

# Taking Things Personally: Women, Journal Writing, and Self-Creation

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*Women come to writing. . . simultaneously with self-creation.*

—Carolyn Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life*

*For women, the journal has been one of the few places in which they could be writers and women, without paradox.*

—Cynthia Gannett, *Gender and the Journal*

*Writing has been the constancy through which I have reinvented myself after every uprooting.*

—Mary Catherine Bateson, *Composing a Life*

Journal writing is not only a process of self-recording, self-exploration, and self-expression, although it is all of these. It is also a channel of *self-creation*. We create ourselves in the very process of writing about ourselves and our lives. Keeping a personal journal is a powerful and effective means of deconstructing our assigned roles as women in a patriarchal society and the numerous discourses that fill our eyes and ears from every direction. Through reflecting on the concrete reality of our own immediate experience, and through giving voice to our perceptions, intuitions, and “felt sense” of things, we create ourselves anew.<sup>1</sup> Often, we bring this new and ever-evolving self into the external world surrounding us, in turn, and a dynamic relationship between the diarist's inner and outer worlds ensues.<sup>2</sup>

In this discussion of conceptual, personal, and experiential perspectives on women's diaries, I want to suggest that the personal journal constitutes a literary hybrid of lived experience and creative expression unique among forms of personal narrative. Frequently, journal writing has

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no explicit goal save that of deepened self-understanding; yet, paradoxically, it may yield many significant benefits. It can encourage self-awareness and exploration of one's private and public selves, thereby expanding one's sense of identity; allow for cathartic expression without fear of censorship or recrimination; provide a safe testing ground for questions and half-formed thoughts and insights; stimulate creativity and the flow of ideas by removing the fear of premature critical judgment; and build confidence through the gradual emergence and evolution of the diarist's written voice. Finally and perhaps most fundamentally, the very process of rendering her experience into language prompts the journal writer to take herself, her life, her experience, and her written voice seriously. Thus, in significant ways, journal writing can empower the writer.

The personal journal may serve as the intermediate space in which private and public, personal and political, individual and social, experiential and conceptual concerns meet and intersect. "The personal is political" has long been a basic tenet of feminist thought, one that is borne out by many women's journals.<sup>3</sup> For, in its very specificity, a woman's diary may provide a more powerful witness to the existence and effects of sexism, racism, and the many other forms of institutionalized oppression than any "objective," more public account could accomplish. (For example, it is one thing to read about the latest debate concerning reproductive rights in the newspaper; it is another to be faced with making a decision about one's own body and to consider one's alternatives in a journal entry.)

I am not suggesting that journal writing can heal, cure, or resolve the many forms of oppression and injustice that women individually and collectively witness, experience, and too often perpetrate on those around us; neither am I suggesting a retreat into inner realms at the cost of social awareness or action. However, the personal journal does hold subversive potential. It can provide a safe channel of thinking and creating one's life beyond the boundaries and terms that society deems appropriate to female selfhood and behavior in a given historical epoch. It may also serve as a mirror that reflects the radical discrepancies between the "truths" of the public realm (for "truths," read the prevailing perspectives of those who hold power) and the actual daily experience of everyone else: women and all so-called minorities (a misnomer of course, because in reality it is the privileged perspective that is itself the minority viewpoint). As Louise DeSalvo says in her study of Virginia Woolf: "In its most radical manifestation, a diary is a potential historical time bomb; it lies in waiting until it explodes misapprehensions about the past, misconceptions about the role of women or other outsider groups in history, misrepresentations about how a particular life was lived" (236-37).

Perhaps one way to demonstrate the important potential for self-creation in journal writing is to consider, for a moment, the differences between the journal and autobiography. Traditional autobiography always entails an abstract retrospective construction of the autobiographer's life; it is an account of how the writer arrived at her or his present station in life, which itself carries the subtle implication that she knew where she was going or, even more basically, that he realized that he was on a path. In an article entitled "The Female Self Engendered: Autobiographical Writing and Theories of Selfhood," Shari Benstock points out that in traditional "White-Male-Western-Bourgeois" autobiography, "the fabric of the narrative appears seamless, spun of whole cloth. The effect is magical—the self appears organic, the present the sum total of the past, the past appears as an accurate predictor of the future" (10).

In contrast to autobiography's teleological perspective, the personal journal reflects the writer's ongoing struggle to find and name her path and is, at the same time, both a record of her journey and the journey itself. While the autobiographer attempts to recreate the unique texture of her life in retrospect and in the light of her current greater understanding, the journal writer writes in the midst of living her life, asking, among other questions, "Who am I?" and "How am I living my life?" Unlike the autobiographer, she does not know the outcome of her daily concerns, the resolution of issues urgently before her at the time of writing, or whether she will ever find answers to the questions she asks. Indeed, I would suggest that the very process of reflecting on and articulating these concerns affects her experience of day-to-day living, and cumulatively, the very shape and texture of her life.

Journal writing, I would argue, is inherently a form of feminist practice.<sup>4</sup> With its emphasis on everyday life and the human connections that embed us in community, its fluid and all-encompassing thematic outlines, its seamless interweaving of life and art, and its concrete integration of inner and outer experience, the personal journal may indeed be a quintessential form of feminist writing, manifesting characteristics integral to feminist process and epistemology. Journal writing is holistic, inclusive and integrative, self-reflective and process-oriented, and concerned with the concrete experience of the individual woman (see Hogan). Let me dwell briefly on several of these characteristics.

Journal writing—as activity and as ongoing text—is *holistic* in the sense that it permits the diarist to explore an overall bodily awareness that does not partition thoughts from feelings, or feelings from sensations and intuitions. Yet the journal is no *simple* whole. A useful definition of holistic process is given by the physicist and philosopher David Bohm, writing about the organic principle of order underlying natural phenomena. Bohm states, "Each part grows in the context of the whole, so that it does not exist independently, nor can it be said that it merely 'interacts' with

others, without itself being essentially affected in this relationship" (173). While Bohm is speaking here of the findings of modern science, his words are clearly relevant to feminist notions of process and, particularly, to what I have described as the holistic quality of journal writing.<sup>5</sup> The journal does consist of fragments (or "parts"), but of fragments that share an organic relatedness, rising as they do out of the writer's bodily experience. More than any other mode of writing, diaries manifest a close connection between the text and the diarist's body. This connection is the source both of the journal's wholeness and of its fragmentation. The journal gives the appearance of being fragmented since, far from being a "finished product," it is an open structure with many loose ends. Yet these "ends," being interwoven in the organic manner noted by Bohm, are one and inseparable. It is in this sense that the journal text is holistic; it is both fragmented and whole. Himani Bannerji makes a similar point in reflecting on the difficulty of translating Bengali experience, memory, and language into English. She writes, "A whole new story has to be told, with fragments, with disruptions, and with self-conscious and critical reflections. . . a form which is both fragmentary and coherent. . . [one which is] moving towards a fragmented whole" (40).

Journal writing is inclusive and integrative. Rebecca Hogan makes an important distinction here, when she states, "Diaries are not so much inclusive because they contain *everything* from a given day, as they are inclusive in the sense that they do not privilege 'amazing' over 'ordinary' events, in terms of scope, space, or selection" (103). The diary integrates dimensions of the writer's life that might otherwise remain separate: fragments and patchwork pieces of experience that when juxtaposed with each other and interwoven in the narrative, reveal their meaning.

It also challenges the arguably artificial barrier between writing as self-therapy and conceptual writing, or writing as "thinking on paper." Cynthia Gannett makes this point in the following passage from her illuminating, recently published study *Gender and the Journal: Diaries and Academic Discourse*. She writes, "We have been trained to make the common misguided assumption that therapeutic writing, writing to heal, is unrelated to writing to know and that it has no place in the academy." To the contrary, Gannett says, "Writing to heal and writing to know, to become a self capable of knowing, are necessarily correlated, particularly for marginalized groups like women, whose oppression has been linked directly with sexual and discursive violence" (204).

A final parallel between feminist epistemology and journal writing is their common emphasis on concrete experience as the basis of knowledge. What could be more concrete than a written account of an individual woman's inner life: her personal experiences, thoughts, emotions, reflections, fantasies, and imaginary lives—recorded in her own handwriting in the notebook of her choice? In her introduction to *A Day at a Time*, Margo

Culley notes that ideally we would have the manuscript itself in hand when reading a journal, in order to experience its material aspects: the paper on which it is written, possible enclosures, fluctuations in handwriting, sketches, diagrams, and anything else that reveals the journal writer's personality and experience (14-15). When this is possible, the link between diarist and reader is a tangible one.

Having touched on some preliminary theoretical issues concerning women's diaries, let me turn now to the concrete experience of journal writing—my own and others'—whence these issues arise. The remaining sections of this essay focus respectively on my own journal writing of more than 25 years, my use of journals in the college classroom, and finally, the women's journal workshops that I have been conducting since 1990. I would like to close by pointing out several promising directions for further inquiry into women's journals.

### **PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES: MY OWN JOURNAL WRITING**

I began keeping a journal when I was about 11 years old. I bought myself a five-year diary with lock and key and hid it among my mother's lingerie. This was also approximately the time I first read Anne Frank's *Diary*, but I do not remember whether that was the catalyst for my own writing or not. I do remember that I wrote to an imaginary friend called Nicole and that I stopped writing briefly after I discovered that my mother was reading my diary. In retrospect, I'm sure a psychologist would say there was something unconsciously intentional in my entrusting my diary to my mother, with its grievances and complaints confidentially recorded. I didn't think she would read it, and when she confronted me with some of my own feelings in a way that showed me she had betrayed my trust, I removed it from her care and decided journal writing was dangerous business. (It is interesting that quite a few of the women in my journal workshops who have kept journals in the past stopped as a result of having had their privacy invaded.)

This did not stop me for long, however. I soon began to write in inconspicuous school notebooks aptly called "scribblers," which I made sure to mistle and hide away. Since then I have always kept a journal. I don't know whether anyone has read what I have written over the years; if so, it was without my permission. What I have shared voluntarily consists mainly of dream entries, which I read aloud to my life partner.

In a rash moment about ten years ago, I tore up and threw out my earliest diaries and journals (about five years' worth of consistent writing) in a fit of impatience, frustration, and probably shame over the adolescent I once was. What I have left begins in 1969, when I was 16 years old.

Since then, the longest silence between entries is about three weeks. I never had the sense that I had to write every day, so the entries might run every day for five or six days, followed by nothing for three or four days and then another period of writing. Over the years, I have written in every possible kind of bound and unbound book and notebook and on looseleaf paper inserted into binders large and small. There are at least 70 volumes now, including several three-inch spiral binders containing about 500 pages of writing.

At some point in my early twenties, I came to realize that there were not too many people out there who shared this curious preoccupation with plumbing the depths of their psyches and lives through journal writing. I longed for a journal writing community of some kind, or even a few kindred spirits with whom to discuss the whole process, perhaps over a cup of cappuccino. Journal workshops were almost unheard of in the 1970s, but Vancouver had many cafés where one could buy an espresso or café laté and write undisturbed for an hour or two. Since then, I have written in cafés across Canada and the United States, Mexico, England, Europe, Israel, and Egypt. I have also managed to create the journal writing community I missed back then, in the form of the Women's Journal Workshop, which I shall discuss in the final section of this paper.

As anyone who has kept a journal over time knows, it is almost impossible to describe the role it comes to play in one's life. It has clearly been the single most consistent and stable factor in my life, and it largely defines who I am and have become and how I think of myself. If I had to stop writing now for some reason, it would feel like losing a limb. In these 25 years, my journal has been not only the one constant presence in my life (superseding friends and lovers, family and workplace) but also the most sensitive measure of my progress on life's journey. In its pages I have rejoiced, sorrowed, complained, reasoned, raged, argued, celebrated, reflected, and thought out loud. In my journal, I have written about hopes and fears, goals and aspirations, dreams and nightmares. I have also written stories, poems, songs, prayers, outlines of novels, ideas for my two dissertations, dreams, letters (both sent and unsent), every imaginable kind of list— from Christmas presents given and received to weight gained and lost and regained. I kept special travel journals whenever I took a long trip and recorded my thoughts, my feelings, and my observations of life in exotic places or perhaps, at least equally, of myself in exotic places. I planned one-month goals, one-year, five-year, and ten-year goals. I read Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* and Proggoff's *At a Journal Workshop* and experimented with keeping three, four, and five journals at once, eventually returning to one. I dialogued with other journal writers: Anaïs Nin, Simone de Beauvoir, Käthe Kollwitz, Virginia Woolf, May Sarton, Etty Hillesum, and many others. And so my journal

has become as integrally a part of me as the color of my eyes and the shape of my hands.

The following entry from my journal, written several years ago, demonstrates the typical interweaving and synchronicity among the events of daily life, reading material, and dream life that journal writing captures:

Back in New York. The night I actually arrived, I felt very emotional, ostensibly about my mother and my strange identification with her. I'm sure there was lots else going on as well, however. I felt the sadness and tragedy and grief of Mom's life—of always being in pain and identifying with her illness more than almost anything else. I felt it very intensely and, again, I'm not even sure why. I feel as if I am always trying to think of ways to make her happy and of course I really can't do much, and that helplessness is the worst of it.

I'm reading Marion Woodman's *Addiction to Perfection: The Still Unravished Bride* right now, and really loving it. It deals mainly with mother-daughter bonds, healthy and unhealthy, and a great deal of it really fits me—with regard to my relationship to Mom. I've been so quick to be in tears about it, lately—also Sarah's ongoing grief over her mother's death, Margaret's grief over Andy's death, etc. Maybe grief is the most appropriate emotion for the world to experience at this point in time. There is certainly so much to be grieving about.

It also ties into my relationship with Sarah in some ways that I can't figure out, quite. Steve reminded me of my sense of not really getting attention from either her or Mom because both are so completely caught up with their own lives and needs that they can't focus on someone outside themselves. (My grammar reveals how I have conflated them into one person!) I'm sure that there are all kinds of dynamics here that I am not even aware of. That night I also had a strange dream in which I was walking with Sarah when she suddenly felt very dizzy and faint, and I had to support her and hold her up and try to get her somewhere where she could lie down. There was also a man (a younger one) hanging around and prepared to give a hand but helpless, not knowing what to do. So I told him (a little impatiently) to help me carry Sarah to a couch where she could lie down. [Written in red ink after rereading the dream: Interesting—this reminds me of my feeling of Sarah being so male-identified that she drains support from me in order to sustain her relationships with men—Peter, for example, even though she doesn't seem to get much from him.] Then suddenly (as I remember it now) I felt that Mom also needed me and how could I take care of them both at once? I felt torn.

It can't be coincidental that I have this dream after that lengthy discussion with Steve. I wonder what else my dreams may tell me over time.

I include this entry because its overlapping components, its reflective dimension, and its parenthetical modifications and afterthoughts demonstrate the integrative quality of journal writing. Thinking and feeling are interwoven; waking and dream lives shed light on each other.

Over the years, my journal has frequently provided a safe space in which to explore the defining transitions in my life and a bridge between changing selves. I grew up in a working-class family of devout German and Czech Baptist immigrants to Canada. After high school graduation, I attended a religious college for two years and then had a drawn-out existential crisis that eventually led to a painful and traumatic separation from the church and the tightly knit community I had been born into and with which I had identified.

During the years leading up to this break, journal writing enabled me to live in the tension between what I felt I should be and what I felt I was. It was my way of keeping my self, a self that was continually in dialogue with the assumptions and dictates of fundamentalist Christianity, intact. (It was very interesting to me that Gannett cites parents on the political right and the Christian right as the most violent critics of the use of student journals in the classroom, on the grounds that teachers are thereby "manipulating children through a series of invasive 'psychological headgames' that threaten the privacy of the family. . .[and encouraging] the questioning of traditional values" (35, 39). No doubt if my own parents had realized that my journal writing was so subversive, they would have tried to put a stop to it!)

For three or four years in my early and mid twenties I was in acute crisis regarding my spiritual life and the effect that this decision was having on my parents. Guilt. Terrible conflict. Vague thoughts of suicide. During these years, my journal was where I could pour out all of the anguish: my fear, anxiety, guilt, and uncertainty about the future. Sometimes I would wake up in the middle of the night in terror and write until I felt calmer.

The other major transition of roughly the same time involved a dramatic weight loss and what it meant to be a "regular sized," conventionally attractive young woman after twenty years of being plump, overweight, and as I saw it, unattractive. I had anticipated that this would mean pure happiness; instead, I was full of ambivalence about being suddenly the object of considerable sexual attention. Those were the years during which I wrote a 500-page journal in a period of six months, most of it repetitive, extremely narcissistic, and not that interesting in retrospect; however, it served an essential therapeutic purpose at the time.

So, in two very essential ways, I was forced to ask myself during those years, *Who am I?* and *What does it mean?* Journal writing was the unifying



impulse and the effort to hold the fragments of myself together until they could begin to reintegrate. In a very concrete sense, the journal helped me to *create myself anew* in this period of my life. And in the end, it turned out that "Marlene after" was not all that radically different in most ways from "Marlene before"; before loss of faith, weight, and virginity, in fairly accurate order of importance. Several close friends were loving witnesses to my evolving identity, and my academic studies suggested other possible structures of meaning in life. But it was through journal writing, above all, that I experienced and supported the essential, questioning core of my being.

My journal has been my travel companion in a literal sense as well. During the past two decades, I have done a fair amount of traveling and have often found myself writing both in transit and on arrival. I always write in airports and airplanes, and on trains when possible. Flying, in particular, is very conducive to casting a slightly estranged eye on one's life and viewing it from a different perspective, figuratively as well as literally. Journal writing has served as a way of coping with emotional jet lag; that is, the time it takes my psyche and soul to loosen the ties of one existence and begin to feel the gentle gravitational pull of the new one.

While writing my doctoral dissertation at the University of London, on the (East) German writer Christa Wolf, I traveled back and forth between England and Germany quite frequently to do research and realized at some point that I had unconsciously evolved a kind of settling-in ritual: namely, on arrival, even before unpacking my bags, I would walk through the town, bring back some flowers and a loaf of bread, put the flowers in a glass jar, and take out my journal and write. This was my way of both easing the transition from one country and language into another and fixing myself in the new one. These trips provided the occasion for other insights as well. The following entry dates back to 1985, when I was living in a dormitory while doing research in Marbach, Germany:

I was thinking again that wherever two or more women meet, they form a community. One brings out the coffee or the wine, another brings the biscuits, another a tablecloth and a candle, another proposes an outing together—it's amazing but it seems to happen all the time. I find that where there are three women, there is a community; where there are three men, there are three lonely individuals...I still want to do something with this idea about women and communities. Women seem to "commune" in order to share, whether their experiences or physical resources. Men get together for external purposes: war, sport, business. Always, as they say, "goal-oriented."

Many other dimensions of my life permeate my journal writing. I have often used (and still do) my journal as a place to reflect on my intermittent

dissatisfaction concerning my relationships with other people and to puzzle out the possible roots of this feeling, as is evident here:

Another thought: What would it be like to feel so centered in myself and so aware of my inner resources that I didn't actually need other people? That I didn't feel disappointed or let down when someone fails to follow up with the promised phone call or when still another social occasion turns into very self-centered rambling on the other person's part? What if I could look at that person—whether it be Hannah or Sarah or Kate or even Janet—and not need them to be anything but what they are? There are many thoughts going through my mind right now—tying into these questions. Wouldn't "not needing" anything from people change the whole quality of the relationship? (As Alice Koller also discovered.) It seems to me that I would be more relaxed—and either interested or not, but maybe not ruled so much by my own ego's needs, etc. Maybe there would simply be a way of deciding or feeling that I either do or do not feel like spending time with a certain person—but not so much based on whether my own needs might be addressed in the relationship. That would probably still end up with me deciding I don't want to see Hannah anymore—but (to the extent that I do feel bitterness), it might dissipate the emotional undertones of the decision.

Let's try that on for size. Would it be simply fooling myself to say I just don't find her that interesting or that compelling a person to spend time with? What was it I wanted from her anyway? Did I really expect her to be the "wiser older woman," etc.? There is no question that I was deeply insulted that she sees Steve as the "brains" and me as the "pretty partner" in our relationship, despite the fact that I was primary author of our joint article. Is that enough for me to write her off? I guess it is.

More often than not, the journal has been where I first explored connections among the many dimensions and facets of my own life and of the intricate social network in which I participate. It has also served me as an intellectual tool, for this was where I "thought out loud" about my undergraduate essays and, later, my two dissertations, often to the extent of writing partial drafts of essays and chapters in my journal, later to be transferred to my academic files. (I even had the uncanny realization while writing my dissertation that I was so deeply immersed in Christa Wolf's literary style and voice that I was beginning to echo them in my journal writing!)

Since I began teaching in 1985, I have used my journal to reflect on pedagogical issues and to express my sense of the excitement and frustration of teaching. Convinced that journal writing could prove to be a valuable classroom tool as well, I began to require my students to keep journals in 1989.

## JOURNALS IN THE CLASSROOM

For the past four years I have assigned class journals in the classes I teach at the College of Staten Island, City University of New York.<sup>6</sup> In the required first-year composition course, the journals can be as personal as the students like. I usually hand out a page of suggested topics for the times when they feel stuck, topics ranging from “What memory from your childhood is the most vivid?” to “Imagine that you won ten million dollars in the state lottery a year ago—how has your life changed since then?” In addition, students can bring in anything that is currently of importance in their lives, from personal or relationship issues and concerns about studies or career to national or world events. I tell them at the beginning that if they write something which they would rather not have me read, they can either seal it so that I know not to read it or remove it altogether. Because this assignment is generally new to the students and there are always questions such as “How much and how often and how many pages do you want us to write?” I suggest that they write for a minimum of thirty minutes twice a week.

In all other classes, I assign “reader-response” journals, making it clear that students can relate the material read and discussed in class to their own lives in any way they like. Because I don’t generally give exams, I require at least one journal entry for each topic or assigned reading selection, and the students can also write entries about their perception of small-group discussions, class dynamics, and how they feel the class is going in general. These free-form journal entries provide me with a more accurate impression of each student’s level of engagement with the course material than quizzes and exams would afford.

I collect all class journals at least once around midterm, read them and make brief comments, then hold short individual conferences with each student to return them and answer any questions. At the end of the semester, I collect them again (minimum of 25 entries, each representing 30 minutes of continuous writing), read them rather more carefully, make occasional comments, and assign a grade based on how seriously they carried out the assignment and the depth of their engagement with the course material. Since the mark they receive (25 percent of their overall grade for the class) is not based on the quality of the writing, it frequently happens that a student who has an average of B- or B on her/his class essays can raise that grade by getting an A for the journal. In fact, I tell the students that this is the easiest part of the course work because they don’t have to produce brilliant or even good writing; they just have to do it.

I am constantly amazed by students’ class journals. Recently, a young woman came up to me after the first day of a first-year composition class and told me she was worried about how she would fare, having failed the

college writing assessment test six times before finally passing it on her seventh try. "Am I going to have problems with this course?" she asked. I must say honestly that my heart sank a little at the prospect, but I replied that anyone with as much determination as she obviously had would have as good a chance as anyone at passing the course. She struggled and worked hard. With considerable rewriting, she got all Cs on her class essays; however, her journal got an A. She had done much more than the required amount of writing and her entries, while lacking in elegance, showed her consistent thoughtful reflection on the material we had covered in the course.

The nature of my comments in student journals varies, and I continue to think about what their function should be as I negotiate the delicate balance between active engagement and noninterference in students' writing. As much as possible, I avoid judging students' experience; however, I do tell each class at the outset that I will challenge statements that are blatantly racist, sexist, or in any other way prejudicial. Looking back, this has taken the form of "What about. .?," and "Have you thought about. .?" questions in the margins of student journals. Occasionally a student writes, "These class journals are so long that I wonder if Professor Schiwy actually reads them." Then, of course, I am compelled to respond! If the journal writer wonders about other books by an author or filmmaker she likes, I make notes in the margins of any information I have. If she questions me directly or indirectly about my own life or experience, I write a brief reply. On several occasions when a student has expressed great emotional distress or a sense of being unable to cope with her life, I have indicated that I am available for a private discussion if she would like to speak to me.

One particular incident that comes to mind occurred about a year ago. In a second-semester college writing class, a Haitian student in her mid-twenties wrote in her journal that she felt herself abused by the aunt and uncle with whom she was living through force of circumstance, to the point of being screamed at, and of not getting enough to eat. Because she was no longer a child, I hesitated before commenting. Finally, I simply wrote, "You seem to be in a lot of distress. If you would like to talk about it, please feel free to come by during my office hours or leave me a note." In the meantime, I made some discreet inquiries at the college concerning possible assistance in a situation like this and learned that, at the very least, there were counselors to whom she could go and that she could get vouchers for meals in the cafeteria. She came by shortly thereafter and we spoke at length, though our talk was interspersed with long pauses and silences. She appeared, not surprisingly, conflicted over whether and to what extent she wanted to discuss her situation, and I suggested that while I was willing to talk with her, she might find it easier to discuss it

with a counselor. I also told her about the food vouchers that were available, but she was diffident, perhaps embarrassed. Since then, she has come by several times, and while we have had interesting chats about her courses and career plans and my own current projects, she has never again referred to anything discussed in our initial conversation. She looks healthy and well, so I have not found it appropriate to ask either.

I have never experienced a situation like this with a male student. In fact, an interesting if perhaps not surprising gender-related pattern emerges in class journals. Although there are always one or two exceptions, the men in the class tend to focus on external events, circumstances, and crises, while the women use the journal writing assignment as a chance to focus on their inner experience of things: their feelings about their primary relationships, satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their personal lives, and the feeling tones that accompany the external events of their lives.

Since these have been predominantly evening and weekend classes to date, the students—both men and women—have been older than the average day student, with many women in their twenties, thirties, and forties, often mothers of small or adolescent children. Not surprisingly, one of the most common themes in their journals has been the sense of not having enough time or energy for both family caretaking and their studies (which are usually very important to them at this point in their lives) and the accompanying feelings of guilt and pressure. Very often, among the last entries they write is a summary of what the journal writing has meant. Occasionally, someone has said that at times it was just one more task in an already overcrowded day; however, more often they have commented that the journal writing was the one time they felt justified in taking half an hour or forty minutes to dwell on their own feelings. Thus the journal writing obviously had a cathartic function in their lives. Also, many who in the beginning had expressed anxiety about not being able to write for thirty minutes, found that they were losing track of time and writing more as the journal writing found its own momentum and became a way of integrating the many fragments and dimensions of their lives. It is interesting that as a rule, even those women who experienced the journal assignment as a chore at times wrote more than the required amount, which leads me to think that perhaps they were getting something out of it that they were not aware of or could not put into words.

Since my focus here is women and journals, I will not go into detail about male students' responses to the journal assignment other than to say that my experience very much corroborates Cinthia Gannett's analysis of her male students' use of class journals. For most of them, she observes, the journal

seemed to function, at least in part, in a powerful and useful way for focussing, managing, and releasing pressure from academic and social responsibility. The journal was often used by men as a daybook, a place to track and monitor activities and assignments. . . . All the men included important and detailed entries about sports.

She adds that while they occasionally alluded to personal relationships of various kinds, they “tended not to write extended or reflective entries on those topics” (163). Gannett also found that the men tended to write, on the average, about one-third fewer pages than the women. This has been my experience with student journals as well.<sup>7</sup>

I want to summarize briefly several benefits that keeping class journals—whether personal or reader-response—seems to hold for students and their writing. I have already mentioned the obvious therapeutic function of the personal journal, especially for women students. Of equal importance, however, is the reader-response journal, which helps the student relate the texts she is reading to her own life and explore the parallels between her personal experience and literary representations of similar experiences.<sup>8</sup> The journal reinforces the integral relationship among living, experiencing, thinking, reading, and writing. It encourages her to articulate her own opinions and interpretations of class material and, indeed, to realize that she does bring *her own perspective* to its interpretation.

### THE WOMEN'S JOURNAL WORKSHOP

The Women's Journal Workshop was created as a result of my own desire for a journal writing community. To date, the participants have ranged in age from their midtwenties to their late sixties and have been predominantly professional and working-class women. The level of education has ranged from women who were considering returning to college after having dropped out of high school to those with master's degrees. The women have been mostly white Americans with diverse ethnic backgrounds, and there have been several African Americans as well. Quite a few, like myself, are children of immigrant parents and the first generation of college graduates. To introduce some other voices here, I will include several comments made by participants concerning their workshop experiences.

The workshops differ in significant ways from the college English class as a setting for journal writing. While the differences will become obvious in the following discussion, let me begin by summarizing some of the most important ones. Most crucial is that the workshops are open only to women and that group size is never more than a dozen (compared with English classes of 30 to 35 or more students). The workshops are more

relaxed and informal; often held in my living room, with music, refreshments, and for the one-day workshops, lunch. Unlike college English, registration is voluntary and there is no homework or obligatory work of any kind. The extent and quality of participation are quite different from what I encounter in my English classes; interaction among participants is more intimate, and there is a greater degree of self-revelation and a wider range of emotional expression.

As the workshop facilitator, I also disclose more of myself than I do as the authority figure in the classroom. Because the pressure to achieve certain ends, to evaluate written work and assign grades is off here, and because women come to the workshop precisely because they value this more personal way of relating, I can be more fully myself and channel my energy differently than I would in a classroom in which at least half the students are taking the class to meet a requirement rather than by choice.

My intention is that the workshops be experiential, holistic, interactive, and supportive. No two are the same, because it is the particular constellation of women participating that gives each workshop its characteristic feeling. By experiential, I mean that a workshop is not merely a series of writing exercises on introspective and personal topics but a process of discovery of oneself and of oneself in relationship to others in the group, as well as an occasion to explore one's written voice. Given the personal, often emotional, and sometimes traumatic content of the women's writing, there can be sadness, tears, laughter, and the "aha" experience of hearing one's own feelings articulated by another woman.

The workshop is interactive; women listen and respond to each other, not to give advice or constructive criticism, but to witness and support each other's attempt to articulate the dimensions and possibilities of her life.<sup>9</sup> One woman described her experience as follows:

I was given support and help from the other women in the workshop in accepting the nameless and scary places in my heart. There was an incredible healing energy that occurred when women were reading their work aloud and a mutual shock of recognition would run through each woman listening. The workshop gave me a sense of perspective that I lacked previously, because I discovered that although the variations in an individual's life are formed by their unique personalities, all of us share common needs, experiences, and ideas.<sup>10</sup>

With regard to interpersonal group relations, I am using "holistic" here in David Bohm's sense of "parts" (group members) that are "essentially affected" by each other. On the level of the individual writer, I want the workshop to provide a time and space in which she can experience herself and her life as a meaningful whole rather than as a collection of separate roles and functions, a place where heart, mind, body, soul, and spirit all

receive their due, where nothing is outlawed. To that end, I also make the environment—frequently my living room—as rich and evocative as possible, with comfortable chairs and cushions, a variety of soft music, a book table, bulletin board, related handouts and bibliographies, flowers, homemade cakes, cookies and muffins, and a wide variety of coffees and teas. My goal is to create an environment that is both stimulating and relaxing at the same time.

The workshops are self-regulating in terms of how much time is spent writing and discussing. I do my best to gauge the group sense of how much writing time and talking time are desired, and I also ask that anyone who prefers more of one or the other let me know. There is no pressure on anyone to speak or to share or read anything unless she wants to. There is nothing that is “out of bounds” as far as the content of writing or discussion is concerned, and I only intervene if someone seems to be in danger of taking the discussion too far afield or of launching into volatile material that might be better worked on with a psychotherapist. When I first began to offer workshops, I made a conscious decision not to censor any kind of material but simultaneously not to delve into severe psychic trauma that I was not trained to deal with. Although the issue of what does or does not require “professional” attention is a difficult one for many feminists, it would be unethical, I felt, to encourage a journal writer to pursue painful memories in a way that would open up wounds without providing protection for her. This issue has come up only once to date.

I also see the workshop as process-rather than goal-oriented. That is, insofar as there is a “goal,” it is not to write something in the hope of eventual publication. The journey of self-discovery undertaken in journal writing is itself the only goal.<sup>11</sup>

The workshop is not a “course” as such, and I don’t instruct participants concerning the mechanics of writing. When someone has occasionally asked me for advice on how to “improve” something, I decline. I do occasionally offer very general suggestions; for example, if a woman says that she tends to write only when she is sad or depressed, that she try writing when she feels exhilarated; or if she writes only in perfectly formed and polished sentences, that she try writing on the basis of free association and see what happens. We discuss such issues as self-censorship and the feeling many have that our writing should be a certain way: logical, coherent, grammatically perfect.

Since many workshop participants are women in their thirties and forties with children, I see our sessions as a place where they can have some sustained time and space for themselves, and where they can, ideally, be nurtured by each other and by me. Since there are no “requirements” of any sort, there is minimal performance anxiety and each woman’s energy



can, one hopes, be used creatively instead. One participant has written, "As one who must negotiate solitude, participation in the journal workshop is essential. Not only does it provide me with a much needed 'room of one's own,' but it helps to restore the 'I' that is often smothered by my mommy-wife mode." Another woman writes:

I am in a time in my life where I need to find time for myself and it seems that writing is the route I am choosing. I've been tackling or, better yet, climbing the boulders that are in my path to reach that mountaintop, and writing was one of those that stopped me from my journey. I no longer fear it. I just need to continue with perseverance.

The powerful healing potential of journal writing is evident in the following passage, written by a woman who lost her mother a week before participating in a workshop:

I came to journal writing a fractured person, holding within a frame of flesh and bone the shattered pieces of a grieving soul. The workshop exercises put me in touch with my inner self—the self I rarely reached to and only minimally acknowledged. Over time, the ability and desire to write in my journal—of colors, visions, dreams and even of nightmares—became the cushioning filler against which my broken parts could rest and eventually set. I was able to feel whole again—if only for isolated moments, and with increasing regularity. . . . What a remarkable feeling—to know that even if I forget who I am, my journal will always remember, speak for me, to me, tell me where I have been and where I have wanted to go.

My hope is that the workshop will "empower" the women who participate by encouraging them to find themselves interesting and to take themselves seriously.<sup>12</sup> When repression is lifted, even in a small way, from a woman's inner life, her psychic experience can begin to take its true shape, which is always rich, complex, labyrinthine, and infinitely interesting.

I also stress the importance for workshop participants of listening and bearing witness to each other's lives rather than trying to solve each other's problems. No advice is needed; no solutions are called for. As Sue Atchley Ebaugh has said so beautifully in the 7 January entry of *Each Day a New Beginning: Daily Meditations for Women*, "the greatest gift we can give one another is rapt attention to one another's existence." Here I want to evoke the words of the feminist theologian Nelle Morton, who speaks about "women hearing one another into our own speech" and about the danger of jumping in with our advice instead of helping a woman to hear what she herself is saying (127-28).

As far as registration is concerned, I did not want the cost of the workshop to be prohibitive, so I have kept the fees down, against the better judgment of friends in the business world who explained to me that

people generally believe they get what they pay for and that keeping the fees low could work against me! I have had to weigh this advice against my own sense that I wanted the workshop to be available to women in my own relatively low income bracket. Ultimately, I designed a series of workshops that I myself would feel I could afford to take.

The last point that I want to make about the workshops is that, in sinking deeply into the subterranean layers of our individual psychic lives, it seems that we may reach a layer of greater interrelatedness. There have been moments in the workshops where this connection is palpable. I always think here of Virginia Woolf's beautiful description of the transpersonal dimension of her characters' lives, in *Mrs. Dalloway*: "I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters. The idea is that the caves shall connect and each comes to daylight at the present moment" (65).

### FINAL COMMENTS

Having moved in this paper from some conceptual considerations to the personal and experiential dimensions of journal writing, I would like to end with some ideas concerning possible areas of further inquiry into women's journals. First, the relationship between women's journal writing and creative process bears close study; how does a writer's or artist's journal writing affect her primary artistic work? Second, there is tremendous scope for examining the way "the female self is engendered," to use Benstock's words, through the process of journal writing—both in individual instances and collectively. Third, one could look at the different roles of time, memory, and self-revision in journals and autobiography, especially where one woman has written both (e.g., Virginia Woolf and Lou Andreas Salomé). Fourth, the nature of figurative language in women's journals—the symbols, metaphors, and images that reveal our psychic workings—warrants detailed analysis. Another interesting issue is the effects of editorial shaping, where we know that a 250-page published journal represents only part of the 1500-page-long original manuscript, as in the case of Etty Hillesum's journals. These are only a few possibilities: beyond these suggestions, the field is wide open.

As I said at the outset, I am not claiming that journal writing alone can save the world. What I do feel and believe, however, is that we must be grounded in the specifics of our own experience and be guided by our intuition and felt sense of things. We have to have integrity, in its original sense of wholeness, for our own sake and for the sake of the world, which is suffering every form of fragmentation, repression, schizophrenia, and psychosis, overlaid with thick and heavy denial. We have to describe what we see and experience and how it feels; what we know and how we know

it; and what we envision, for ourselves and for our world. And, both within and beyond the walls of the academy, we have to encourage other women whose voices may be shaky to look for words and sentences to explore and evolve their own voices. We have to "hear ourselves and each other into speech." For all of these ends, journal writing is a powerful channel. And in seeking to achieve them, we engage in nothing less than a process of self-creation.

## Notes

My love and thanks to Steve Rosen, who was my first audience for the lecture from which this essay evolved and who read and offered perceptive comments on subsequent versions.

<sup>1</sup> I am using "felt sense" as defined by Eugene Gendlin: "A felt sense is not a mental experience but a physical one. A bodily awareness of a situation or person or event. An internal aura that encompasses everything you feel and know about the given subject at a given time—encompasses it and communicates it to you all at once rather than detail by detail" (32).

<sup>2</sup> Although I am aware of the distinction that has frequently been drawn between diaries (as records of daily life) and journals (as introspective, self-reflective writing), in actual practice the two terms are more often used interchangeably, and that is how I am using them here. This use is not unprecedented; see, for example, Culley xiii-xiv, Bunkers 17, and Franklin xv. For a detailed analysis of the derivation and use of "diary" and "journal," see Gannett 105-07.

<sup>3</sup> In a recent reformulation, Gloria Steinem adds, "It's time to turn the feminist adage around. *The political is personal*" (17).

<sup>4</sup> Adrienne Rich has referred to the journal as "that profoundly female and feminist genre" (217). See also Cynthia Huff's incisive discussion of the parallels between the diary and feminist criticism.

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Steve Rosen for drawing my attention to David Bohm's work on holistic process, and its relevance to journal writing. See Rosen's *Science, Paradox, and the Moebius Principle: The Evolution of a "Transcultural" Approach to Wholeness*.

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of journal writing in an academic setting, see Gannett's second chapter, entitled "Academic Journals: Panacea or Problem," and her excellent bibliography. See also Ellen Berry and Elizabeth Black, "The Integrative Learning Journal."

<sup>7</sup> One notable exception was a middle-aged man who wrote so prolifically that for the first time in my teaching experience, I could not afford the time to read every sentence of every page he wrote, about 300 pages in one semester. The other remarkable thing about his journal was the fact that although his class essays always contained run-on sentences, comma splices, and sentence fragments—and I had spent several office hours going over his papers with him for this reason—his journal entries were remarkably free of error, and he was not aware of this until I pointed it out to him. The possible reasons for this discrepancy certainly raise intriguing further questions about the process of journal writing that I had not foreseen in giving the assignment.

<sup>8</sup> The use of published journals as texts in literature classes is a fascinating topic in its own right. I have used a number of diary anthologies in women's literature classes with great success; reading other women's diaries proved a useful impetus for students in starting their own class journals. Occasionally, I have used published journals in other courses as well; notably, Etty Hillesum's diaries about her life in Nazi-occupied Holland, in the context of a course called Modern Culture, which included a section on the Holocaust.

<sup>9</sup> I should say here that while I do not see the workshops primarily as group therapy, I did take some Gestalt training in self-awareness and group dynamics in anticipation of the emotional aspects of the workshop. The explicitly interactive dimension of the latter is one of the ways in which the Women's Journal Workshop differs from Progoff's Intensive Journal Workshop method. Over time I have found, as I had suspected I would, and as did Elouise Bell in the course of her journal writing seminar with women, that "the workshop participants wanted very much to hear each other's voices—and their own" (82).

<sup>10</sup> This and the following three short quotes are taken with permission from feedback questionnaires completed by four women who have each attended several workshops: Edie Scheie, Karen Laszlo, Judy Wilson, and Robin Garber-Kabalkin. My thanks to them.

<sup>11</sup> I have actually discouraged some would-be participants who wanted to use the workshop as a forum for writing that they hoped to publish. As it happens, several women have gone on to publish writing that came out of a workshop, but publication certainly is not the goal.

<sup>12</sup> And here I have to say that I find the whole terminology of "power", including the term "empowerment" problematic. I am not sure that these words can be redeemed for feminist purposes, in light of Audre Lorde's statement, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (112).

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