



FUEL YOUR CREATIVITY

An 'inspiration notebook' creates a FOUNDATION for writing

Not a journal or diary per se, it offers a way to capture the pieces of one's experience—plus 'a way to savor life twice'

By Jessica P. Morrell

Journals capture my ideas, my emotions, the smell of the mowed grasses, the taste of a wildflower lemon stalk, the images from the farmhouse porch on a cool spring morning. My farm journals do the same; they record my feelings about a spring storm on peach blossoms or the fear of invisible diseases growing on my grapes. Writing and farming share a common tie—neither is done well by using formulas. Good stories are not based on recipes, a juicy peach cannot be grown by following "how to" books.

—David Mas Masumoto

EVERY AUGUST, I visit the Oregon coast for a week and deliberately take time away from my computer. And, as every time I travel, I carry along several notebooks that I call inspiration notebooks. They are modest composition books with heavy cardboard covers, the same brand I've been jotting in for years,

and they form a solid foundation for my writing practice.

My notebooks aren't journals or diaries, don't contain complaints or venting, but instead capture daily events, dreams and life's many relics. My notebooks are a gathering place, idea logs, and they record the sights, sounds and smells of my world. They are a catchall of lists such as books I want to read, films I plan to rent, and CDs I might buy. In it I jot down gleanings and make

notes on longer projects I'm working on. It's where I dissect the plot of the novel I'm reading and sketch character arcs for the cast of *The Sopranos*. My notebooks are filled with borrowed lines, metaphors and phrases that excite my imagination, along with bits from radio broadcasts and song refrains.

My notebooks are filled with reminders of the passing of seasons—geese honking overhead, sightings of spring flowers, trips to the farmer's market, midnight frosts and ice storms. Since I'm guilty of overusing the same phrases and words, I also collect phrases and words I want to incorporate: beguiling, erudite, bedevil, muzzy, pimp-slapped, churr, drubbing, patina, lollapalooza, tussle and scallywag.

In them I write poems that I pen

illustration by Kellie Jaeger

when I first awake and short stories and exercises I complete along with students in my workshops. I write a lot about what I see on my walks and how a light rain feels like velvet on my skin and a hard rain lands like needles and how the air smells after a hard rain. I jot down names and dates I find in a cemetery, names I find in obituaries, and lines from movies. Sometimes I glue items into them—a photo of exotic birds, replicas of artworks, postcards, a poem, a program from a W.S. Merwin reading along with notes from his lecture.

They also contain “mindmaps”—right-brain exercises where you quickly sketch ideas based on a nucleus word or idea. Because I often have the radio on in the background as I work, quotes, bits from news stories, and snippets from various broadcasts are filtered into my notebook. I note events and political shenanigans that worry me and tick me off. On Sept. 8, 2005, I noted that there were 25,000 body bags sent to Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina along with 10,000 unemployment forms. I find a notation after listening to NPR foreign correspondent Anne Garrels reporting from Fallujah. She reported that wild dogs were eating bodies in the streets, and she reminded her listeners of the many Iraqi civilians dying every day. I also note anniversaries and passings—the death of Julia Child, and of Arthur Miller, who said, “I do believe that a play places a drop of acid in the system and it spreads and eliminates rust.”

I record snippets of overheard conversations, especially from cell phone users: “Well, I’m concerned about grandma, too” and “You know that’s a sign of mental illness, don’t you?” This last tidbit was spoken by a woman squeezing tomatoes at Whole Foods. I am constantly snatching overheard conversations, such as a group of teenagers describing in detail how haggis is made, and an Air America caller referring to Tom DeLay as “the little Texas puke.”

My notebooks are scattered with author quotes. From Barbara Kingsolver: “Memory is a complicated thing, a relative to the truth but not its twin.” Or, “Novelists and spies share some of the same gifts and instincts,” by Graham Greene. I jotted down Daniel Pinkwa-

ter’s comment on NPR when he said, “I believe that it’s impossible to make sense of this world except through art.”

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And as I corral and harvest inspirations, it’s also a place of memory and I recall my grandmothers’ kitchens, or a closet in my grandmother’s house stuffed with a rainbow of prom dresses made of magic and chiffon and matching satin pumps that my aunts wore in the early 1960s. I recall a hike where a friend and I discovered a wild orchid of coppery gold beneath a towering pine.

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My notebooks prove that I’m a scavenger by nature, a spy, a snoop and a seeker. I’m the sort who leans toward the next table in the restaurant where the woman is weeping and her companion is flustered, and I watch the couple who have arrived for the Early Bird Special and have nothing to say to each other. I like to make up stories about these people, such as when I spot an expensive-looking woman in a gold sheath and retro Jackie O sunglasses, imagining her as a mobster’s mistress.

This capturing of inspirations and memories is simply fun and a way to savor life twice. So I create these keepsakes in words, and they’ve become a way of living and the simplest means I know of deepening my craft. My favorite place for writing in a notebook is while traveling by train as it shimmies through the countryside, gazing out the window, feeling dreamy and content as the landscape slips by.

Here is my advice for anyone who

hasn’t yet joined me in this practice of using an inspiration notebook or who has lost the habit of writing by hand. Write close to your heart, about topics that matter and scraps of life that fascinate you. Remember that writers are collectors. Remember, too, that this is not a diary. It’s a source, a taproot, a wellspring. It’s a place where you practice turning your keen writer’s eye toward the planet as you sort out its dizzying offerings into fancy and nuance.

Write often. Write while waiting for the doctor, while you’re waiting for your kid to finish softball practice, when you first awake, on vacation, when you can’t sleep, on the bus, when you’re worried or worn. Write on the crest of hope, new love, or after hard-won success.

Use your notebooks to aim at the future, and return home to your true self. Instead of only looking inward, look out at the world, noticing, always noticing. And listening. Because if you’re only plumbing your inner life for material or sustenance, you’ll miss what lies all around. So many small moments that are radiant and fascinating. Jewels scattered at our feet, shimmering everywhere if we only slow down to notice.

A writer’s notebook is a sanctuary for a deliberately cultivated awareness of our surroundings and imagination and inner world. Through this noticing we encourage our artistic sensibilities; we mull over films, books, conversations and past events. Life can slam past us at a breakneck pace; keeping a notebook slows time, forces us to record the now, and strive for clarity of thought.

But I think a notebook has another purpose—it serves as constant companion and reminder to live as a writer.

Finally, one last word: In a letter that Johnny Cash sent his daughter Roseanne, he urged her: “Write. Write. Write. And don’t care what anyone thinks.”

Jessica P. Morrell

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This article first appeared in *The Willamette Writer*.