Why I Journal

I have written a lot over the years, but there is only one place I write consistently. That place is in my journals. These journals are a series of diaries and notebooks filled with daily entries about the events of my day and my opinions on them. Other content, such as lists, trackers, and thoughts on my faith, get woven into my journal entries, even though the bulk of them are written outside of my journals. I always date my journal entries, a sign of good record keeping, and I always write them by hand.

My first intentional journal entry was about my baptism. As an eight-year old, I wrote because my mom told me I should. She gave me a journal with a Renoir painting on the cover, although I didn't know that at the time. I decided I liked how it looked because she told me it was cute. As a child, I would often take my opinions directly from my parents or older sister, who were always around, and I almost always did as I was told. I still tend to be obedient to this day, as a way of showing respect and admiration for those who give me advice, but it was different when I was little. Back then, I was inexperienced with discovering my own opinions and I simply wanted to live up to others' expectations. I was led to journal by a desire to please others, but as I sat down to write, it was on my own terms. I did not journal for them, I journaled for myself. As I wrote, I sorted through the expectations and external opinions in my mind and isolated what I truly agreed with.

My entries for the next several years were sparse, but in the beginning of 2020, I made a goal to write in my journal every single day. I wrote that I wanted to "reflect on my life and make it better." And so I started what would become a multi-year routine. I was determined to do it. Yes, I skipped days, took week-long breaks, and just didn't want to do it some days, but I always picked up the journal again and wrote another entry.

I filled journal after journal, to the point where I started to ask for journals as my birthday present. I remember my uncle gifting me a journal with a black leather cover and replaceable papers. My mom was skeptical that I would need it, since I still hadn't finished my other journal. She thought I might not use it all. But I did. The clasp was worn thin by the time I moved on to my next journal.

Once the Covid-19 pandemic started, I had much more time in the mornings to journal. My journaling habit became so ingrained into my daily routine that I wouldn't eat breakfast until I had finished. These entries gave me an important sense of time when there was little variation from day to day. They helped me to keep track of my progress and stay focused on what matters to me, which kept me motivated. When I put how I chose to spend my time on paper, I was able to better reflect and recognize which accomplishments were most valuable to me. The difference my efforts made was reflected in my habit trackers and in the way I filled the pages of my journals. Because my progress was written down, it was made concrete, even measurable. That made it so much more rewarding.

Then, my family and I bought an RV and traveled across the country. My journals became a place to record all the amazing places we went and what we did there, including hiking

in Yellowstone and seeing alligators in Florida. I enjoyed thinking about and reliving the good parts of my day as I wrote them down. When I couldn't remember something, I could look back to jog my memory. This was when I started to regularly use "journal" as a verb.

In high school, I gave up several hobbies to make time for my school work, but my journaling survived the cut. I prioritized journaling in its analog form, hoping to maintain the personal aspect of it in a technology-based world full of distractions and comparisons. Because of the school schedule, I had to change the time of day I journal, which could have broken my habit if it were not for my determination to continue.

But why do I continue? And why have I always kept my journals despite the many times I have cleaned out my old things to make room for the new?

It's not because there's a practical purpose to my journaling. After all, it's so long and fundamentally ordinary that I don't expect anyone else to ever read it. Not my family, not my posterity, not even my future self, most likely. I write for myself, in the moment, and for the small chance I will reread it one day.

I'm proud of being able to say I've written every day for years. I try to remember that I pursue goals because they make me a better person, not so that I can say I've done something. Yet on those days when lifting a pen feels like lifting a brick, this motivating force makes itself useful as I tap into it to write my daily entry. But that's not the whole story.

I love the satisfaction of filling the last page in a journal I've had for months. It's quite like the feeling of crossing off the last thing on a long to-do list or eliminating the last piece of white on a coloring page. It's a feeling of completion, of having all the creativity and the flexibility contained and unified. But that's not quite it either.

It motivates me to improve. But so do to-do lists that I throw away after I'm done with them. They both serve the purpose of helping me hold myself accountable and remember where I am and where I want to be. So what's so special about journals?

What I write is mundane. So much is unoriginal, since I probably did the same thing a couple days before. Yet it becomes precious as it ages, kind of like a time capsule. I find hidden treasures every time I read old entries. I appreciate the chaos of sloppy handwriting and misspellings because it is my mind at that time. Journaling captures my thoughts at a specific moment of time, freezes them in action. It shows my perspective, my opinions, and my voice. I am more confident in myself because I know where I came from, and I know that those experiences are written down. They feel more valid when they are preserved. That way, I know that if I ever doubt, I can find myself again in the pages I created.

Actively writing in my journal changes the way I think about my day. It leads me to be more thoughtful and objective instead of letting disappointment or frustration take control. It encourages me to reflect on myself and recognize how I have improved, as well as identify

further changes I want to make in my life. It gives me a chance to be grateful each day. In a way, it gives my day additional value by simply recognizing it for what it is and the value it has.

This common occurrence of being sustained through the act of journaling is exemplified by my experience one day when I was disappointed with my performance on a math test. That night, I wrote that I was frustrated and "took some time to mourn" for the rest of the day. By simply stating my emotions, they immediately felt much more manageable. I was better able to see the good in my day and forgive the bad, especially as I recognized that I would have a new day tomorrow. Rewarding moments of journal writing like this incrementally influence me to become a more optimistic person overall.

So, my journaling preserves my perspectives at the time, and as it does so it influences my perspective today. My journals remind me that each day I experience is just a part of the weeks, months, and years that make up my life. They help me to remember that I am so much more than just right now. This is why I choose to designate regular time to journal. My journaling is how I keep my voice afloat in a world that tries to drown each individual opinion in a sea of online voices and pull them into alignment with the rest. When I say, "At least I've done one thing right today," I'm usually referring to my journaling.