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The Unexpected Truths I Learned From 52 Years of Keeping a Journal

Our emotions don't change with age — but the way we understand them does

By Chip Brown

My kids recently gave me a formulaic little book called *Dad, I Want to Hear Your Story*, a “father’s guided journal” filled with ostensibly character-defining questions such as: Did I like roller coasters as a child, do I think there’s life on other planets, do I believe in love at first sight? To get taciturn dads in a confidential mood, the fill-in-the-blank pages are peppered with uplifting advice from Euripides to Carol Burnett.

I appreciate the gift but wonder whether my children aren’t inviting me to water the lawn in a downpour, because I have been keeping a journal — unguided — since I was a sophomore in college. As of last month, I have 137 wide-ruled spiral notebooks; I would have 138 but I lost one in 1989, when my briefcase was stolen from a restaurant in Rockefeller Center. All told, that’s more than 20,000 pages of scribbling amassed over 52 years. In the unlikely event my kids are ever remotely interested in rummaging through this archive, they will learn that Dad does not like roller coasters; hopes there is life on other planets given the mess we are making of this one; and believed way too often in love at first sight.

In journal-keeping, per the famous dictum of Socrates that “the unexamined life is not worth living,” I found a way of auditing myself, of parsing what was in my mind and heart. Sometimes it was also a way of slapping myself in the face to wake up, get out of the clouds, drain the angst, bridle the rage, absorb the rush of losses, or just strip away the grime of habit and routine that so often obscures the astonishment of being alive.

Over the last 40 years, many scientific studies of journal-keeping (or what is often called “expressive writing”) have added an extensive list of practical reasons why everyone ought to heed the Socratic admonition. Akin to meditation or therapies based on music and art, keeping a journal can improve sleep, enhance immune function, reduce depression, retard memory loss, and decrease the discomfort of chronic conditions like asthma and rheumatoid arthritis.

Researchers in New Zealand asked adults ages 64 to 97 to write 20 minutes a day for three days in a row, then took skin biopsies. The arm wounds in the group that had been asked to write about “upsetting life events” healed much faster than the wounds in the group that simply recorded their daily activities. The reason is not clear, though results in other studies have correlated writing about trauma with the reduction of the immune-impeding effects of cortisol in the body.

And then there are the seemingly minor benefits of journal-keeping that, in my 70s, are beginning to feel less incidental. I’ve read that assisted living facilities recommend journal writing, not just because it can help stave off memory decline but because wielding a pen exercises fine motor muscles that enable older people to pick up their pills.

It’s not like time’s accelerating arrow is hard to miss when I look at my trove of handwritten notebooks. I often hear my now-dead father’s voice. He was not a journal-keeper.

“Dad,” I once told him, “the unexamined life is not worth living, according to Socrates.”

“The over-examined life might not be worth living either,” he replied.

For sure. But in any archive of journals, a depth of insight accrues over time. There’s what you registered in the moment that you thought worth writing about, and there’s what you can see between the lines years later, reviewing the accounts you made. It took me a long time to learn that if you want to know what the past felt like — if you want to experience again the living pulse and texture of time that has come and gone — you have to write the facts, not the feelings. Emotions are ageless, almost ahistorical, and the charge of a particular feeling at 20 is virtually indistinguishable from the charge of the same feeling at 70. It’s the specific context of facts that enables us to tell one instance of loneliness or joy or heartbreak from another.

Of course, if you have kept a journal all your life, there are going to be pages you cannot reread without cringing. Pages of heedlessness, selfishness, sexual mania; pages of faux pas and broken promises; a veritable Himalaya of molehill love problems and fruitless attempts to resist becoming a fully-fledged cliché. So many entries will leave you thinking you might have been better off if you'd used a disposable camera instead of a pen.

Because even in the cascade of words, something is always missing. The immense mystery of an ordinary afternoon. That last chess game. Bob Marley softly on the radio singing "Waiting in Vain." A copy of Backstage with upcoming auditions circled in red. A blue paper cup of Dominican coffee. A green-eyed cat drowsing on the bed. An anecdote about an amusing dinner with someone who either knew Jack Lemmon's daughter or maybe was Jack Lemmon's daughter. Who will remember any of it? Or any of these words clinging to the past like a diminuendo of frail notes subsiding into silence?

Whoa! I seem to have hit some heavy weather. Need to wrap this up. Get to my journal. Turn the page.

Chip Brown is the author of two books and has written for numerous national magazines, including Outside, National Geographic and The New York Times Magazine.