

Keeping the Nature Journal
By
Fred Young, SFO
Secular Franciscan National Ecology Commission

The purpose for keeping a nature journal is to challenge yourself to perceive the world through spiritual eyes. Journaling helps drop the perspective of the utilitarian and technological and allows you to experience oneness with the Earth, its creatures, and the Creator. Keeping a nature journal is your opportunity to view the world in a most personal way. Journals are often used by nature writers because of the necessity of describing the long-term processes of nature, such as seasonal or environmental changes, in great detail, and of carefully recording outdoor excursions and experiences for articles or essays. These journals are often utilized by successful writers and thinkers as a means, of organizing experience, reflecting on life and further generating literary material.

The nature journal is not a “dear diary ,” but, rather, a serious log of events, conversations, thoughts, memories, and emotions. It is a place to store autobiographical moments; an intellectual repository if you will. There are many ways to keep a nature journal - scribbled in notebooks, spoken into tape recorders for later transcription, or directly onto a computer disk. Although, some may feel very comfortable carrying a laptop computer into the wild, this presents an aesthetic problem. Consider the mechanical clackity-clack-clack of fingers in contact with a keyboard and the eerie glow of a monitor. In my opinion, this is probably as out of touch with nature as wearing a tuxedo to go kayaking. Some tend to believe that keeping a nature journal electronically is antithetic to the whole notion of escaping technology. If it works for you though, by all means pursue it.

Any serious discussion of nature journal writing must begin with Henry David Thoreau. Scholars have estimated that his journals, which span his intellectual life from age 20 (1837) to his death at age 44 (1862) contain over two million words and 39 bound manuscripts. This, of course, was all done with a pencil. Without exception, all serious nature writers keep nature journals. From the earliest Greeks such as Homer, Hesiod, Alcman, Sophocles, Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates who promulgated humankind’s role in nature to the Roman writers such as Lucretius, Cicero, Cleanthes, and Manilius who developed the philosophy of nature, Writers of the Middle Ages such as Francis of Assisi made the link between God and Nature as witnessed in *The Canticle of Creatures*. During the Renaissance the Humanists emerged and created nature in a more literary way through poetry and, increasingly, prose. The “Scientific Revolution” of the 17th and 18th centuries brought about the quantification of nature by attempting to apply “order” to what is by design, “ran-

dom.” This led to the backlash that produced the modern literary phenomena of nature writing. For sources of inspiration, try reading Thoreau’s Walden, John Muir’s My First Summer in the Sierra, Aldo Leopold’s A Sand County Almanac, Sigurd Olson’s Listening Point, Helen Hoover’s A Place in the Woods, Edward Abbey’s Desert Solitaire, Diana Kappel-Smith’s Wintering, Annie Dillard’s Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, or Rick Bass’ excellent Winter: Notes From Montana.

Every person has the potential to become a journalist. Try the following exercises below to get yourself “into” the rhythm of nature journaling. For several days at approximately the same time of day or night, go to a favorite spot, for example, a certain tree, a place along a river, a hilltop, beach swale, a bog, pond, or wetland and make the following observations:

- Spend at least 15 minutes making full use of your bodily senses by watching, tasting, smelling, feeling and listening to your chosen spot. Begin writing in your journal by describing your spot in as great a detail as possible, using the information you consciously draw in from your various senses.
- What sorts of plants and wildlife do you encounter? Describe in detail everything from the smallest insect to large fauna such as wolves, bear, deer or moose. Refer to field guides such as Peterson’s, Stoke’s, Audubon, Sibley’s, National Geographic, Golden, etc. to learn the Latin scientific names of species, their taxonomy, origins, pelage, seasonal plumage, range, variations and other pertinent information.
- Incorporate this newly gained knowledge in your journal.
- Why did you choose this particular spot? (Note your reasons for any changes from day-to-day or every time you visit). How do you feel or experience yourself in this spot? How is this different from how you feel when you are at “home?”
- If your spot could speak, what would it say? Does it have a message to either you or the world?

I find it more productive to keep two journals. The first I call “field notes” where I record my initial impressions and responses to my encounters with nature. It’s a form of shorthand, a place to scribble notes. When I return home I like to sit at my kitchen table with a cup of Earl Grey and a little folk or bluegrass music in the background. It is here that I take time to reflect on the field notes and then write in

my journal expressing my experience. I write carefully and thoughtfully. I reference field guides (mentioned above) and use colored pencils to illustrate my work. As you advance in your nature journaling try the following techniques:

- Write a nature journal that covers one season of the year. Since I live in the far north with over 300 inches of snow for seven-months out of the year, winter, if not my favorite season, certainly is my most convenient season to write about. We are blessed with four seasons and all are unique!
- Take a car trip (or a train as mass transit is always best) and assiduously record all of your impressions in your nature journal. Remember to focus as much on human nature, your inner spiritual life, and the interplay of your companions as much as on the wild nature about you.
- Try writing your journal entries in a stream-of-consciousness fashion. In this exercise, it is not necessary to write complete sentences and formal paragraphs.
- Utilize this exercise to liberate your imagination and expand later. You will find that this will help develop your “field note” technique.
- Observe the processes of nature in great detail. For example describe falling snowflakes; the way leaves change colors or the lifecycle of wildflowers in a meadow or tadpoles in a pond.
- Write journal entries from memory about significant encounters with nature perhaps beginning with your childhood. An example may be your impressions of the first time you saw the Grand Canyon. or your first wilderness canoe outing.

The following resources will instruct you further on the techniques of good writing help you learn and grow as a nature writer:

Baldwin, Christina, *Life's Companion: Journal Writing as a Spiritual Quest*, New York: Bantam Books, 1991.

Baughman, Mel, *The Birder's Journal*, Mechanicsburg, PA: stackpole Books, 1989.

Cargas, Harry J. and Roger J. Radley, *Keeping a Spiritual Journal*, Garden City , NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1981.

Fulwiler, Toby, Ed., *The Journal Book*, Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1987.

Klug, Ron, *How to Keep a Spiritual Journal: A Guide to Journal Keeping for Inner Growth and Personal Discovery*, Minneapolis, Augsburg Press, 2002.

Leslie, Clare Walker and Charles E. Roth, *Keeping a Nature Journal: Discover a Whole New Way of Seeing the World Around You*, Pownal, VT: Storey Books, 2000.

Letchworth, Beverly J., *Leaf Bird Days & Firefly Nights: Personal Renewal Through Nature Journaling*, St. Louis: Pen Central Press, 2001.

Murray, John A. *The Nature Writing Handbook: A Creative Guide*, San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1995.

Petersen, David, *Writing Naturally: A Down-to-Earth Guide to Nature Writing*, Boulder, CO: Johnson Books, 2001.

Rainer, Tristine, *The New Diary*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978.

Finally, as you develop as a writer, think about attending a nature-writing workshop such as The Environmental Writing Institute at Missoula, Montana, The Art of the Wild at the University of California-Davis, The Desert Writers Workshop at Moab, Utah, or The Isle Royale Environmental Writing Conference. Attend conferences with environmental themes such as The Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE), The American Society of Environmental History (ASEH), The Western Literature Association (WLA), etc. Information on these organizations may be located on the Internet with the aid of a search engine.

Enjoy your foray into the world of nature writing!