretching them forwards, watching where they are likely to lead. You can do this in a diary. Present time is full of the past which is then projected into the future. Just as Blake saw the world in a grain of sand, I see all time in the passing moment. A diary connects the past with the present, the intimate with the sublime, small and large, birth and death, near and far.

Apart from this exercise of stretching the moment backwards and forwards, there are other introspective exercises described by Progoff which uncover patterns of behaviour, bring back turning points and milestones in your life and, as I say, identify moments of trauma that are still troubling you deep within yourself going back to birth and pre-natal memories. It's not only therapeutic; it's a creative process, better than any creative writing workshop. It also improves the memory, especially at my age.

In my reading I try to balance science with literature, and sometimes I find literature tells me more than science. Sometimes the two are combined in one book, especially a book about illness. *The Anatomy of an Illness* by Norman Cousins is one. *Awakenings* by Oliver Sacks is another. Each gives a graphic description of an illness which is both emotionally and scientifically authentic.



Baudelaire said that the genius was in touch with his childhood. Recently, I have been reading an interesting book about a woman_who suffered from multiple infarct dementia, which, like Alzheimer's, eventually leads to a massive loss of memory but in the early stages is more insidious and not so obvious, with the sufferer fooling people because the memory is patchy and selective. It is written by the woman's daughter, Linda Grant, a Guardian journalist, who calls the book *Remind me who I am, again.* The publisher's blurb describes the book as 'a descent into darkness'. Not the sort of book to recommend to someone of my age you might think. But surprisingly I found it uplifting, because the writing is so good and much of it is about Liverpool where Linda Grant's family lived and where my family lived in the early part of this century; and many of the places Linda writes about bring back memories of my own childhood.

Memories are everything. They resonate in every cell in the body and in our breathing. They shape our lives; from conception to old age, they go on remaining active, but they change as we grow older and sometimes neural pathways are weakened or destroyed and we have trouble bringing back memories, particularly short-term ones. This can be devastating, not only for the sufferer but for all her family. As Linda Grant wrote:
*'When a mother loses her memory the whole family goes down with it and you must do what you canto reclaim yourselves from oblivion.'*
So in her book she does just that: she reclaims her past, including much that she didn't understand as a child, such as her Jewishness and her place in the family history of persecution.

It is not all grim. Linda has a Merseyside sense of humour and even manages to laugh at some of the things that happen which are pretty awful really. But that's what happens when things go terribly wrong, as I discovered during the war. Some of the best books are about facing some of the worst things that can happen to us - war, disease, death and so on. The things we usually try to forget. As Browning wrote, 'Suddenly the worst becomes the best to the brave.' Everything in life, even a personal tragedy, has something to teach you, and everything can be understood in terms of what happened to you very early in your life.

Krishnamurti said that perception was action, seeing was action, a difficult idea to grasp because we usually associate seeing and perceiving with thinking about something or describing something. verbally or according to some kind of numerical measurement. But for Krishnamurti seeing 'what is' is the opposite of thinking - clearing the mind of its problems, images, remembrances, words and concepts and so on which prevent you from seeing anything. Seeing 'what is', says Krishnamurti, is acting intelligently in the field of reality, not distorting it. This does not mean obliterating memory altogether but means seeing memory for what it is: a fiction - a useful one perhaps but still a fiction, which can be re-written. What your memory digs up are habits, including habits of thinking, perceiving, conceptualising, and conforming to fashions of behaviour.

If you see 'what is', which means seeing the distortion and seeing how everything you think and do is the active response of memory, you begin to change what you see or you have an

impact on what you see, which is the activity or interactivity; the seeing itself being part of the action. Krishnamurti called this 'seeing without the me seeing' or choiceless awareness. Put another way, when you give your full attention to an object, or what language defines as an object, or a person or situation a change occurs through what Karl Popper called reflexivity. As I understand it, this is about feedback. An image you impose on something bounces back at you, and you call that reality. It is another way of understanding the same truth that Krishnamurtj keeps talking about -i.e. the act of observing and the thing observed are two aspects of perception - not mutually exclusive. Being aware - at the same time - both of the observer and the observed is a state of mind described by Gurdjieff as 'self-remembering'.

For Krishnamurti thought is limited and contradictory. Thinking about things is distorting and does not reveal the truth. The truth, he believes, is something different. It has its own vitality and movement. When you see something stunningly beautiful (the truth) thought stops. As the epithet implies, you are stunned by what you see. Seeing in this way is an end of thought; the aesthetic sense taking over. So the question is, if I surround myself with beautiful things - beautiful music, beautiful pictures, beautiful scenery outside my window and I fill my mind with beautiful thoughts, with poetry and so on, am I more likely to live a beautiful life. Or is beauty, as they say, in the mind of the beholder? Can you turn the ugly into the beautiful in the way you write about it intuitively, feelingly, spontaneously? I am sure you can. And you can do this in a diary.

The Scottish philosopher John MacMurray believed that the worst feature of modem life was its failure to believe in beauty. For human life beauty is as important as truth -even more important - and beauty in life is the product of feeling. It was necessary, MacMurray said, to recapture the sense of beauty if we were not to lose our freedom What this is tantamount to saying is that to be free we need to be more creative and spontaneous in what we say, and in how we think and what we do. Being creative, being free and fully attentive, can transmute and reshape the past, give meaning to the present and create surprises for the future.

Those who are interested in the Intensive Journal Method or join other groups, especially primal groups, are there to learn to move into new areas of behaviour both inside and outside the group. To become more spontaneous, uninhibited, creative people. As primal psychotherapist Frank Lake used to say, taking risks in the here-and-now is the best way to change attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. At least, you can begin this process by dropping your social mask in a diary.

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## Further Reading

Ira Progoff *At a Journal Workshop: Writing to Access the Power of the Unconscious and Evoke Creative Ability (Inner Workbook)* J. P Tarcher 1992
G. Lyn Nelson *Writing and Being: Taking Back our Lives Through the Power of Language* Inisfree Press 1994
Linda Grant *Remind Me Who I Am, Again* Granta Books 1999
J. Krishnarmurti and David Bohm *The Limits of Thought* Routledge, 1999