



## ROUGH NOTES ON A LIFE: A WRITING PRACTICE

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Tuesday, rainy gloomy morn, on the bus to school, coffee delicious in this chilliness...Halfway through June and I'm still wearing sweaters! I wonder how this will affect the crops? At any rate the flowers are blossoming—little English daisies singing in the grasses, columbines and poppies bobbing their heads...I can smell the warm violet sweetness of irises everywhere, while the rhododendrons and azaleas have already dropped their blooms, leaving exotic carpets of pink and fuchsia on the green, so much green...I'm wearing my green rain boots—they match the plants...I hear it's already in the 90s in NY...

Got my journal out, as always—me in my little world, writing to myself, to that unknown friend, that unknown person...What compels me to it? It's like writing letters that may or may not ever get read to people who may or may not ever exist...

I wonder when people started journaling, writing diaries, personal histories?

I was about 12 when I started, living with Mom and my brother, needing a place to release what I didn't feel free to speak...I wanted to hear and express my own thoughts, so I wrote, scrawled, spewed, cried myself onto paper, even though I had to hide it, or put it under lock and key...I'm so addicted to it now that I'd feel alone in the world without pen and paper to scratch myself onto... but I don't really know what compels me...

Who am I writing to? Myself? All the people I've had crushes on? Dead people? My children? People I'm angry at? God? The American Government? Who did others write to? Why did they write? So many different reasons, I'm sure...

How much of "history"—this story constructed around The Word of Someone Else—has been a-mended by discoveries of journals written by people in the category of oppressed at the time? Or by the elite few who could write?

We need places for our own words, chronicles of our own lives to balance out the story...

For centuries, women in many different circumstances wrote diaries—no doubt because they had nowhere else to express themselves, excepting in needlework! And the few long ago women's diaries that I've read often rail against that very needlework! And what about those diaries written by women who crossed prairies and mountains in covered wagons and lived in barren wastes, struggling against Men and Nature...?

And the diaries of women writers...Because they wrote other things, their journals became valuable material, saved for me to read. How many times have I found myself in there, still facing the same challenges? I wonder if they thought about posterity while they wrote? I'm not sure they wanted their inner selves bared for all to see, but I for one am grateful to whoever didn't burn that writing; those words are like letters for me—in place of physical friendship I have these women's personalities: their opinions, their struggles, sorrows, joys, wit, their observations of the life around them, often the same as now...often different...

And these diaries have much in common with others written during oppressive and violent times, diaries written in hiding, and hidden away, often in hopes that they would be found someday, left as testimony to a suppressed truth...

I didn't start journaling with the intention of recordkeeping. It was definitely to have "someone" to confide my most secret and most angry thoughts to. It was only with time that it became a will to write. I still have that John Steinbeck quotation Mom copied out for me, saying a writer writes, so keep on writing, no matter what you write. So I did. One goal I had was to write like myself, to sound like myself, to be natural. I wanted to write so constantly that my thoughts would spill freely onto paper without me censoring or editing myself. Journaling was the way I practiced writing in my own voice. No need to research or make stuff up—plenty of words waiting to be spilled.

But I left out many details—I'd go on for weeks just recording my feelings and thoughts, while only vaguely alluding to actual incidents...

The power of details really came across to me while reading Holocaust diaries, especially *The Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak: Five Notebooks from the Lodz Ghetto, 1939–1943*. Dawid's diaries begin just before Poland was invaded, and continue on until he died in the ghetto. He recorded political developments in and outside the ghetto; he recorded the grams of food he was allotted; the condition of his clothes, his environment, his body, his family; he recorded that he tutored for money to buy books, and which books he was reading; titles of other things he was writing; his attempts to get any kind of work; his increasing weakness; his own anger, frustration, and sadness...

Dawid's inclusion of these specifics makes his predicament palpable, measurable, comprehensible, insofar as it can be comprehended from any distance at all...

I love him for doing it, for being committed to writing, day after day until he dropped dead. He became a friend to me because he wrote. Through even just the five journals that remain, his legacy lives on, in me, and now you, too, whoever you are reading this...But one could get in big trouble/die for what they write in a journal...

I remember my 9/11 journals: all that heretical shit, chickens roosting, etc...I knew it was compromising, but it was my testimony—nothing I was ashamed of, but nothing I felt like broadcasting, especially under the circumstances and ensuing conditions. But I also grieved. I was living two hours outside of the city at the time, going to community college, but the city was my home, those were my people. I rushed back by the 13th, continuously jotting things down, crying onto my pages as the bus rounded that skyline, gaping hole still pouring out smoke, me and the woman beside me, a stranger, exchanging glances, holding hands, tears filling our eyes...

The next week, in a class I was taking, *Images of America: The Dream and the Nightmare*, our professors asked us to begin keeping a journal. I felt a bit queasy inside: Could I let them read all that crazy shit I'd already been writing? Did I have to? I didn't know them—maybe they worked for the feds?!? Of course I knew it was up to me to hand in whatever I felt comfortable with. I figured I could just “redact” the compromising bits, and only hand in what was safe: **the funny stuff:** t-shirts, “I survived 9/11” being sold by 9/15; **the sad stuff:** mourning with hundreds of people in Union Square; flyers posted all over the city: “Have you seen...?”; **the details:** choking on smoky air the whole week; trucks full of firemen returning from ground zero day after day, covered in dust, empty hands, hearts heavy in their eyes; signs posted, “NY We love you more than ever”...

But handing in my internal dialogs about how and why it might have all happened?

Those particular professors became my friends so I handed in every damning bit of it; but I had to think about it first. I had to get to know them, to question them. I had to decide how much was safe to share—it's no light matter handing your innermost thoughts over to outsiders...

Still, at least I wrote it all down fresh, because now it's a matter of historical record, mine and others, for better and worse...

At this point, with all the journals I've kept, I have much material to mine, to pass on: stories, dreams, ponderings, understandings, details and events that I've either forgotten or re-remembered....

And all along I've had the pleasure of writing just how I want to write, with no one looking over my shoulder telling me how I can or can't, or to stop using ellipses, or to stop using slang (what is slang, anyways?). It's habit now; I'm comfortable with a pen in my hand, fingers on the keyboard, comfortable letting my own words, my own thoughts flow out onto a page. It helps me to write everything else I ever have to write without sounding like somebody I don't know, and that's what I like most: It's all in my own voice, and I know it when I read it. It's my voice, my story, my way, written out to that unknown somebody—maybe to you, whomever you are...