It’s All About the Journal

Write your way through trauma and triumph

August 1, 1998 By Bo Young

From Anne Frank to Paul Monette, the great journal-keepers have tracked daily life in the midst of a holocaust, leaving behind shining records of not only their own survival but that of the human spirit. Of course, the average HIVer has a humbler goal when picking up the pen. For most of us, gaining insight, not to mention solace, from written reflection on life with AIDS is satisfaction enough. Glory is gravy.

Where to start? You can take journal workshops at one of many continuing-ed places such as New York City’s Dialogue House (established by the late Ira Progoff). Self-starters can consult such books as Progoff’s At Journal Workshop (Putnam), Julia Cameron’s The Artist’s Way (Putnam) or Natalie Goldberg’s Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within (Shambhala). Journaling requires no previous writing experience; it’s all about expressing your thoughts and feelings. But as with any new sport, the trick is to practice every day—no excuses!—whether in the comfort and quiet of your own home or amidst the hubbub of a coffee shop. Aesthetes may find that a notebook with a beautiful cover helps motivate, but any blank surface—from a three-ringer to a placemat—will do. The only other equipment you need is a pen and time to reflect.

Spring 1997: I wish I knew why I had to get HIV. I’m just a kid, 16 years old, and I was raped. I lost my childhood, and they sit in jail, but in reality I am the one who got the life sentence.…Why me? I always did what I was told. I was a kid in the wrong place.—A Flint, Michigan, PWA

For several years, New York City’s Gay Men’s Health Crisis has offered Intensive Journal Workshops, helping PWAs to recall dreams, confront fears and write their way through illness and anxiety. “Working with a journal is a way of listening to your inner guidance,” says seminar leader Annette Corvatta. “And you can always burn it when you’re done.” Is it too much of a stretch to claim that writing has healing powers? No, says Walt Zeichner, a Vermont therapist. “Sometimes the mere act of putting something into words on a page is very therapeutic,” he says. “It gives form to inchoate feelings and provides a perspective that allows reflection and insight. Naming an issue is the first step in dealing with it.”

Author Cameron recommends writing for 15 uninterrupted and uncensored minutes upon waking, composing what she calls “Morning Pages.” “In the morning, we access the wisdom of the

uncensored mind and set a ‘golden track’ for the day,” Cameron says. “Morning Pages record a stream of consciousness, what the Buddhists call ‘cloud thoughts.’ Simultaneously grounding and transcendent, it’s particularly relevant to those who must live in the difficult now and connect to a sense of the benevolent eternal.”

A journal is an investment in your own future because it is an invaluable record of your past. “It’s the single most important tool I have in dealing with my HIV,” says avid journaler Roger T. (not his real name), in Tucson, Arizona. “I have kept a journal since my diagnosis. It is ‘there’ where no one else can be. I can turn back to something I wrote a year ago. Something I felt that helped me get through that moment may spark what I need to get through the next valley. It’s a companion in labs or doctors’ reception rooms, waiting for results or for a friend to die. And a solace when they do.”

A journal is a record not just of what happened to you that day but, more important, of how you felt, what you saw, who you were. And how you have changed.

May 17, 1991: Today I’m 38. I feel so old—I may live to see 40, but probably not long after that. Sometimes I don’t even care. Lately it’s almost a relief. Later that day: Feel that all the fun and interesting times are behind me. Afraid of what’s to
come, or not to come.
April 12, 1998: Interesting to re-read this. I’m now 45, and although my life has changed quite a bit, I want more. To keep going. Very different mindset. What was I thinking?—A Chicago PWA

Keeping a journal may help you find a way to transcend HIV. And in the end, the pen may be mightier than the cocktail.

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