Author

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Professor Brady teaches graduate courses in the history and philosophy of adult education, action research, facilitating learning, and gerontology. In addition, each summer he teaches his only undergraduate course while traveling an average of three thousand miles by motor coach. "Baseball and American Society: A Journey," now in its tenth season, has been the subject of dozens of media reports and has won a national award.

Mike is a founding member of what was known at the time (1997) as "Senior College" but later, through the largesse of the Bernard Osher Foundation, grew into the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI). In 2001, he was appointed as OLLI's first senior research fellow. In this role, Mike investigates a wide range of issues and questions related to learners over the age of fifty-five. The article published in this inaugural edition of *The Southern Maine Review* is based on interviews of OLLI members who keep personal journals.

Mike and Nancy Brady have been married twenty-five years and have three children. Their oldest, Ryan, is a Naval Intelligence Specialist currently working in England. Meghan is a junior at McGill University in Montreal, studying political science and religion. Maura is a junior at Gorham High School and plans to attend "a good college somewhere within Red Sox nation."

In Awe of the Ordinary: Older Learners and Their Journals

E. Michael Brady

Overview and Context

This article reports research findings from a recent empirical study conducted within the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) at the University of Southern Maine. OLLI is a member-based educational program serving persons age fifty-five and over. Peer-taught courses are noncredit and typically run two hours per week for eight weeks. The curriculum is predominantly liberal arts in nature. OLLI is the largest (eight hundred members) and oldest (instituted in 1997) of fifteen lifelong learning institutes in Maine. The Maine programs, in turn, are part of a national movement in elder education, which includes more than four hundred institutes across all fifty states. A unique dimension of OLLI, one that differentiates it from nearly every other lifelong learning institute, is that its mission includes a research agenda. This study of journal writing and older learners is one of several research investigations that members have conducted at OLLI during the past three years.

Brief History of Journal Writing

The genre of journal or diary writing has a long, albeit unclear, history.[1] The practice dates at least as far back as 56 CE, when the Chinese wrote journals and later archived them as documents.[2] Many believe that the fourth-century bishop and Western theologian Augustine of Hippo invented the literary genre of autobiography.[3] St. Augustine's classic work *Confessions*[4] represents this prolific thinker's effort to trace his own religious conversion and spiritual growth and, in many places, "provides a very early example of diary-like writing."[5]

The Japanese have also understood and respected the diary as a way of recording history. The pillow book, a well-documented "diary" form created in tenth-century Japan, was so named because it was placed in the bedchamber or in drawers of wooden pillows. Written primarily by Heian court ladies, these records incorporated factual accounts, dreams, fantasies, and poetry.[6] Within this tradition is the travel diary, in good part comprised of poetry and categorized by some Japanese critics as a separate genre.[7]

In contrast to its earlier Japanese ancestor, the Western travel diary is primarily a narrative emphasizing the factual—what the traveler has done and seen. During the European Renaissance, privileged young men taking continental tours often wrote such chronicles. In his essay "Of Travel,"

Francis Bacon actually instructed them on writing travel diaries, encouraging observation of "the courts of princes, the courts of justice, the churches and monasteries, the walls and fortifications of cities and towns."[8] In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, travel diaries supplied much of the existing information about distant places. These works functioned as map supplements to areas few had explored. Thomas Mallon notes that "the earliest travel diaries were kept less for reasons of sentiment than geography.... The ship's log—like the household account and the commonplace book—is one of the forms to which the diary probably owes its murky start."[9]

While Europe enjoyed a strong travel diary tradition by the seventeenth century, the practice had only just begun in America. Explorers and pioneers often kept journals that they then sent to others who were planning to make similar journeys. A special type of travel diary, the war diary, appeared in the French and Indian Wars (1689-1763) and the American Revolution (1775-1783). Soldiers; army physicians; civilians; and even prisoners, despite the risk of punishment, kept war diaries.[10]

Evolving later, but derived from a combination of earlier diary types, the personal journal emphasizes the self, often in relationship with other people, events, and ideas. Entries are characterized by immediacy and self-reflection. Samuel Pepys' diary, written between 1660-1669, is a well-known example.[11] Nineteenth-century French diaries, commonly known as *journaux intimes*, developed greater intensity, self-preoccupation, confession, and passion. Emerging around the time of the French Revolution, the *journal intime* often questioned traditional values, existing literary forms, government, and even relationships between the sexes.[12]

By the twentieth century, journal writing had taken hold as a common practice among both professional and non-professional writers. In fact, within the past one hundred years, the message has become widespread that anyone, not merely those who happen to write for a living, can benefit from keeping a personal journal.[13] Today people widely recognize that journal writing is a vehicle for self-understanding, self-guidance, expanded creativity, and spiritual development.

Journal Writing as a Tool for Learning

Since the 1980s, there has been a burgeoning literature on the journal as an educational tool. An important source, especially for the use of diaries in kindergarten through high school education, is *The Journal Book*, edited by Toby Fulwiler. This book consists of articles published by primary, middle, and high school teachers representing a wide range of academic fields including English, history, foreign language, mathematics, and physics. These teachers describe how keeping diaries has enhanced their students' learning. A major theme repeated in these essays is that human beings find meaning in the world by exploring it through writing in their own colloquial or "easy

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talk" language as compared with the more formal jargon of textbooks and teachers. Educators use numerous types of journals in the classroom, including learning logs; interpretive diaries; reader-response journals; and dialogue journals, in which the student and teacher maintain an ongoing correspondence about issues related to the course of study.

Scholarship also explores the benefits of journal writing among adult learners. According to Pat Schneider, journal writing is closest to natural speech, and adults who keep journals learn to write without self-consciousness or inhibition. Journal writing also reveals thought processes and can often assist memory.[14] Journals are a safe place to practice writing daily and do not impose the restrictions of form that frequently accompany other types of writing. This informality is one of the reasons why using journals is a popular option in adult basic education and English For Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes.[15]

Additional benefits of writing diaries or journals in adult education include the ability to provide tangible evidence of mental processes, interact with and expand upon ideas, and chart the progress of intellectual growth. The internationally renowned adult educator Stephen Brookfield promotes personal writing as an important way for both students and educators to critically reflect on and make meaning of subjects under study.[16] Despite the interest in adult education scholarship over the past twenty years, however, little is written about the relationship between journal writing and aging or, more specifically, the benefits accrued to older students (age fifty-five and older) from the practice of keeping a diary.

Research Method and Sample

Fifteen members of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute participated in an interview regarding their past and current journal writing practices. Prior to OLLI recruiting them into the study, the University of Southern Maine's Human Subjects/Institutional Review Board approved the entire research protocol. OLLI then posted a notice in its newsletter inviting members who were experienced journal writers to participate in the study.[17] The semi-structured interview included questions related to personal history with diaries, current practice, perceived benefits, and ways in which journal writing enhanced learning. We taped and transcribed the interviews, which averaged forty-five minutes in length.

Three socio-demographic variables appear in this study: gender, age, and educational background. Of the fifteen participants, three were men. This ratio represents a smaller percentage of men to women than in the general OLLI membership (28% male). The average age of participants in this research sample was 69.2 years, as compared with 72 years in the general membership. The range of ages in the research sample was 57 to 81. This group was highly educated, with thirteen of the fifteen individuals holding

undergraduate degrees and eight holding graduate degrees. This self-selecting sample was even more highly educated than the overall OLLI community, of whose members 36% have bachelor's degrees and 32% graduate degrees. The sample included people with backgrounds in nursing, teaching, ministry, school guidance, business, library science, public administration, and psychotherapy.

The Efficacy of Journal Writing for Older Learners

During the research interview, we asked two questions that elicited responses about the perceived efficacy of keeping a journal: "What benefits do you derive from keeping a journal?" and "How does journal writing help you learn in both self-directed and formal educational settings?" In most cases, these two questions occupied the vast majority of the interview as people became animated about the implications of their writing and were motivated to tell stories and share details. By combining analyses of the data collected on these two interview questions, four overall themes emerged: learning to cope, fostering curiosity and discovery, facilitating the process of learning, and self-exploration.

That journals help teach people to cope was one of the strongest and nearly universal responses to these questions. Thirteen of the fifteen respondents talked in some manner about how their writing serves as a form of self-therapy. "It's almost as though my journal were my psychiatrist," confided one person. This sixty-two-year-old woman later went on to clarify and develop the therapeutic nature of her writing: "Say I'm feeling anger. If I get in touch with that emotion, then I can start thinking of the pros and cons of the cause of that anger...It's as if all the words were inside the body and they got all jumbled up and they don't make sense to me and I write them down and I read them and say, 'Oh, now I see.'" Another person expressed it differently: "I am able to work things out on paper."

Another way journal writing helps people cope is to offer a vehicle for sorting out relationships. Several people talked about how writing helped them clarify feelings about important relationships in their past (e.g., with one or both parents). In addition to increasing awareness about these relationships, in some situations, journal writing enabled the process of reconciliation. Others shared stories about current difficulties with a spouse or child and how their regular practice of writing helped them achieve perspective and insight.

Journals also facilitate coping by helping older persons make important personal decisions. Writing down ambivalent thoughts and feelings about a difficult decision and laying the evidence before one's own eyes has long been a benefit of keeping a diary. Participants in this study reported using their writing to sort out issues as consequential as the timing of retirement, moving to another state, and whether or not to seek reconciliation with a long-estranged family member.

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Three participants also spoke about chronicling their experiences as a way to cope with failing memory. One woman talked about not wanting to lose precious observations or sayings uttered by her grandchildren; thus, writing became an act of preservation. A seventy-five-year-old man spoke about writing and memory in the following manner:

> I think documenting helps. The reality of the situation is that it sort of implants things in your mind. Memory is a problem. It's a problem for a lot of us. So I write things down...Documenting it fixes it in my mind, and there is something there that I can locate if I need it in the future.

Coping with failing memory was also a theme in relation to re-reading one's journals. Interviewees talked about how much they enjoy sitting down with old diaries and reviewing events and reflections—even those painful to write at the time—and bringing these past experiences to life in the present. One retired librarian said about re-reading old entries, "I found some really important things that I would have lost had I not written them down."

A second overall theme that emerged from these data is that journal writing helps foster curiosity and discovery. "Journal writing has made me more curious about why things are the way they are," noted one subject. "When I write things down it helps me to ask, 'Why is this so, or how I can research this further, or why do I want to do this?' In other words, writing helps me to question." Another person spoke in detail about how her journals, which often included fragments of poetry, foster her curiosity:

> The other day a refugee wanted me to do an interview about getting older, what it's like...I spoke symbolically about climbing a mountain...when you're young you race but you don't look around and you're impatient. And then you slow down in the middle and at the top. Because you're going slower you look around and you see the light....Just putting down ideas on paper forces my mind to examine them more. It's as though I bring a thought out and put it on the table and feel it, look at it, listen to it more.

Another interviewee, a woman in her late fifties, also spoke about how writing has helped increase her powers of observation. She pays greater attention to herself and the world around her because of journal writing. "I see a word or I see a beautiful picture in a magazine and I will cut it out and glue it into my journal and write about it." Later in the interview, this woman, who remains a practicing psychotherapist, related this beautiful image about a family of cardinals that lives in her yard:

> Writing in my journal has helped me to see the wonders of walking out one's front door, you know, letting the day greet me and me greet the day....Every single snowstorm I cannot wait for the morning because my cardinal is going to be out in this particular bush. I mean he's just... there's nothing but white and this cardinal. And I

say to him, "Why can't you be smart like your partner? I mean, she's got a little brown on her. She doesn't have to be quite so flamboyant." I am constantly in awe of the ordinary.

Thirdly, these older journal writers described ways in which their writing facilitates the process of learning. This connection occurred in both the formal context of OLLI classes and situations that were more self-directed. Some participants claimed that writing regularly means that they pay closer attention to words. One male respondent spoke of his newfound interest in words: "Before I began to write, I used to glance over words I read and thought I knew what they meant but probably never did. But now when I see words I don't understand I go to the dictionary....Many times I am surprised at the true meaning of what that word is when I thought it meant something else."

Those in the practice of reflective writing often find that they take notes during OLLI classes and later go home and compose diary entries about them. One seventy-six-year-old woman jots down quotes she likes and other ideas during class onto three-by-five-inch index cards; before she goes to bed, she reads back through her cards and writes a journal entry about what these ideas mean to her. Several other people mentioned how writing has helped them read more deeply and effectively. A sixty-nine-year-old retired high school teacher made the following observation: "I write about what I read. I very often will pose a question as a result of reading a book or article, so my journal will help me to think further about this question....Writing is like a sounding board for me. I can think and investigate my reactions to things that I read." Journal writing also helps people learn via connections. "My favorite thing is connecting," said one interviewee. "When I write I often find that something connects to something else that I never thought was related. How I love it when that happens!"

In addition, journal writing helps people learn about the process of writing itself. Three of the fifteen research subjects reported how they have become so interested in writing that they have joined writing groups or have otherwise made a serious study of the practice. They credit their daily (or nearly daily) journal practice with sparking this interest. Moreover, the students have become better as well as more confident writers in good part because they write frequently in their journals. The quantity of writing seems to help improve the quality of writing.

Finally, journal writing has made an impact on the lives of these students by enabling them to explore and learn about themselves. Nearly every person talked during the interview about journals serving as a mirror into their own psyche. The discovery of self takes place both in the actual writing and also reading over earlier entries. "It's amazing how much I have grown" is a common mantra among long-term diarists who review their personal writing over time. As one sixty-two-year-old woman put it, "My journals tell me not only what my journey has been like but how far I have come. I've watched my growth...my maturing."

A unique way that journal writing helps people learn about themselves is by pointing out both discontinuities and continuities over time. "I came to realize that I am the same person I was twenty years ago, but I am also very different. I could see the change in myself." The gerontologist Robert Atchley asserts that the ability to recognize and appreciate salient continuities in values, commitments, and even activities across various stages in the human life span can make important contributions to well-being in later age.[18] A personal journal can be, and often is, an internal bridge-building tool for older persons.

The solitude required for writing turns out to be another contributing factor to self-discovery. Several individuals talked about the contemplative nature of their writing and how important solitude and quiet are to them in the overall scope of life. "I go back to that concept of quiet time," a sixty-eight-year-old retired minister said. "It's a way to reflect. I think it is really important in my spiritual life to just stop whatever I'm doing and spend time thinking about my life. Journal writing is a wonderful way to do this."

Writing helps people work through difficulties and transitions, and what often occurs on the other side of this change is the realization of a new level of consciousness. One interviewee referred to this process as moving from one "spiritual plateau" to another. She characterized the current place in her own journey as one of a "great spurt of writing" that has edged her along to another level of consciousness. "I am reaching a deeper understanding of myself. One would think that at my age I would be close to a complete understanding! But I don't think we ever reach that."

Conclusion

In a contemporary novel about an eighty-one-year-old World War I veteran living in a nursing home, Jonathan Hull speaks through his journal-keeping protagonist Patrick Delaney: "At a certain age you realize that living life is only the first step, then you've got to figure out what to make of the experiences themselves."[19] The centuries-old practice of writing down one's thoughts and feelings speaks to one of the most compelling challenges of growing old—the quest to derive meaning from many years of lived experience. Writing has long been, and continues to be, one the most useful tools for people to reflect on, recollect, interpret, and thereby bestow significance upon, experience.

In her highly acclaimed memoir *The Measure of My Days*, written at the age of eighty-four, writer, actor, suffragist, and Jungian analyst Florida Scott-Maxwell took up what she called her "notebook" and set about the important work of reflection and the creation of meaning through a personal journal. "Age is a desert of time—hours, days, weeks, years perhaps—with little to do. So one has ample time to face everything one has had, been, done; gather them all in: the things that came from outside, and those from inside. We have time at last to make them truly ours."[20] The author goes on to make

a compelling argument on behalf of the integration and synthesis such reflective writing facilitates: "You only need claim the events of your life to make yourself yours. When you truly possess all you have been and done, which may take some time, you are fierce with reality. When at last age has assembled you together, will it not be easy to let it all go?"[21]

Learning to cope with life's daily events and challenges, nurturing a sense of curiosity and discovery, enhancing one's ability to learn, and exploring the depths of one's own heart and mind are ways that fifteen OLLI students have benefited and derived meaning from their practice of keeping a journal. As one sixty-nine-year-old retired teacher commented, "I think journal writing gives reality and meaning, a sequence somehow....When you write you see how events and conversations are related. I do believe we become what we think and what we write." Journal writing, to again quote the woman who takes time on winter days to admire the male cardinal, helps people be "in awe of the ordinary." And awe is quite an apt response, even if the ordinary is nothing more—or less—than the gritty and glorious details of everyday life.

Notes

1. Although some writers and critics perceive minor technical differences between "journal" and "diary," this article employs these terms interchangeably.
2. See Sharyn Lowenstein, "A Brief History of Journal Keeping," in *The Journal Book*, ed. Toby Fulwiler (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1987), 87.
3. See Harry Berman, "From the Pages of my Life," in *Generations* 15, no. 2 (1991); Fulwiler, *The Journal Book*
4. See St. Augustine, *Confessions* (London: Penguin Books, 1961).
5. Berman, "From the Pages," 33.
6. See Herbert E. Plutshow, *Japanese Travel Diaries of the Middle Ages* (doctoral dissertation, Columbia University, New York, 1973).
7. See Berman, "From the Pages," 33.
8. Francis Bacon, "Of Travel," in *The Essays: Or, Counsels, Civil and Moral: And Wisdom of the Ancients* (Boston: Little Brown, 1958), 113-114.
9. Thomas Mallon, *A Book of One's Own: People and Their Diaries* (New York: Penguin, 1984), 42-43.
10. See Lowenstein, "A Brief History," 90.
11. See Robert Lathan and William Mathews, eds., *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970).
12. See Lowenstein, "A Brief History," 93.
13. See Julia Cameron, *The Right to Write: An Invitation and Initiation into the Writing Life* (New York: J. P. Tarcher, 1998). There are a host of such cheerleading-type books in the contemporary marketplace.
14. See Pat Schneider, *The Writer As An Artist: A New Approach to Writing Alone and with Others* (Los Angeles: Lowell House, 1994).
15. See Sandra Kerka, "Journal Writing and Adult Learning," *ERIC Digest* no. 174 (Ohio State University ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, 1996).
16. See Stephen Brookfield, *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1995); Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1999).
17. We defined "experienced" as currently keeping a journal and maintaining a minimum of three years' consistent practice. For an earlier article based on these fifteen OLLI member interviews, see E. Michael Brady and Harry Z. Sky, "Journal Writing Among Older Learners," in *Educational Gerontology* 29, no. 2 (2003): 151-163. In addition to answering different research questions, this article includes a review of the scant literature that exists describing the relationship between aging and journal writing.
18. See Robert Atchley, "A Continuity Theory of Normal Aging," in *The Gerontologist* 29, no. 2 (1989): 183-190.
19. Jonathan Hull, *Losing Julia* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2000), 282.
20. Florida Scott-Maxwell, *The Measure of My Days* (New York: Penguin, 1968), 41.
21. Ibid., 42.

Interview

E. Michael Brady

SMR *How do the research you conducted and its results fit within related bodies of research occurring at OLLI and in the field of lifelong learning as a whole?*

In the larger view, "In Awe of the Ordinary: Older Learners and Their Journals" is about how people in their later years are striving to learn, grow, and adapt to change. In this sense, my study complements a burgeoning research literature—in the United States and internationally—that explores ways in which older adults are learning and striving to remain healthy and productive. The specific issue addressed in my study, however—the use of personal journals or diaries among older persons—has not been exhaustively researched. In fact, I find it surprising that, while you can go into almost any bookstore and find entire shelves of recently published volumes dedicated to improving one's writing, starting a personal journal, and related themes regarding self-improvement, there is a dearth of published research that investigates ways in which these writing practices enhance learning or personal growth. It is my hope that this study will help to encourage dialogue about the benefits of journal writing as an educational tool.

SMR *As an educator, what similarities and differences do you see between older and younger students in relation to teaching and learning?*

We have actually been examining this question in a formal manner here at the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute. Here are some of the things we have learned thus far: First and foremost, the older students who attend OLLI and the hundreds of other lifelong learning institutes around the country do so voluntarily. They do not come to school for degrees, diplomas, certificates, or credentials of any kind. They come to learn. This circumstance has a myriad of implications for teachers. Instructors do not have to question the motivation of their students. While the expectation in a typical OLLI course might be for students to read one book, many will choose to read three or four. Because of the enthusiasm and all-out learning spirit of many older students, the mere posing of one fertile question could occupy an entire class period with discussion. Teachers tell us that the long and deep life experience of OLLI students presents both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, skillful teachers will use their students' experiences to help build a richer and more textured conversation about the subject being addressed. There are times, however, when one or more students in a course know more about the subject than the teacher. On rare occasions, this situation may erupt into competition and a less-than-collaborative environment.

SMR *In what ways can the academy enhance multi-generational learning? What do you perceive as the benefits and drawbacks of such a learning environment?*

This is an area in which we have a lot of work ahead of us. The forty-year tradition of lifelong learning institutes has primarily been one of older learners coming together and more or less segregating themselves on college campuses. The assumption has been that elders feel more comfortable with their peers and can enhance the enjoyment of the classroom experience without "mixing it up" with traditional college students. But in my view, the generations are separated quite enough in general society (e.g., elderly housing, senior centers, organizations such as AARP, etc.). College and university campuses ought to be a natural forum for young and old to interact with each other on behalf of the common goal of learning. An opportune place to design such intergenerational engagements would be a history curriculum. Imagine, for example, having a course on the Great Depression of the 1930s offered in the regular degree-granting curriculum and having older students who personally experienced this period sitting side-by-side with twenty-one year olds. Eureka—what magic might ensue! Another approach would be to have courses—both the semester-long ones offered for academic credit and the eight-week, non-credit courses at OLLI—team taught by one full-time USM faculty member and somebody from OLLI with a mixed-generation group of students. The OLLI membership includes a large number of retired teachers as well as many individuals who worked outside of education but who have become highly expert about specific historical events or periods. OLLI has begun conversations with USM's History Department to try to create such an inter-generational experience. Nothing concrete has come of these conversations as yet, but I remain optimistic. My feeling is that as long as members of OLLI have a choice between taking age-integrated or age-segregated courses, there will be few if any drawbacks to such an approach.

SMR *Do you think that the same benefits OLLI students derive from keeping journals might also be realized by younger students?*

In my "regular job" here at the university, I am a professor of Adult Education in the College of Education and Human Development. For years I have advocated the use of journals among matriculated graduate students in our program. While these are not "young" students by any means—the average age is about forty—my graduate students are typically one generation younger than the average OLLI student. And yes—the benefits of keeping a journal are legion for these students as well. Among their many virtues, journals provide tangible evidence of mental processes, enhance the action-reflection cycle, chronicle important ideas learned in classes and from reading, improve the quality of writing, and help people derive meaning from their experiences.

SMR *Do you plan to continue research in this area (e.g., journal writing) and/or others related to lifelong learning?*

Yes, I would like to do more with journal writing. I have been keeping a journal myself since 1970 and continue to be fascinated by the process. The time I spend with OLLI is limited, however, and we have other priorities on our research agenda. As one possible follow-up to the study reported here, I would like to pursue more deeply how journal writing enhances the learning process. I feel we just scratched the surface of that issue in this first study. Learning itself is such a complex and multidimensional phenomenon—some even say "mysterious"—and there numerous possibilities for further investigation. I am also interested in teaching practices. One of the things that makes teaching especially interesting in places such as OLLI is that they use a "peer-teaching" model. In other words, older learners teach each other. Once again, this aspect of learning/teaching presents fascinating research possibilities. Finally, OLLI has recently begun to offer service-learning courses, so I would like to explore them and the related but wider issue of civic engagement in the lives of older learners.