

(1990)

A Journal Revisited

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In my classes journals have lately become one of several innovative tools to develop fluent and reflective writing. I hesitate, however, to advocate too great a control over their subject matter or their method and effectiveness. To be sure, they need to be encouraged and “checked” periodically to keep many students active; but just how far to carry this oversight becomes problematic, and I believe that in this case like Thoreau in “On Civil Disobedience,” perhaps the best government is no government at all.

I say this with good reason. Recently I looked back at a series of diary journals I kept during preparatory school and college years, in which I freely expressed, without thought of audience or constraint, but with several gaps, observations and judgments during the period from 1938 to 1945. Motivation for these records is not hard to understand. Probably the initial reason for keeping them was that around Christmas time, a local insurance company kept giving my father fine leather diaries which I hated to see wasted. Perhaps a stronger motive was the desire to preserve a record of what was to be (I felt) a remarkable life.

In reading over the record for 1941, a critical year in American history, I have discovered an account of growing intellectual

awareness, but at the same time, a critical self-analysis that becomes almost stifling in retrospect. On the periphery is the developing awareness of World War II, which ascends in influence, and then for a time diminishes as personal concerns replace it. I shall cite a chronological selection of items from the year, my own second-semester Upper-Middler (Junior) and first semester Senior years at Andover (note: the following selections are quoted verbatim, although spelling and punctuation have been normalized):

* * *

Year: 1941

January 4: School is looming nearer. . . I shall be sorry. . . to begin again the long grind....

January 12: Practically all the American news of this time is about defense. President Roosevelt is now trying to get power of leasing arms to Britain, etc. There is much dispute over whether he is trying to become a dictator.

January 19: [On the radio] I heard Joseph Szigetti, a violinist who sounds, to me, perfect—without a single flaw.

January 24: I went to the concert given by Mischa Elman after supper—it was the best violin concert I have heard; though he is perhaps not the best violinist, for he made a few mistakes. However, his playing, in general, is masterly.

February 4: . . . I cannot help feeling that Hitler has some plan, which will not be long in coming, and against which England will have a hard job to stand up.

February 17: I spent all evening in reading Maurois' "Ariel" (a life of Shelley). (It took me 4 1/2 hours). My first impressions are that it is very good.

February 23: After supper I went to see a large fire, which entirely consumed a small factory: said to be recently hired by the government. Perhaps sabotage? This was the first real fire I have ever seen, and it was an awe-inspiring sight. Think how London must look, with several fires larger than this, every few nights.

February 27: I finished Strachey's "Queen Victoria," the best biography I have yet read.

March 2: I have only 1 1/2 weeks till vacation, thank goodness. It is always the looking forward to a vacation which is better than the vacation itself; at least in my case.

March 11: The Lend-Lease Bill, for all out British aid, was passed today.

March 15: President Roosevelt this evening spoke on our aid to Britain in a clear speech.

March 20: I read in the evening, finishing the following plays today: Sidney Howard's "They Knew What they Wanted," George Kelly's "Craig's Wife," Paul Green's "In Abraham's Bosom," and Elmer Rice's "Street Scene." I liked the second and last best. The first was too ordinary, and the 3rd too gruesome.

March 25: Yugoslavia has joined the Axis: Greece beware! I have been planning all vacation to go on a trip to New York Friday with Mr. Baldwin. I would go on a boat with Dad, but now mother says I cannot go—I would pay my own way, but Dad has to accompany me (I am not capable of going myself?), and it would cost him too much. I suppose it is wrong of me, but I still want very much to go there for the first time.

April 13: I read Maurois' "Disraeli," an excellent biography.

April 18: The Yugoslavs have surrendered and the British are

being pushed back in Greece. Slowly, but surely, this country is approaching war. Our history teacher predicts that by the end of the year, we shall have entered it.

April 26: On the way home 1 cigarette—the first since summer.

May 1: The British are said to have saved 80% of their troops in Greece, by a second Dunkerque; but I fear the Suez Canal is in grave danger.

May 5: Although many are speaking against Lindbergh, I believe that it is right for him to be allowed to speak his views—defeatist though they may be.

May 9: The apple blossoms are out, and these, mingled with lilacs and many other flowers, make the air very fragrant.

May 12-16: Concern with Hess's flight to England. My conclusion:

“. . . Hess probably came to England because he disagreed with Hitler's joining the Russians.”

May 25: The “Hood,” the greatest English battle-cruiser, was today sunk.

May 28: The President made a historic speech last night proclaiming us in a state of emergency: War is soon here.

June 9: After supper I went to the Competition in musical instruments. I played the first movement of Mozart's E flat Concerto, and they say I did well (for me), but, since they wanted to give the prize to a young beginner, Graham, I got none.

June 17: U.S. and Germany broke off diplomatic relations yesterday.

July 28: Well, today I started out on a new experience, that of

assistant dishwasher at Langsford House, a hotel of about 110 guests, at Cape Porpoise, Maine. We arrived at 11:15 a.m., and I got right to work. They have an electric machine, so that we merely have to stack the dishes.

August 7: I am having a very good time here, but I would not want to live like this very long, for there is nothing constructive to do in your spare time.

August 9: Today after the breakfast dishes, one of the boys (Charlie Beattie, a bell boy) was fired for stealing a bracelet and some money. As a result the dishwasher became a bell-hop, and I became the chief dishwasher; I receive \$7 per week now.

August 14: Roosevelt and Churchill, it was announced today, had a secret (?) meeting and formulated an eight-point peace program. This is a momentous meeting, but we will not feel the effects of it for a little while.

August 19: My present philosophy of life is this: We are all given certain abilities. We are supposed to use these as well as we can. The purpose of life is to see how well we can use those abilities, however slight they may be.

August 31: All phases of life and art are concerned with developing a theme.

September 9: Today it was learned the Germans sank an American ship in the Red Sea and one in the Atlantic. Added to the Greer, these could seem to show that Hitler wants U.S. at war.

September 18: I saw, this evening, the Northern lights. But, unlike the customary appearance, these were of all hues, like huge candles, from all sides, even the south. At times they formed a vault, which covered the entire sky with streaks and shimmering light. I have never seen them as clear.

September 25: An example of the lower living standards necessitated by the decrease in ability to buy the metal products desired, brought about by the war, is brought home. This morning our water boiler broke. We cannot get a similar one except by an order that may take many days to fill. The only way we can get one now is to buy a more expensive one which the gas company has in stock.

October 1: The unrest in conquered Europe is steadily mounting. Beware Nazis!

October 2: I thought, today, that common sense must enter into any argument; that logic alone is not enough, for things do not always occur as we would expect. Instead, ironically, they often happen the way that no reasoning would reach.

October 5: I today wondered if anyone on earth could ever be truly happy; I think not. They can't because the future is uncertain, and for complete happiness security is necessary.

October 9: I have almost made up my mind to write on this question for my 1500 word English Essay: Is anyone ever truly happy?

October 11: Mr. Blackmer, my English teacher, seems to me to have the elements of greatness. He is absolutely logical, he is thorough and fair; but, above all, he is a human being.

October 16: The Germans are pushing on to Moscow. They have captured Odessa on the Baltic, and are, all along the 2000 mile front, advancing. Japan, the sly fox, is now probably going to actively join the Axis because she wants to be on the bandwagon. October 17- Today Germany torpedoed an American destroyer!! and America passed the bill to arm merchant ships. That the U.S. will enter the war is almost inevitable. It is up to Germany how long she will stay out.

October 18: After studying I went to Boston to the Symphony for the first time in my life: It was excellent, and since I had a seat near the front, I could see Koussevitsky's mannerisms very well. The program was fair: a Mozart symphony (the Haffner), the initial performance of William Schuman's 3rd Symphony and Tchaikovsky's 6th, but the playing was superb.

October 23: Boston was, today, made the clearing port for all ships from the U.S. to Russia. The night curfew on gasoline, too, is to be lifted, since Britain has returned 40 tankers she had been using.

October 27: Roosevelt made a speech at 10 p.m. in which he tried to arouse us against Hitler. It was not constructive, however, since it merely gave again what he has been repeating for months.

November 2: The leaves are almost all off the trees now, though a few remain like tattered rags to flap in the breeze. We are nearing war. Another American destroyer was sunk a few days ago, but Germany claims this ship attacked her sub first.

November 8: In the evening I went with a group of English classes to Boston to see Maurice Evans in "Macbeth." The scenery and presentation were excellent and the acting of the majority superb, especially Macbeth, Lady Macbeth and the gate-keeper. The only criticism was that the music, consisting of organ and muted trumpets, was "corny." This is the best play I have yet seen (I have seen only 2 other actual professional ones).

November 11: I do not believe that a person should be lauded for his abilities; instead, for what he makes of those abilities which he does possess.

November 13: The repeal of the Neutrality Bill passed Congress today. We shall soon be in war.

November 14: After supper I studied, practiced singing and violin and finished Shaw's "Saint Joan." His genius is obvious in this play, a magnificent work.

November 15: After dinner I went with the Elliots (Gordon was kind

enough to invite me to go with him and his family, except for Mrs. Elliot) to Exeter to watch the great Andover-Exeter football game. We won by the close score 14-13. After getting home (we were lost for a while on the back, and found ourselves in Newburyport), I had supper, then went to my second Boston Symphony concert. I enjoy them a great deal.

November 18: We had been planning to have Dorothy, Priscilla and Rossy here for Thanksgiving, but we called it off. It seems to me that this family never invites anyone to the house, with the result of a missing freedom of action when we are among other people; a reticence and shyness which is exhibited by all of us except John [my brother].

November 19: After dinner I practiced, then went with May [my sister] and Gordon [a friend mentioned above] to see "La Femme du Boulanger," ("The Baker's Wife") a truly great motion picture entirely in French, with English captions. The greatness of the picture lies not in an exceptionally original plot (a baker's wife runs off with a shepherd, but eventually returns, repentant) but in its intently potent picture of the suffering of the boulanger; indeed in its portrayal of true life. It is unlike the usual Hollywood productions, for it presents a view of actual life, without artificiality: it is the best movie I have ever seen as an approach to art.

November 28: I had to miss a lecture by Margaret Bourke-White, one of the most famous photographers in the world, because of my theme on "Ability: Its Significance in Success."

December 1: I finished Tolstoy's great novel "War and Peace." War with Japan will occur unless Germany suffers a defeat which is impressive enough to make Japan doubt whether the Axis can really win.

December 4: Dr. Darling [history teacher] is an extraordinary teacher. He realizes the dynamic power of certain historical facts and tries to impress them upon us. He has not once become angry at one class, although he keeps us alert every second of the time.

December 5: Japan is threatening even more to be a source of conflict with the United States and Britain. Since the Germans have not yet made her sure of success against Russia, Japan is holding off. But, I believe, when Moscow is taken we had better look out; for Japan will not.

December 6: After dinner I spent my time preparing for our annual trip to Roger's Hall in Lowell. We gave a moderately successful concert and then met our partners, ate and danced. A Lowell girl whose father is a jeweler, Millicent Cotter, was my partner. Although she was only a Sophomore, nevertheless she was a very likable girl, and I enjoyed the evening with her. I was not impressed with any other girl except Joan Thomas, my first year's partner (3 years ago), who is now president of the school, and I danced a few minutes with her.

December 7: Clear-Cloudy and Cold: 20-40 F. It has happened! We are in the war! At 2:22 p.m. today Japan declared war on the United States, and, before that, bombed Pearl Harbor, killing 300 American soldiers. I was wrong in believing that Japan would wait until Moscow fell. But, I cannot see what she gains by this attack, except perhaps to draw American resources away from Europe, under Hitler's orders. My own reactions are as follows: I have no hatred for Japan; I have no liking for the war; I am excited, but not outwardly; I cannot realize how much the war will affect me

personally. There was a large fire in Lawrence today. I saw the engines pouring water on the Brocklman Market Building and I saw the Central Building; both shells in the upper floors.

December 8: As was expected, we today declared war, by a resolution of both Houses, against Japan. Roosevelt made a speech at 12:30 p.m. to which the entire school listened before the resolution. It seems, sad to relate, that the Japanese had planned this war well, for they have attacked nearly all the Pacific Island possessions of the United States, and have greatly damaged Pearl Harbor. In Europe, the Germans have given up hope of capturing Moscow before spring a piece of good news.

The war is having a decided effect upon us as students. Aside from taking away our interest in our subjects, it causes a highly keyed excitement which the slightest unexpected occurrence will aggravate and cause I don't know what results.

December 9: Today the East Coast had an air-raid scare. Somehow the rumor of enemy planes attacking circulated so that all precautions were taken: schools let out (even we had no athletics), traffic stopped, factories let out, stores closed, etc. There was great excitement, but everything was carried out systematically except for a few untrained people making it harder. When it was found it was merely a test, some felt really disappointed; I did.

December 10: We are beginning to become used to the war. A great change has come, however. We have an enemy now, and we are using means of getting the public anger aroused. The word "Jap" is used, with a disdainful sound; 3 new songs have come out against the Japanese. There are pleas for everyone's help in the defense. Now, I believe that these measures are justified, although I do not like them; for I can see that we are beginning to lose our self control. We are losing the war, however, at least, both our ships and British ships are being sunk rapidly.

December 11: Today, after Germany and Italy declared war on us, we declared it on them. How fast events are taking place. It is impossible to realize the extent of the implications of this war. If we should lose, which I cannot foresee unless Russia changes her side, it would be truly terrible. But, meanwhile, we have to continue to study.

December 13: At assembly today, sheets of instruction about what to do during air raids. I hope they will not come to be needed. I hear, too, that the infirmary is to be used as a hospital for the town in case of air raids, with beach wagons as ambulances. The war itself seems to be progressing very favorably. It is strange, but I feel that it is impossible for us to lose. I feel as if the Axis is the "underdog," and almost pity them in looking ahead to the results of a victory.

December 14: For the next 3 days I shall have to delegate the War to a secondary position while preparing for exams.

December 22: After dinner I went skating at Gordon's. At 4, Gordon and I went to Lawrence and from 4-7:45 we were at the Lawrence District Air-Raid warning center. There we received one good check call from the Boston line. But, Gordon accidentally pushed down all the buttons on the telephone, thus locking them and throwing the telephone out of order. On the 2nd check call, therefore, we could not report back. We had to go through a great deal of worry until a service man fixed the phone.

December 24: This Christmas is to be my first War one. There is an atmosphere of recklessness. "This is our last chance to have a good time, so let's make it a good Christmas." And, that feeling may be justified, for we are beginning to feel the effects of the war. A 10% tax is on practically all luxuries and even some necessities;

and, besides, dealers are running low on stocks which cannot be refilled.

December 26: Today Winston Churchill addressed the combined Houses of Congress in an expression of Anglo-American unity, at the same time voicing the optimistic view that we shall win the war, although this will entail much hard struggle. I was for 3 hours an air raid spotter of planes at the Andover listening post. We report all planes seen or heard to the army in Boston. The work of preparing New England for air raids is going ahead steadily, and if there can be a few more weeks, we will be fully prepared.

December 31: After dinner I went to Lawrence and had some pictures taken for my Harvard application. I then practiced. In the evening I went to MacFarlan's and, after taking a while, took Margaret to the midnight show at the Playhouse. This is the first time I have ever taken a girl to a movie that I remember, and I enjoyed welcoming in 1942 in that way. As for Margaret, I cannot tell yet how well I like her. It is queer; I cannot understand why I should suddenly start seeing any girl so much.

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It is doubtful whether the selections above would have been written for an assigned journal. Several tendencies of teachers (myself included) would work against the spontaneity which such expression required. First, the very fact that the material was required would dampen the enthusiasm for direct self-expression. Second, and even worse, if a specific assignment were made requiring, say, a reaction to a play or a book, it would stifle somewhat the enthusiasm which free choice makes. Third, some observations (like those made about teachers) would hardly be expected in a journal to be passed for a class.

Yet I see no real cause for alarm. Journals for the classroom might, indeed, encourage students to continue on their own, in their own way. Thus they might become the catalyst for some future Pepys or Evelyn.



(1996)

Visiting a Revisited Journal

After re-reading the article I wrote for Volume 2 of the *Writing Across the Curriculum Journal* for 1990, I have had almost seven years to test my hypothesis that writing a journal should be a spontaneous, not a specifically assigned expression. I confess that I have not fully adhered to my own advice, and finding the journal a convenient agent for assuring homework assignments, I have frequently assigned as entries reactions to readings, or classroom activities. I suppose I should feel guilty of expediency; but I rather think I have been acting pragmatically, since journals in classrooms provide one of the best ways to encourage involvement by an entire class in assignments otherwise not assured of universal acceptance.

I am still hoping to put the original concept of the journal into the classroom. Perhaps it would best fit in a class devoted to writing non-fiction, as one mode of self expression. In this context it could be left entirely free. Perhaps in such a class we could supply each student with a colorful blank book to encourage the writing of colorful prose.