

Keeping Up with the Days

There is no doubt in my mind that a demon has been living in me since birth.

—David Berkowitz (“Son of Sam”) in his diary

Apparently I could be quite a show-off. Once, at a college dorm party, I engaged my fellow guests by dangling by one arm from the terrace railing. The dorm was in a high-rise building, the party on the fifteenth floor. Another time, in the parking lot of an abbey in northern Germany, a similar desperate bid for attention had me jumping backward, or trying to, over a two-foot-tall post-chain barrier. Apparently I was wearing cowboy boots; apparently the back of a heel caught; apparently I was out cold for two minutes. When I came to, I couldn’t feel or move from the neck down. My first (apparent) words to my traveling companions: “Guys, I think I just ruined our summer vacation.”

My nervous system recovered, but my memory didn’t. If I say “apparently,” it’s because I don’t recall either scenario. Were it not for the testimonies of multiple eyewitnesses, I’d dismiss both stories as apocryphal. I wish, too, that I could blame my memory lapses on alcohol or mind-bending drugs. But I’ve never been much of a drinker, and drugs played no role in my behavior or my memory loss.

I don’t remember these incidents because I didn’t write them down. For about ten years, starting when I was a senior in high school, I was a compulsive diarist, you might even say an addicted one. Wherever I went, whatever I did, I carried a notebook with me and filled it with the flotsam and jetsam of my days. In the beginning these notebooks were oversized (twelve by sixteen inches, some even larger), plain paper designed more for sketching than for scribbling, with spiral bindings that came untwined and caught on sweaters and in women’s hair. In them I recorded things seen and done, snatches of conversations, lush descriptions of landscapes and rooms, of people I’d meet and places I’d visit. When at a loss for words I tossed in some sketches, too. But mostly I wrote. In fact, that’s just about all I did. For ten years I was a machine whose primary purpose was to turn life into words

and feed them to my ravenous notebooks, like a mother bird feeding worms to her chicks.

To give you an idea of just how bad my habit was: Dining among friends, I'd keep my damned notebook open next to my place setting, between salad bowl and bread dish, and scribble away between bites of food and sips of coffee or wine. (The few notebooks I've kept from those addicted days all bear ketchup, soy sauce, coffee, and wine stains.)

At first even my most indulgent friends balked at being shadowed by this recording angel, this stenographer escaped from the courtroom, this dime-store *frere* Goncourt. Those who didn't like it had a choice: they could grin and bear it, or they could stop being my friends.

I lost a lot of friends.

The ones I didn't lose got used to it, or they resigned themselves, I guess: I can't be sure. Honestly, their feelings weren't of that much concern to me. When it comes to an addict and his addictions, the feelings of others don't often count for much. And like all addicts I rationalized my behavior and its morality. After all, was not my habit as much a part of me as my arms and legs? Did my true friends—those capable of understanding me at all—not understand that to ask me to put my notebook away would have been like asking me to saw off my nose and slip it into my pocket? We were inseparable, my notebooks and I: like John and Yoko.

People think of diary keeping as a positive thing, a source of therapy and enlightenment, not to mention self-amusement. All over the country "journaling" workshops are the rage, with participants encouraged to unleash and unburden themselves daily in writing, to get to know themselves and tend their psychic and spiritual gardens. In the United States alone five million diaries or "blank books" are sold every year (it wouldn't surprise me to learn that the number exceeds that of annual first-novel sales). In *Writing Down the Bones*, writing guru Natalie Goldberg instructs her disciples to "finish a notebook a month. . . . Simply . . . fill it. That is the practice." That is also a lot of notebooks. Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way*, a twelve-step program for creative self-fulfillment (a program that, among other things, encourages its adherents to "journal" every morning), has been an international best-seller for years. Diary keeping, a once utterly private and even (with its

faintly onanistic undertones) distasteful act, has grown into a vastly popular pastime and a multimillion-dollar industry.

But is diary keeping *good* for you?

In my case, it wasn't. But then, I may have gone too far. I didn't just keep a diary, I kept it to an unhealthy extreme. My diary became not the place where I kept track of my existence but where I lost it in a flurry of words, my spiritual garden choked with verbal weeds. My habit made me rude, terribly rude. I had no idea how rude I could be.

Well, I had some idea. One evening, on a double date in the East Village, I was given my comeuppance. My date was a Turkish conceptual artist named Gülsen (pronounced *Goo-shen*). We were gathered around her coffee table, drinking wine and eating caviar-stuffed eggs, when I got out my notebook and started writing. Gülsen, whose pencil drawings typically consisted of a single fine line drawn vertically down a sheet of tracing paper (a line so delicate you had to stand within centimeters to see it) and who could be as blunt in person as her drawings were subtle, put down her glass of wine and said, "Why don't you count the flowers in my vase, Peter, and write down the number? Or better still, why not take off all of your clothes, count your pubic hairs, and tell your notebook how many there are?"

I blushed and put the notebook away. But Gülsen's lesson was short-lived: You can't shame an addict into quitting. The next day I was at it again, and the day after that, scribbling away, trying in vain to keep up with the days.

For that was what my compulsion was based on: the notion that one could somehow hold on to one's life by putting it down in words, that in recording my experiences I was saving them, keeping them from being ground to smithereens in time's garbage disposal. With each tick of the clock another moment was gone, forgotten. My sense of loss was great, or would have been, but I had the cure: I would hoard and preserve my experiences, vacuum-pack them away like peaches and pears in Mason jars, trap them like flies in amber. I would rescue my past from oblivion.

Little did I know that by "rescuing" my life I would sacrifice it. Not only would I relinquish the past just like everyone else, I would lose my memories of those days; I'd trade them in for a tangle of useless, mildewy words.

My diary-keeping addiction didn't spring forth full-grown and in armor like Athena from the forehead of Zeus. Its origins go far back. Though I wouldn't become a full-fledged addict until my twenties, I had my first taste of the wicked drug when I was seven. For my birthday my mother gave me a diary: a four-by-five-inch book bound in synthetic white leather (which has since badly cracked), the words EVERY DAY DIARY stamped on the front cover over a cartoon basket of pink and red flowers. The pages inside were gilt-edged, ruled, and ticked off with the days of the month. At the top of each page the words MY DIARY in vehement all caps reinforced my already ironclad conviction that the little book had been manufactured for me alone.

The first entry is dated February 20, five days after my birthday. I quote it in full: "I went to the movie. The movie was all western. I called it crap for babies."

You see here in embryo the critic I would become in my later years, as well as the full extent of my literary skills, which, over the next decade, would not improve considerably. I remember how possessively I clutched that little diary to my seven-year-old bosom, like a Bambuti tribeswoman suckling her newborn. I kept it in a carved wooden box behind my bed, locked away from my twin brother's probing fingers (which I threatened to break if he ever touched it). Unlike everything else in our lives—our sweaters, our friends, the games that we played—this small book with its hideous floral cover was one thing I was not required to share, a sign that said, "I'm me—you're not!" With each word I entered into its gilt-edged pages, my sense of my own uniqueness increased.

But while part of me guarded my words, another, more hidden part longed to disperse them—like barbs from a porcupine's back. In addition to the days of the week, the diary had spaces set aside for "Special Events." Under one such heading I wrote:

"George Selgin stinks like the sewer he lives in. SUPER SECRET [underscored twice]."

I see this as evidence that my "secret" diary wasn't so secret after all, that some part of me not only expected it to be read, but hoped, longed for it, as a hunter longs for the quarry to spring his trap. (Come

to think of it, isn't every diary a kind of booby trap to be sprung long after its keeper has set it and fled? A bomb with a very long fuse?)

The entries in my EVERY DAY DIARY were sustained through Thanksgiving, when "we ate turkey [sic] stuffing peas and an artichoke." Shortly afterward, my brother and I started a neighborhood club called U.N.C.L.E. ("Unqualified Nazi Criminals Laundry Enamas [sic]"). Dues: five cents. Objective: "But [sic] into peoples games and try to convince them your one of the players." Eight more entries follow, listing names of club members with dues paid or owed. Then the pages go blank and stay that way.

Six years passed before I kept my next notebook, this one assigned by my eighth-grade English teacher, Mr. Proudfoot, and referred to not as a "diary" but a "journal"—a prophylactic distinction designed to forestall visions of Ann Margaret scrawling in bathrobe and bunny slippers. It was the early 1970s, and mood rings, powder-blue leisure suits, and creative self-indulgence were all popular. Ira Progoff would soon start shucking his Intensive Journal workshops. But Proudfoot was a step ahead of him. He had us write in our journals every day, spurred on by these words, sprawled in purple-blue ink e. e. cummings-style down a mimeograph sheet:

to be
nobody but
your-
self
in a world
that
keeps doing its
best
to make you
somebody
else

I took the words to heart. I tried as hard as I could to be nobody but myself. It wasn't easy with everyone around me trying equally hard and using the same means. Still, it felt good getting up early every morning and writing in my journal over a mug of hot tea (not my

father's bagged Lipton floor-sweepings, but loose Formosa oolong, as Proudfoot and I had drunk it together, squatting at the Japanese-style table in the one-room apartment he rented at the edge of town). Scribbling in my journal made me feel mature, worldly—even a bit holy. I was thirteen years old.

Under Proudfoot's tutelage we did more than keep journals. We launched our school's first underground newspaper (knocked off on the same ditto master), wore love beads, and staged sit-ins against the Vietnam War. Two months before the school year's official end, Proudfoot left in a cloud of controversy.

With Proudfoot's departure my notebook keeping again entered a long hibernation, from which it didn't emerge until senior year, high school, with drawings—brazen caricatures of classmates and teachers—replacing words. These notebooks were practically community property, their pages greasy with the thumbprints of the curious, who passed them around as if they were oracles meant to be consulted in times of strife. Once, following my execution of a particularly brutal likeness of Madame Standish, my French teacher, I was sent to the principal's office. "Pete," Mr. Murillo said, grinning and shaking his bald head while examining my latest artistic affront, "how many times do I have to tell you to be more discreet?" Having pocketed my latest indiscretion for his growing collection, Mr. Murillo shook my hand and sent me on my way.

As senior year gave way to summer, and summer to backpacking in Europe, and Europe to art school in New York City, words crept back into my notebooks until—like kudzu strangling a forest—they took over again. Though I had no great command over them, something about words made them irresistible to me, possibly the fact that they weren't totally in my control. And so I wrestled with them, pinning them to page after page, not realizing that the words had *me* pinned, that my notebooks were writing me, displacing my life, consuming and ruining it.

Being an addict I saw none of this—or maybe I did see it, but I excused it, telling myself it was for a good cause, for art with a capital A. I was an artist, burdened with an artist's dreams. One of those dreams was to produce a work unlike any other in its scale, rawness, honesty, and

originality: a direct transcription of experience that would spare no one and hold nothing back. This work, which I titled *Pure Flux*, would have no discernible plot, no theme, no consistent characters. It would be a work of chaos to match the chaos of life and would, in its unique way, advance down that road well-trodden by Miller, Céline, Kerouac, Alexander Trocchi (whose *Cain's Book*, a novel in journal entries about a heroin junkie living on a gravel scow in New York harbor, was the Holy Grail of my journal-keeping days), and a half-dozen other inveterate documentarians of their own dissolutions. Was I not preordained to produce a work to rival, if not surpass, theirs? Did I not have—as both a warning and a blessing—the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, quoted in the epigraph of *Tropic of Cancer*, to guide and inspire me:

These novels will give way, by and by, to diaries or autobiographies—captivating books, if only a man knew how to choose among what he calls his experience, that which is really his experiences, and how to record truth truly.

If only! But I *would* know how to choose; I'd be one of those exceptions that proves the rule—the rule in this case being that life, whatever else it may be, is not a work of art. *Bullshit!* So I scribbled on frantically, furiously, piling up notebooks like a bag person piling up magazines and newspapers, sure that all this would add up to artistic triumph. Confronting me then with the distinction between literature and graphomania would have been as pointless as telling a bag person that his bundles of newspaper don't amount to shit, much less salvation.

Having started down this path, I couldn't stop; I had to keep going. Even if my notebooks all but choked me out of my real life, still, I believed in them. This is the diarist's dire fate, and why—taking Anaïs Nin to task for her own incurable habit—Henry Miller cautioned, “You will never keep up with the days. It will be like a big web which will strangle you.”

Miller wasn't alone in condemning diaries. Immanuel Kant, among many others, warned his readers to avoid the practice, which, he said, paved the way to “lies, extravagance, distortion of perspective, perhaps even to madness itself.” Ironically, some of the most convincing arguments against keeping a diary are made by diarists in their diaries. Of the futility of the enterprise, the playwright Eugène Ionesco had this to say:

Literature is powerless. I can communicate this catastrophe to no one, not even to my wife. The unendurable thing dwells within us, shut in. Our dead remain in us. And why am I writing this journal? What am I hoping for? Whom can these pages interest? Is my unhappiness, my distress, communicable? Who would take on that burden? It would have no significance for anyone.

Ionesco joins hands with Sartre, who famously described all literature as a form of neurosis. “Where there is no neurosis,” said Sartre, “there is no literature, either.” If all literature is neurotic, diary keeping is literature in its purest form. See the diarist locked up and scribbling away, generating enough morbid self-involvement to power a small eastern-seaboard city. *I scribble, therefore I am*: such is the diarist’s credo. No use explaining to him or her that a diary is to experience roughly what Cheez Whiz is to a cow. Or to put it another way: Just because you muck the stable doesn’t mean you know how to ride a horse.

But diarists aren’t just neurotic, they’re also liars and cheaters. Of her own diary keeping, Anaïs Nin admits “an incentive to make your life interesting, so that your diary will not be dull”—a statement that betrays her willingness to stack the deck of existence. When Oscar Wilde quips, “I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read on the train,” he blurs the distinction between diary and novel. But that distinction will always be blurry, with diarists conflating transcription and embroidery. At the very least, a diary is selective experience. Intentionally or not, it lies through omission.

But then isn’t the whole enterprise of diary keeping somewhat disingenuous, if not downright spurious? On the one hand, the diarist calls her pursuit intensely private; on the other, there is a record being made—for whom? Is there not, in the back of every diary keeper’s mind, the desire—somewhere, someday, somehow—to be read? In *A Book of One’s Own*, his deft survey of diarists and their diaries, Thomas Mallon writes, “Whether or not they admit it, I think all the purchasers of [diaries] have a ‘you’ in mind. . . . Perhaps in the back of their minds, or hidden in the subconscious strata, but there.” Mallon goes on to say, “In fact I don’t believe one can write to oneself for many more words than get used in a note tacked to the refrigerator, saying,

'Buy Bread.' " A diary with no audience is like the proverbial tree that falls with no one there to hear it: that it exists at all no one can prove.

Now it seems that diary keepers are plagued with more than just the neurosis of their habit. A recent psychiatric study conducted in Great Britain shows that people who keep diaries are "more likely than non-diarists to suffer from headaches, sleeplessness, digestive problems and social awkwardness." The study upsets long-cherished views of diary keeping as therapeutic. In fact, among test subjects who'd undergone traumatic events, the diarists fared worst of all: they are more apt to "continually churn over their misfortunes" and as such are less likely to get over them.

So much for tending one's psychic garden.

By my twenty-eighth birthday I had filled over forty notebooks. But I didn't think of myself as a "diarist," or of my notebooks as "diaries." Nor did I view them, as many artists and writers see their notebooks, as the rough-and-tumble means to some perfected end, as scullery maids—rags on which to wipe their creative thoughts. As ever I looked to the exceptions, to works of art that began as notebooks and ended as masterpieces. No one would ever call Auden's *A Certain World*, Fitzgerald's *The Crack-Up*, or Cyril Connolly's *An Unquiet Grave* scullery maids. Yet these works more than qualify in style and content as notebooks.

But compared to what I had in mind, those were shapely, tidy volumes. My own notebooks would culminate in something far more grandiose and exhaustive, a work of gargantuan ambitions and proportions to shame *Remembrance of Things Past* or *Ulysses: Pure Flux*, the notebook of notebooks!

During those ten years I seldom kept one address for more than a few months. Not wanting to carry all those notebooks around, I'd ship them home to my mother, who stored them in the cellar of the house I grew up in on a Connecticut hill, where a set of particle-board shelves groaned under their ever-increasing weight. Whenever I'd visit home, I'd pull one down off the shelf, blow the furnace dust from its pages, sit on the guest bed, and read. Like Oscar Wilde before me, I found my own notebook entries highly amusing. There was the element of

surprise, compounded with the joy of not recognizing oneself. To read those notebooks was to encounter this odd person who had been me, and whose thoughts in ways paralleled but did not entirely match my own. What a curious fellow, I'd think, flipping pages scented with mildew, reeking of a past all but forgotten, as if I'd never lived it. Over time, with repeated readings, the entries took on the quality of myths, replacing the past they were meant to preserve. Meanwhile my real past receded—like the lower layer of words in a palimpsest—growing fainter and fainter, until it disappeared entirely.

Not so long ago one friend reminded me of that episode in front of the abbey in Germany. More recently another friend told me of the time I dangled from that terrace. When I said I had no memory of these things, neither friend believed me. "How could you have forgotten?" Yet I had. Those episodes had escaped my notebooks; perhaps because they had been so embarrassing, I had "neglected" to record them. Therefore they never happened; they didn't exist. Written words had crowded out genuine memories; diary had replaced experience. Where others had a cerebral cortex, medial temporal lobes, and a hippocampus, I had a bunch of fusty old notebooks.

I'm not sure what made me stop. Maybe the fact that I began writing fiction and publishing it. My dream of *Pure Flux* dissolved, replaced by more humble ambitions. After that, the few notebooks I kept were simply places to jot down titles and ideas, to work out a paragraph, to take down the name of a book recommended by a friend. Whenever the temptation to record my days crept up on me, I'd swat it away.

I'm not the only one to give up the habit. These days more and more would-be diarists have taken to the Internet. What would have been diaries a decade ago are blogs today. The supposedly "private" act of recording ones feelings has torn off its hypocritical mask and gone totally public, turning into a flagrant spectacle of self-indulgence at the computer keyboard. In the old days, writers drank in public and wrote in private. Now private vice and public performance have merged seamlessly. Booze gave us Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Joyce, Wolfe, Lowry, Faulkner . . . what will blogs give us?

A few years ago my father passed away. My mother sold the big house on the hill and moved to a condominium. She no longer had room for

my notebooks. At the time my wife and I were renting a one-bedroom in Manhattan. We worked at home, with little room to spare. Still, for a while I kept the notebooks there: They were like a bunch of old friends who came to visit with no intention of leaving. The few times I'd take one down from the closet to dip into it, I started sneezing; I couldn't stop. Was it the dust and mildew or the words themselves that made me sneeze? Anyway, I was allergic to them.

One night I carried a notebook out to the compactor room, pulled the ovenlike door, took a deep breath, and, feeling as Abraham must have felt, braced myself. Then I let go (I should have recycled, I know, but that would have meant putting it in the blue plastic recycling bin, from which I might have retrieved it). As the notebook thumped its way down the chute, I waited to feel either horror or relief. I felt nothing. Not a thing. So I did it again. I threw a second notebook down the chute, and a third, a fourth, a fifth, a sixth. . . .

It was past midnight. The rest of the building, including my wife, slept. I felt like a criminal. One by one the notebooks went down the chute, taking chunks of my ersatz past with them. In a sense, it was my youth going down that chute. I'd been holding on to it, thinking I might need it again someday.

With all but four notebooks gone, I crawled back in bed next to my sleeping wife and lay there, staring up at the dark ceiling, feeling not a sense of relief, exactly, but one of quiet accomplishment.

That was five years ago. I've not had one regret about throwing those notebooks away. They were the first very rough draft of a life that has since taken on some meaningful structure and shape and that has, if not a plot, at least a theme and some good characters. Like all rough drafts, it was a means to an end, something I had to go through to get where I am. And for that I'm glad.

But no, I don't miss my notebooks. Why should I?

After all, I still have my memories.