

Steve Glines

The handwritten

a lyric essay

I once spent well over \$200 on a Mont Blanc fountain pen. I used it for two or three years until the nib had worn down to a razor sharp edge that effortlessly sliced through the pages of my journal. The pen was guaranteed for life but exercising that guarantee included the cost of shipping, handling and insurance or more than the cost of a lifetime supply of cheap BIC pens. So I gave the pen body to a very grateful young lady who was starting a diary. For her, getting a second hand Mont Blanc was a paradise worth saving for: an investment of about \$50, to get a world class writing instrument. I bought BIC pens (or their equivalent) in boxes of a dozen after that.

When I was in a scribbling mood I would take my journal to a café in Harvard Square Cambridge, usually the Café Pamplona (on the corner of Bow and Arrow Streets) in the evening or the Café Piroshka (in Holyoke Center on Dunster Street) in the morning, and scribble for several hours about life, love and my alternating bouts of ennui and angst. Most of what I wrote was awful but rain or shine I had promised myself that I would write at least one full page every day. At my peek I may have written ten, fifteen, twenty or more pages in longhand, day after day.

My goal was to teach myself how to write. I believed that since I could *tell* a good story I could learn how to *write* a good story and since telling a good story was a result of good mind – mouth coordination it made sense to me that writing a good story would require good mind – hand coordination. To that end I began a journal. I think the theory is mostly true and I think in practice it works. I wrote in longhand for years, writing around a million and a half words, but I ultimately turned to a typewriter then a computer but that would take much more than a decade.

At the beginning it was very difficult to find something suitable to write. I could talk to the other denizens of the café's for hours then turn to my journal and have nothing at all to say. Those conversations have not been wasted; they have formed the basis for a lot of what I've written about

over the years and some of my favorite characters were those I encountered the bars and café's of Cambridge. I wrote about the weather more than once when I simply could not translate a story I could tell with my tongue into a story I could tell with my fingers. It's not always an easy translation. There are many stories I've told "off the cuff" for years that I'm only just beginning to be able to write about. The truth is I still occupy two parallel linguistic universes, the one I can speak about and the one I can write about. I am finally more comfortable in the universe I can write about. I am so much smarter, wittier, and brilliant and articulate in print than in person.

In person I find myself getting angry when I cannot find the right word or remember the right fact in the middle of a conversation. I've wondered if, in person, I might have early onset of senility but my writing gets better and better.

People who write in journals are called diarists not journalists. Journalists are writers who, like formal poets, must write in a very strict format. The who, what, when, where and why of journalism starts with the most general statement about a news item (who got killed) and gets progressively more detailed as the story lengthens. The "juice" in a journalist work is always at the end. Newspapers and other purveyors of journalism are in the primary business of selling advertising space not literature so the honey only serves to drag a reader in front of advertisements, much like the unavailable but beautiful babes at a car show. The reason for the journalists form is that an editor should be able to arbitrarily cut from the bottom to make the article fit the available space. Very few journalists are truly accomplished in this art form and it shows in the butchery of articles on the inside pages of our nations daily newspapers. Editors cut to fit and articles often end abruptly, missing information hinted at but not delivered.

Diarists on the other hand write sequentially and most often about their personal lives or about the immediate world in which they live. There was a period in my life when I despaired of ever writing anything of import and I fantasized that my journals might define my era and be compared favorably to the diaries of Samuel Pepes. I read the abridged version of Pepes' diaries and they contained the same kinds of stories I

was writing about except that during the course of his writings he moved from being a middle class English civil servant to one of the highest appointed positions in England, that of Secretary to the Admiralty. The traditional British Admiralty Board consisted of an appointed politician known as The First Lord of the Admiralty, a position Winston Churchill held, The First Sea Lord, the top professional seaman and The Secretary to the Admiralty, the top civil servant, held by Samuel Pepes. Two hundred years separated Churchill from Pepes. The best I can say I did in the decade or so I was writing my diaries was to move from assistant art director at the East/West Journal to assistant art director at Sail Magazine. Not a lot to brag about when comparing myself to Samuel Pepes.

I wrote 15 ¼ volumes in longhand before abandoning my journals. I still occasionally pick up the last volume and scribble a paragraph or two but the sprit is gone and disuse of the muscles used to hold a pen now quickly lead to cramps. Before I began the journals I would outline a story on 4 x 6 cards in detail before beginning to write or type a rough draft. It was torture. I realized that if I was to become a fluid writer I needed to find a way to express myself on paper as easily as I could in air. After several false starts with a loose life folder I settled on a bound notebook.

Volume I was one of those green mottled cardboard backed “composition” notebooks sewn in one large signature with 120 pages. The idea of filling a book this size was daunting. I wrote the date on the cover: June 1, 1972. By the time I committed to this “journalism” I had already written quite a lot but had been hedging my future. Would writing remain a psychologically required hobby or would it play a large part in my economic future?

When I was in my early teens I announced to my mother that it was my intent to become a writer to which she wearily replied, “Well, you come by it naturally. You come from a long line of failed and petty literati.”

Writing had become a challenge, an urgent necessity that, at the age of 20, I felt I was not making the kind of progress I assumed I would be making if I were to become a professional writer. Drastic efforts were needed if I was to become accomplished, if posterity were to know my

name. In the first page of Journal Volume I wrote with my fountain pen,

“June 1, 1972 – Today was the start of my new life. I woke up at 6:00 A.M. and wrote a letter to Suds Macklem (after my father died a neighbor, Suds Macklem, became my intellectual mentor). I told him that I had decided once and for all to become a writer.

What I had lacked was self-discipline. So to correct my lack of self-discipline I have taken several big steps, which, at least psychologically, help to order my mind. The major steps I have taken are to start this diary, get up at 6:00 A. M. everyday except Sunday and to write at least one hour every day before breakfast.
...”

On Saturday, November 4 1972 I write,

“... It is a cold wet November day, almost winter. They say it's snowing in western Massachusetts.
Poem {It is winter as the sky, that cold grey body that hovers, threateningly, over our heads from November till April, hangs low and absorbs every drop of heat with its cold, cold wind blown rain.}

I haven't much energy today due to getting drunk last night, GAC, Casablanca. I can feel myself falling into a rut. When I started this journal I was destitute, I had no money, no job. Now I have a job ...

It took me four months, almost to a day to complete this volume. It will take considerably longer for the next as it is 400 very large pages.”

An annotation on the inside back cover reads 40,000, my estimate of the number of words I had written. Not yet a novel.

The next 14 volumes were large Smyth sewn signature “Record” books sold by the Harvard Coop. Volume II had 432 numbered pages. I began the volume on November 5th 1972 and finished May 17th 1973. The last

entry was 6 pages long. I recorded that I was paid \$10 for the pilot chapter for a book on John Keats' *Ode On a Grecian Urn*. The job was to write a "Cliff Notes" on a series of well-known poets. I did three or four sample chapters but Simon and Schuster eventually passed on the project. I debate on abandoning, temporally, my life in Cambridge for an adventure in Newfoundland. I eventually did go to Newfoundland but not for several more volumes. "It's frustrating not doing anything and not being able to decide what to do," I wrote, "I am riddled with indecision." I agonized about going into the typesetting business and where to raise the money if I did. I end with, "I have, in the confines of this volume gone from abject poverty to relative opulence and back to poverty again. On the other hand I have a lot more experience now than I did 100,000 words ago." On the endleaf I note: "total words since June 1, ~150,000."

For twelve more volumes I scribbled every day. Poetry, philosophy, and outlines of books I wanted to write, snapshot portraits of characters and a never-ending series of complaints about my love life, ennui or angst.

Volume XIV (14) was the last volume I completely finished by hand. I had given up my fountain pen by volume III and by the end of volume 14 I was no longer obsessed with my daily entries. I began on August 11, 1980 and finally filled the last of 432 pages on February 10, 1986. The last entry was, "The next volume will be generated electronically and bound in a three ring notebook." and so it was. After three hundred or so pages of complaints about my life I bought another bound "journal" but it was not the same. My hands cramped when I attempted to write longhand. My writing just "petered out."

By 1986 my life as a professional writer was at a standstill. I had not sold a literary piece in years. I had abandoned literary writing, abandoned graphic design and academia. For the next 15 years I wrote technical books, political diatribes and "edgy" columns in technical magazines. My daughters became the center of my life and I gave away my Everyman's edition of the Diaries of Samuel Pepes.