

## Chapter 5 (excerpt)

### **Paying Religious Attention Through Journaling**

The twentieth-century poet and writer W. H. Auden said in his foreword to *Markings*, the succinctly eloquent journal of Dag Hammarskjöld, the former secretary general of the United Nations, that he couldn't recall another attempt by a professional man of action "to unite in one life, the *via activa* and the *via contemplativa*." Developing self-awareness requires that we do exactly what Dag Hammarskjöld did. We must learn to unite a life being lived with our efforts to reflect upon that life. But once we become alert to our need to pay careful attention to our actions, thoughts, feelings, and messages from the unconscious, we find this heedfulness a daunting task. It's helpful for us to find a process that can contain our work. Journaling provides one of the best such approaches, a routine that offers both discipline and refreshment.

Committing ourselves to such an approach frees us from our attempts to master ourselves. By mastering ourselves I'm referring to efforts that are usually based on willpower to control our emotions, temperaments, appearances, and actions to fit an ideal. Generally, such ideals are rooted in images supplied by the social

character. Knowing ourselves is an effort to emerge from the confusion of images important to society and other people. During the process of individuation we are looking for inner guidelines for putting ourselves and the world into perspective. This point of view is illustrated in the title Dag Hammarskjöld gave his journal. In his native language the word *markings* also means “trail marks” or “guideposts.”

If we forsake willpower, the power-oriented approach to dealing with ourselves, we are free to turn to love and desire for motivation. Self-discipline then becomes self-commitment or self-discipleship and is energized by our desire to know and love ourselves and to experience life more fully. Let me give you a brief example of what I mean. If we feel like we’re overweight, a feeling that often reflects social values, we may decide to go on a diet. In most cases successful dieting depends on willpower. When we cheat or fail, we feel guilty and weak. A person seeking to know themselves, however, might choose to journal and reflect on what they’re feeling whenever they catch themselves wanting to eat. In this way they may learn to understand the meaning of their eating and its place in their lives.

Recently our local newspaper ran an interview with a well-known novelist who said he wrote eight hours a day, seven days a week. As I began to think about what he said it occurred to me that such a person could never sustain this amount of work through willpower alone; this kind of commitment is fueled by passion and desire. Artistic creations don’t just leap into being. The creator must have the commitment to carefully becoming proficient in the craftsmanship of his (or her) field or he can’t bring his vision into actuality.

We too must be willing to create our lives in a similar manner. Like an artist we must be committed to discovering the visions, the patterns arising within us that can bring order and meaning to our lives, in contrast to the design we attempt to impose on ourselves; Dag Hammarskjöld understood this, too. After reviewing his life through his journals, in the cover letter attached to his writings, which were discovered after his death, he wrote, “These entries provide

the only true ‘profile’ that can be drawn.” His statement makes it clear he thought the writings that arose from within him reflected the development and pattern of his life in a way that no biography of external events could show.

Following the examples of some of the great journal writers like Dag Hammarskjöld, Thomas Merton, Anwar Sadat, Anne Morrow Lindbergh, May Sarton, Virginia Woolf, and Julien of Norwich we, too, can begin paying careful attention to our lives by keeping daily journals. Men and women of the highest creative, spiritual, and intellectual caliber—saints, philosophers, historians, artists, and warriors—have found meaning through this process. People have been writing journals about their lives for centuries. Some are simple diaries of events while others become examples of a life’s journey through the discovery of its true nature, a transformed view of the world, enhanced wisdom, and the growth of a loving connection to all life.

Thomas Merton, who as a monk chose the contemplative path as a vocation, also led a very active, creative literary life. He left us some remarkable journals that capture the essence of several methods of journal writing. At times he used his journal to capture ongoing daily events as is shown in the following entry:

*Got back today from being in Washington the weekend with Ed Rice. Maybe I always was bad at picking hotels. Got a very bad one in Washington: the Harrington: not quite so modern or so comfortable as the Olean House. In fact, the Olean House had it all over this great firetrap. Bad rickety joint, people rattling on our doorknob all morning, dark black room on a court from which you couldn’t see the sky. Crummy.*

We can also find examples of his dreams in his journals. Below is one of his dreams. In paragraphs preceding the dream he summarized the events that he thought led up to it.

*Last week I had a dream about planes. It was at Yakutat, one of the small airstrips to which I had been flown in Alaska. There is*

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*a low ceiling and we are waiting to take off in a small plane. But a large plane, a commercial prop plane, is about to land. It comes down, then I hear it leave again. The way is clear. Why don't we take off now? The other plane is never seen though it lands and takes off nearby.*

Merton also used his journal for musings, for letting his imagination play in a lovely manner as the following piece illustrates. If I read this piece quickly it rattles me and seems abrasive. If I read it slowly and allow each image to form in my mind it becomes more fanciful.

*Noises:*

*Outside now it is raining.*

*Noises of a cocktail shaker at Doublaston, first with a martini being stirred in it, then with something being shaken in it. Generally, sun outside, or late slanting sun through the French windows.*

*Noise of a toy electric train going around its tracks.*

*Noise of winding up a clockwork locomotive—slower turn of the key, thickening catch of the spring.*

*Noise of the cook chopping or pounding things in the kitchen.*

*Noise of tires singing past the house on the road outside, in winter, in autumn when the road is light and bare and hard.*

*Noise of a fire, cracking and snapping in the grate, just lit. The sheaves of sparks that rush up the chimney from time to time.*

*Noise of a dog jumping up inside the door and scratching on it as you come up the steps.*

*Noise of Pop walking upstairs, beating with his hand on the banister halfway between the beats of his feet on the hollow-sounding wooden steps.*

*Noises of someone (never me!) shoveling coal into the furnace downstairs, the shovel chunkily bites in under the coal, which smothers its sound: the coal rushing off the shovel into*

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*the fire, leaving the shovel ringing slightly, full of a load.*

*Noise of someone opening up the legs of a card table—a drag and a sudden catch.*

*Noise of starting the radio: click of the knob, the light comes on, then half a second later, a sudden swell of hum that dies again a little, while the radio settles down to think up a real sound. After that nothing very interesting comes out of the radio, as a rule.*

*Noise of the cellar door banging shut: never one bang, but a bang and a quarter because of the bounce. Noise of footsteps on the cement steps leading down to the cellar. Noise of dragging ash cans up the cellar steps, step by step, the heavy, muffled bumping, muffled by the weight of the fine pinkish gray ash. All this took place under the window of the room I slept in: that room was Pop's den. It had an office desk and a swivel chair. Noise made by the swivel chair when you turned on it completely. First no noise at all, then a kind of slight, singing protest. (Noise of the drawers opening and shutting.) The protest of the chair comes not from making it turn, but it is uttered by a tough spring as you lean back in the chair and tilt it quite a bit.*

*Noise of raking leaves, of mowing the grass, of digging with a spade, of raking ground or hoeing. Sweeping the sidewalk and the brick front steps.*

*Noise of the sprinkler, as it turns scattering whirling threads of water around the air over the front lawn. Twenty or thirty feet away the leaves of the privet hedge move where you would not have suspected water was falling.*

And finally let's look at one of his personal reflections, or self-examinations, that's directly related to his growth in self-knowledge:

*Identity. I can see now where the work is to be done. I have been coming here into solitude to find myself, and now I must also lose myself: not simply rest in the calm, the peace, the identity that is made up of my experienced relationship with nature in*

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*solitude. This is healthier than my identity as a writer or a monk, but it is still a false identity, though it has a temporary meaning and validity. It is the cocoon that masks the transition stage between what crawls and what flies.*

Journaling for most of us begins with the simple method of recording daily events and the feelings they evoke in us. As we become more at home in this practice it usually grows into musing, reflection, and self-examination—into seeking to know ourselves more completely. When we help it, the practice of journaling matures and we discover things about ourselves that we often knew at some level but were unable to formulate or consciously articulate. The following quotation from Dag Hammarskjöld’s journal shows how our reflections can mature beyond the values of everyday life into the realm of spiritual consciousness.

*Now you know. When the worries over your work loosen their grip, then this experience of light, warmth, and power. From without—a sustaining element, like air to the glider or water to the swimmer. An intellectual hesitation which demands proofs and logical demonstration prevents me from “believing”—in this, too. Prevents me from expressing and interpreting this reality in intellectual terms. Yet, through me there flashes this vision of a magnetic field in the soul, created in a timeless present by unknown multitudes, living in holy obedience, whose words and actions are a timeless prayer.  
—“The Communion of Saints”—and—within it—an eternal life.*

