

# Osher Lifelong Learning Institute

## **IN AWE OF THE ORDINARY: OLDER LEARNERS AND THEIR JOURNALS**

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## **Overview and Context**

This article reports research findings from a recent empirical study conducted within the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) at the University of Southern Maine. OLLI is a member-based educational program serving persons aged 55 and over. Courses are non-credit, typically run two hours per week for eight weeks, and are peer taught. The curriculum is predominantly liberal arts in nature. OLLI is the largest (800 members) and oldest (begun in 1997) of 15 lifelong learning institutes in Maine. The Maine programs, in turn, are part of a national movement in elder education in which there are more than 400 institutes across all 50 states.

A unique dimension of OLLI, one that differentiates it from nearly every other lifelong learning institute, is that its mission includes a research agenda. The author of this article and principal investigator of this study is a full time faculty member in USM's College of Education and Human Development (Master of Science in Adult Education

Program) and holds a joint appointment in OLLI as a Senior Research Fellow. The study described here is one of several research investigations that have been conducted at OLLI during the past three years.

### **Brief History of Journal Writing**

The genre of journal or diary writing has a long, albeit unclear history.<sup>1</sup> The practice dates at least as far back as 56 CE when, in China, journals were written and later archived as documents.<sup>2</sup> In the west, the fourth century bishop and theologian, Augustine of Hippo, is often credited with having invented the literary genre of autobiography. St. Augustine's classic work, *Confessions*, represents this prolific thinker's effort to trace his own religious conversion and growth in spirituality and in many places "provides a very early example of diary-like writing."<sup>3</sup>

A well-documented diary-like form created in tenth century Japan was the pillow book, so named because it was placed in the bed chamber or perhaps in drawers of wooden pillows. Written primarily by Heian court ladies, these records incorporated factual accounts, dreams, fantasies, and poetry. In Japan the diary has long been understood and respected as a way of recording history. Within this tradition is the travel diary, categorized by some critics in Japan as a separate genre from the other forms then used. These travel diaries were, in good part, comprised of poetry.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to its earlier Japanese ancestor, the western travel diary is primarily a narrative emphasizing the factual, that is, what the traveler has done and seen. During the European Renaissance such chronicles were often written by privileged young men taking continental tours. In his essay "On Travel," Francis Bacon actually instructed

these men on writing travel diaries, encouraging observation of “the courts of princes, the courts of justice, the churches and monasteries, the walls and fortifications of cities and towns.”<sup>5</sup> In sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europe travel diaries, some published in their diary form, supplied much of the existing information about distant places. These diaries functioned as map supplements to places few others had explored. Thomas Mallon notes that “the earliest travel diaries were kept less for reasons of sentiment than geography; The ship’s log – like the household account and the commonplace book – is one of the forms to which the diary probably owes its murky start.”<sup>6</sup>

While in Europe there was a strong travel diary tradition by the seventeenth century, practice in America had only just begun. Explorers and pioneers often kept journals which were then sent to others who were planning to make a similar journey. A special type of travel diary, the war diary, appeared in the French and Indian Wars (1689 – 1763) and the American Revolution (1775 – 1783). Soldiers, army physicians, civilians, and even prisoners, despite the risk of punishment for doing so, kept war diaries.<sup>7</sup>

Evolving later, but derived from a combination of earlier diary types, is the personal journal. This specific genre emphasizes the self, often in relationship with other people, events, and ideas. Entries were characterized by immediacy and self-reflection. Samuel Pepys' diary, written between 1660 – 1669, is a well-known example.<sup>8</sup> In nineteenth century French diaries, commonly known as “journals intime,” the development was toward greater intensity, self-preoccupation, confession, and passion. Emerging around the time of the French Revolution, the journal intime often questioned traditional values, existing literary forms, government, and even the relationship between the sexes.<sup>9</sup>

By the twentieth century, journal writing had taken hold as a common practice among both professional and non-professional writers. In fact, within the past 100 years the message has become widespread that anybody can write and benefit from keeping a personal journal, not just those who happen to write for a living.<sup>10</sup> There is a wide recognition today that journal writing is a vehicle for self-understanding, self-guidance, expanded creativity, and spiritual development.

### **Journal Writing As A Tool For Learning**

Since the 1980's there has been a burgeoning literature on journals as an educational tool. An important source, especially for the use of diaries in kindergarten through high school education, is *The Journal Book* edited by Toby Fulwiler.<sup>11</sup> This book consists of articles published by primary, middle, and high school teachers representing a wide range of academic fields including English, History, Foreign Language, Mathematics and Physics. These teachers describe ways in which keeping diaries has enhanced the learning of their child and adolescent students. A major theme repeated in these essays is that human beings find meaning in the world by exploring it through language – their own colloquial or “easy talk” language as compared with the more formal language of textbooks and teachers. Numerous types of educational journals are used in education. These include learning logs, interpretive diaries, reader response journals, and dialogue journals in which the student and teacher maintain an ongoing correspondence about issues related to the course of study.

Scholarship has also explored the benefits of journal writing among adult learners. According to Schneider, journal writing is closest to natural speech and adults who keep

journals learn to write without self-consciousness or inhibition. Journal writing also helps to reveal thought processes and can often be an assist to memory.<sup>12</sup> Journals are a safe place to practice writing daily and does not have the restrictions of form that frequently accompanies other types of writing. This informality is one of the reasons why using journals is a popular option in adult basic education and ESOL (English For Speakers of Other Languages) classes.<sup>13</sup>

Additional benefits of writing diaries or journals in adult education include the ability to provide tangible evidence of mental processes, to interact with and expand upon ideas, and to chart the progress of intellectual growth. Journals are especially helpful in enhancing the ability to reflect critically and make meaning of subjects being studied. The internationally renowned adult educator Stephen Brookfield promotes personal writing as an important way to become critically reflective as both students and teachers.<sup>14</sup> In fact, it is hard to imagine the development of critical reflectivity without the assistance of writing. However, despite the interest that has been shown in adult education scholarship over the past twenty years, there has been little published about the relationship between journal writing and aging or, more specifically, the benefits accrued to older students (e.g., age 55 and older) from the practice of keeping a diary.<sup>15</sup>

### **Research Method and Sample**

Fifteen members of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute were interviewed about their past and current journal writing practices. Prior to recruiting participants into the study the entire research protocol was reviewed and approved by the university's Human Subjects/Institutional Review Board. A notice was posted in the OLLI newsletter

inviting members who were experienced journal writers to participate in the study (“experienced” was defined as currently keeping a journal and having a minimum of three years of consistent practice). A semi-structured interview included questions related to personal history with diaries, current practice, perceived benefits, and ways in which journal writing enhanced learning. Interviews averaged 45 minutes in length and were tape recorded. After data were collected, tapes of the interviews were transcribed.

Three sociodemographic variables were collected in this study: gender, age, and educational background. Of the 15 participants, three were men. This represents a smaller ratio of men to women than in the general OLLI membership (28% male). The average age of participants in this research sample was 69.2 years (as compared with 72 years in the general membership). The range of ages in the research sample was 57 – 81. This was a highly educated group with 13 of the 15 individuals holding a college degree and eight also having a graduate degree. This self-selecting sample was even more highly educated than the overall OLLI community (of whose members 36% have bachelors degrees and 32% graduate degrees). The sample included people with backgrounds in nursing, teaching (K – 12 and college), ministry, school guidance, business, library science, public administration, and psychotherapy.

### **The Efficacy of Journal Writing for Older Learners**

During the research interview two questions were asked that elicited responses about the perceived efficacy of keeping a journal: “What benefits do you derive from keeping a journal?” and “How does journal writing help you to learn in both self-directed and formal educational settings?” In most cases these two questions occupied the vast

majority of the time spent in the interview as people became animated about the implications of their writing and were motivated to tell stories and share details.

Combining analysis of the data collected on these two interview questions, four overall themes emerged: learning to cope, fostering curiosity and discovery, facilitating the process of learning, and self-exploration.

That journals enabled people to *learn to cope* was one of the strongest and nearly universal responses to these two interview questions. Thirteen of the fifteen respondents talked in some manner about how their writing served as a form of self-therapy. “It’s almost as though my journal were my psychiatrist,” confided one person. This 62-year old woman later went on to clarify and develop the therapeutic nature of her writing: “Say I’m feeling anger. If I get in touch with that emotion then I can start thinking of the pros and cons of the cause of that anger . . . It’s as if all the words were inside the body and they got all jumbled up and they don’t make sense to me and I write them down and I read them and say, ‘Oh, now I see.’” Another person expressed it differently: “I am able to work things out on paper.”

Another way journal writing helps people to cope is to offer a vehicle for sorting out relationships. Several people talked about how writing helped them to clarify feelings about important relationships in their past (e.g., with one or both parents). In addition to increasing awareness about these relationships in some situations journal writing enabled the process of reconciliation. Others shared stories about current difficulties they are having with a spouse or child and how their regular practice of writing is helping them to achieve perspective and insight.

Another way journals facilitate coping in the lives of older persons is to help them make important personal decisions. Writing down ambivalent thoughts and feelings about a difficult decision and laying the evidence before one's own eyes has long been a benefit of keeping a diary. Participants in this study reported having used their writing to sort out issues as consequential as the timing of retirement, moving to another state, and whether or not to seek reconciliation with a long-estranged family member.

Also, three participants in this study spoke about chronicling their experiences as a way to cope with failing memory. One woman talked about not wanting to lose precious observations or sayings uttered by her grandchildren so writing therefore became an act of preservation . A 75-year old man spoke about writing and memory in the following manner:

I think documenting helps. The reality of the situation is that it sort of implants things in your mind. Memory is a problem. It's a problem for a lot of us. So I write things down. By documenting it fixes it in my mind and there is something there that I can locate if I need it in the future.

Coping with failing memory was also a theme that emerged in the context of conversations with several interviewees about re-reading one's journals. Subjects talked about how much they enjoyed sitting down with old diaries and reviewing events and reflections – even ones that were painful to write at the time – and bringing these past experiences to life in the present. One retired librarian said this about re-reading old

entries: “I found some really important things that I would have lost had I not written them down.”

A second overall theme that emerged from these data is that journal writing *helps to foster curiosity and discovery*. “Journal writing has made me more curious about why things are the way they are,” noted one subject. “When I write things down it helps me to ask, ‘Why is this so or how I can research this further or why do I want to do this?’ In other words, writing helps me to question.” Another person spoke in detail about how her journals, which often included fragments of poetry, fostered her curiosity:

The other day a refugee wanted me to do an interview about getting older, what it’s like . . . I spoke symbolically about climbing a mountain and when you’re young you race but you don’t look around and you’re impatient. And then you slow down in the middle and at the top. Because you’re going slower you look around and you see the light . . . Just putting down ideas on paper forces my mind to examine them more. It’s as though I bring a thought out and put it on the table and feel it, look at it, listen to it more.

Another interviewee, a woman in her late 50’s, spoke about how writing helped to increase her powers of observation. She pays greater attention to herself and the world around her because of journal writing. “I see a word or I see a beautiful picture in a magazine and I will cut it out and glue it into my journal and write about it.” Later in the interview this woman, who remains a practicing psychotherapist, related this beautiful image about a family of cardinals that lives in her yard:

Writing in my journal has helped me to see the wonders of walking out one's front door, you know, letting the day greet me and me greet the day . . . Every single snowstorm I cannot wait for the morning because my cardinal is going to be out in this particular bush. I mean he's just . . . there's nothing but white and this cardinal. And I say to him: "Why can't you be smart like your partner? I mean, she's got a little brown on her. She doesn't have to be quite so flamboyant."

I am constantly in awe of the ordinary.

Thirdly, older journal writers described ways in which their writing *facilitated the process of learning*. This occurred in both the formal context of OLLI classes and in situations that were more independent and self-directed. For some people the fact that they are writing regularly means that they pay closer attention to words. One of the male respondents spoke about his new-found interest in words: "Before I began to write I used to glance over words I read and thought I knew what they meant but probably never did. But now when I see words I don't understand I go to the dictionary . . . Many times I am surprised at the true meaning of what that word is when I thought it meant something else."

Those in the practice of reflective writing often find that they take notes during OLLI classes and later go home and compose diary entries about them. One 76 year old woman has developed the practice of jotting quotes she likes and other ideas during class onto 3 x 5" index cards and before she goes to bed at night reads back through her cards

and writes a journal entry about what these ideas mean to her. Several other people in this research sample mentioned how writing has helped them to read more deeply and effectively. A 69 year old retired high school teacher made the following observation: “I write about what I read. I very often will pose a question as a result of reading a book or article, so my journal will help me to think further about this question . . . Writing is like a sounding board for me. I can think and investigate my reactions to things that I read.” Journal writing also helps people to learn by way of making connections. “My favorite thing is connecting,” exclaimed one interviewee. “When I write I often I find that something connects to something else that I never thought was related. How I love it when that happens!”

In addition, journal writing helps people to learn about the process of writing itself. Three of the fifteen research subjects reported how they have become so interested in writing that they have joined writing groups or otherwise have made a serious study of the practice of writing. They credit their daily – or nearly daily – journals with sparking this interest. Quantity of writing helps to improve quality of writing. The older students in this research sample have learned to become better as well as more confident writers in good part because they write frequently in their journals.

The fourth and final category of response about ways in which journal writing has made an impact on the lives of these OLLI students is that it has enabled them *to explore and learn about themselves*. Nearly every person talked during the interview about journals being a mirror into their own psyche. The discovery of self takes place both in the actual writing and also from going back to read over earlier entries. “It’s amazing how much I have grown” is a common mantra among long-term diarists who review their

personal writing over time. A 62 year old woman put it this way: “My journals tell me not only what my journey has been like but how far I have come. I’ve watched my growth . . . my maturing.”

A unique way journal writing helps people learn about themselves is that it can point out both discontinuities and continuities over time. “I came to realize that I am the same person I was 20 years ago, but I am also very different. I could see the change in myself.” The gerontologist Robert Atchley asserts that the ability to recognize and appreciate salient continuities in values, commitments, and even activities across various stages in the human life span can make important contributions to well-being in later age.<sup>16</sup> A personal journal can be and often is such an internal bridge-building tool for older persons.

The solitude that is required for writing turns out to be another contributing factor in self-discovery. Several individuals talked about the contemplative nature of their writing and how important solitude and quietude were to them in the overall scope of things. “I go back to that concept of quiet time, “ a 68-year old retired minister said. “It’s a way to reflect. I think it is really important in my spiritual life to just stop whatever I’m doing and spend time thinking about my life. Journal writing is a wonderful way to do this.”

Writing helps people work through difficulties and transitions, and what often occurs on the other side of this change is the realization of a new level of consciousness. One interviewee called this process moving from one “spiritual plateau” to another. She characterized the current place in her own journey as being one of a “great spurt of writing” that has edged her along to another level of consciousness. “I am reaching a

deeper understanding of myself. One would think that at my age I would be close to a complete understanding! But I don't think we ever reach that."

## **Conclusions**

This research project conducted at the University of Southern Maine's Osher Lifelong Learning Institute investigated the efficacy of journal writing among 15 older learners. Four overall themes describe the way these older persons (average age of 69.2 years) derived benefit from the practice of journal writing. These are learning to cope with day to day issues, fostering curiosity and discovery, facilitating the process of learning, and self-exploration.

In a contemporary novel about an 81-year-old World War I veteran living in a nursing home, Jonathan Hull speaks these words through his journal-keeping protagonist, Patrick Delaney: "At a certain age you realize that living life is only the first step, then you've got to figure out what to make of the experiences themselves."<sup>17</sup> The centuries-old practice of writing down one's experiences, thoughts and feelings into a journal or diary can be and often is among the most useful tools older persons have to make sense of their experiences.

One of the most compelling challenges of growing old is the quest to derive meaning from many years of lived experience. Experiences do not themselves have significance until a person reflects on, recollects, and interprets them. Writing has long been and continues to be one the most useful tools at the disposal of human beings to do this important reflective and integrative work.

In her highly acclaimed memoir, *The Measure of My Days*, written at the age of 84, the writer, actor, suffragist, and Jungian analyst Florida Scott Maxwell took up what she called her “notebook” and set about the important work of reflection and meaning-making through a personal journal. “Age is a desert of time – hours, days, weeks, years perhaps – with little to do. So one has ample time to face everything one has had, been, done; gather them all in: the things that came from outside, and those from inside. We have time at last to make them truly ours.”<sup>18</sup> The author then went on to make a compelling argument on behalf of the integration and synthesis such reflective writing facilitates: “You only need claim the events of your life to make yourself yours. When you truly possess all you have been and done, which may take some time, you are fierce with reality. When at last age has assembled you together, will it not be easy to let it all go . . . ?”<sup>19</sup>

Learning to cope with life’s daily events and challenges, nurturing a sense of curiosity and discovery, enhancing one’s ability to learn, and exploring the depths of one’s own heart and mind are four ways the 15 older OLLI students interviewed in this study have benefited and derive meaning from their practice of keeping a journal. As one of these people, a 69-year-old retired teacher, commented: “I think journal writing gives reality and meaning, a sequence somehow . . . When you write you see how events and conversations are related. I do believe we become what we think and what we write.” Journal writing, to once again quote the woman who takes time on winter days to look out her window and admire the male cardinal against his snow-white background, helps people to be “in awe of the ordinary.” And awe is quite an apt response, even if “the ordinary” is nothing more – or less – than the gritty and glorious details of everyday life.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> While some writers and critics perceive minor technical differences between “journal” and “diary,” these terms are used interchangeably in this article.

<sup>2</sup> S. Lowenstein, “A brief history of journal keeping.” In *The Journal Book* edited by T. Fulwiler (Portsmouth, N.H.: Boynton/Cook, 1987), 87

<sup>3</sup> H. Berman, “From the pages of my life.” In *Generations*, XV (2), 1991, 33.

<sup>4</sup> H. E. Plutshow, *Japanese travel diaries of the Middle Ages*. (Doctoral Dissertation, Columbia University, 1973).

<sup>5</sup> F. Bacon, “Of travel.” In *The essays: Or counsels, civil and moral: And the wisdom of the ancients* (Boston, Little Brown, 1958), 113 – 114.

<sup>6</sup> T. Mallon, *A book of one’s own: People and their diaries* (New York: Penguin, 1984), 42 – 43.

<sup>7</sup> See Lowenstein, 90.

<sup>8</sup> R. Lathan and W. Mathews (Eds.), *The diary of Samuel Pepys* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970).

<sup>9</sup> See Lowenstein, 93.

<sup>10</sup> See J. Cameron *The right to write: An invitation and initiation into the writing life* (New York: J. P. Tarcher, 1998). There are a host of such cheerleading-type books in the contemporary marketplace.

<sup>11</sup> T. Fulwiler, *The Journal Book* (Portsmouth, N.H., Heinemann, 1987).

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<sup>12</sup> P. Schneider, *The Writer As Artist* (Los Angeles: Lowell House, 1994).

<sup>13</sup> See S. Kerka, “Journal Writing and Adult Learning,” ERIC Digest No. 174. (The Ohio State University, ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, 1996).

<sup>14</sup> See S. Brookfield, *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1995) and S. Brookfield and S. Preskill, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> An earlier article based on these 15 OLLI member interviews was published by the author and a colleague. See E.M. Brady and H.Z. Sky, “Journal Writing Among Older Learners” in *Educational Gerontology*, 29 (2), 2003, 151 – 163. In addition to answering different research questions, this article includes a review of the scant literature that exists describing the relationship between aging and journal writing.

<sup>16</sup> See R. Atchley, “A continuity theory of normal aging” in *The Gerontologist*, 29 (2), 1989, 183 – 190.

<sup>17</sup> J. Hull, *Losing Julia* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2000), 282.

<sup>18</sup> F. Scott-Maxwell *The Measure of My Days* (New York: Penguin, 1968), 41.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.