

# On Keeping A Notebook

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I feel an impulsive need to write things down, so I decided to research notebook-keeping as an act of vulnerability and catharsis – the practice of honest self-documentation. I conducted my research through a literary lens, reading Joan Didion’s essay “On Keeping A Notebook” and sifting through the musician Cat Power’s autobiographical lyrics. Notebooks allow us to tell our stories as we know them to be true. It’s a place we are allowed to candidly recount the events of our lives. Each little detail we jot down provides insight; we can hear our own stories as they unfolded in our minds.

My own journaling process often involves tearing up pages, scribbling, rewriting, and feverishly recording song lyrics. Naturally, I echo this process of revision in my paintings. I found myself painting my pure thoughts, and then becoming embarrassed by them, painting them over until I was satisfied with the mood and message each panel portrayed. Imagery of houses in conjunction with my intimate and somber text illustrate my feelings about leaving home. I’m on the brink of being eighteen; that is what is most prevalent in my mind.

My paintings are installed to form a corner, as I always took to the corner to read and write at school, hiding in my own world. I’m reclaiming the corner and opening it up as a place of empowerment and validation. Instinctually, I portrayed my inner emotions as best I could, but I didn’t know the story I was telling until the last panel was done. Similar to real life, we don’t know the story until it is written.

I invite you to step into this rather intimate and potent corner of my mind, filled with nostalgia for my childhood and the angst, delusion, and hope that surrounds my adulthood. This project has taught me that recording our personal and collective experiences, is emotionally and morally valuable. Through journaling, we can never miss out on our own lives, because we always have a page to call back to.

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**Part 1.**  
**Note To Self**

I can recall running my hands through every drawer in my father's desolate house the evening he passed away. I was looking desperately for answer in the form of words. I couldn't stop asking: how could he disappear so fast without remains to explain his absence? The fact that I would never hear his voice or read his words again was an impossible truth that I couldn't face. He was the one to tell me to breathe, to call in sick for me when I didn't have the work done, who told me I could do my work, and do it well; he always knew what to say. Determined, I rummaged through cabinets and cupboards hoping to find some kind of documentation. In my experience, notebooks are where answers are kept. At last, I found a sizable stack of black and brown Moleskine journals tucked away in his spare room. My eyes scanned each page, desperate for a sign of life. At that moment, only words of his own would provide me with the proof of him I needed to get me through this. That's when I realized a sad truth, a person's words are the hardest thing to miss, they are rarely found anywhere but in air and on paper after that person is gone. It's hard to recall the sound of his voice now, and the pacing of his words, and even the most important things he has said to me. I needed his words to comfort me, just this once, and when I came to the last blank page of the last journal, I knew the answer I was looking for wouldn't lie so obviously. He was an private man.

My mother confirmed this cognizance, "You're father wasn't much of a writer."

I shuddered at the thought. How could he not keep documentation of himself? How could he fall into thin air, disappear behind big white hospital doors, zap away in fluorescent light without something as small as a note explaining why? How could he leave me in the dark? My mind would not rest. Then I noticed a murky-brown glass sitting at the table where he worked everyday. His hot water and lemon, just barely sour. His tortilla chips not yet stale. His laptop charger lit up green, still charging. His countertop still sticky with his favorite salsa. A book sat nearby, entitled, *The Obstacle is The Way*. The murky-brown liquid sitting in the glass, half missing, but reeking of alcohol. This didn't sit well with me, so I searched on; I found he was an avid drinker and collector of spirits. As well as a collector of vitamins, teas, protein powders and medication. In his vitamin drawer, next to a Christmas card from me and class photos of me and my brother; there was a remnant of life. A blue-indigo handwritten sticky note read:

1. *Stop Drinking.*
2. *Exercise.*

I wish he had left more words for me, at least more reassuring ones. But in some ways this was a sufficient answer, it answers why, though it doesn't feel like enough. I expected old high school notebooks filled with confessions and hopes, yellow notepads filled with ideas for his company, leather bound journals brimming with old stories of him and my mom in college. I longed for a to-do list of what was next for me now that he was gone. A hand written letter explaining the situation. "I'll be back soon," written on a napkin. But he managed to convey his reasonings for his absence so simply without really saying anything at all. The proof was in the pudding, in the note, in the cup.

We don't get to choose the way we leave, and we don't always get to decide what we leave and what that says of our character. Unless of course, we document ourselves with intent, making a conscious effort to capture who we are and when. We make efforts to write down addresses of old friends, phrases heard in passing, names of our role models, street corners where we had first swigs of peach Schnapps, random ramblings of anger, or just simply lists of mundane things like groceries, plans, or upcoming soccer games. This is what I wished for, and I

think that is exactly what most of us would wish to leave behind in retrospect; little pieces of life as we know it. When tragedy strikes, it's natural to be at a loss for words, and so I grasped for the words of others, for his; constantly. But it all just came back to that note. Then, I realized that what we prioritize is what becomes of us, or what we don't leave behind, in many ways, tells so much of a person's life. In my dad's case, this idea rings true; your words aren't the impactful thing in retrospect, what you said is so often forgotten; but what your leftovers say of you, that's what lingers in people's minds when all's said and done. Much of what is remembered of our lives is formed when we aren't around anymore to comment. What is remembered of us, are things that we cannot predict in our lives, only things that death or time can unveil. We will all become memories, is what I am told so often, but can't we make an effort to leave better ones? To tell better stories is to live better lives. What we leave on the page is important; it gives the people we love memories to hold onto. To keep a notebook is to not be forgotten or misunderstood. Notes give people places to continue to imagine us. Pages are places where people can live forever, or at least it feels that way to me. To document, to write rather, is to have something important to say; and what that is counts especially in the aftermath. We don't really know the "story," until it is over, until the house is empty and the man no longer sits in the chair, but his drinking cup lingers; suggesting an ending.

## **Part 2.**

### **There Are Many of Us**

Some stories tell themselves. Others are telling once given time, or new context. As author Margaret Atwood puts it, "When you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood. It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or to someone else." Stories are formed in hindsight, and to me, this defines why note taking is the most important aspect of storytelling and, dare I say, life. Notes reveal deep desires, unsolved conflicts, unruly and wretched thoughts; mostly the things we cannot say aloud because we would be seen as troubled, difficult, or stubborn. Sometimes notes are just addresses, doodles, phrases - but the act of writing things down implies a deeper significance that what is at face value.

Note taking can be especially appreciated by those of us seeking answers; such as teenagers. Notebooks allow us to revisit and catalogue the process of becoming someone, or unbecoming someone, particularly in our youth. The seemingly mundane thoughts that populate the pages of our journals, middle school diaries, and math book sketches are all stories in waiting. The words we chose to jot down tell so much about our development and personhood. This is especially potent in our youth as we struggle to form our moral standings or system of values. Teenagers are impressionable, yes, but that's what makes their ideas even more valuable - they are not jaded or biased. Teenagers, at heart, are sentimental, as they are feeling everything for the first time. They are constantly waiting for life to "begin," and fail to realize that they are in it right now, but this works in our favor in the case of notetaking because we express ourselves in a way that is unrefined and unapologetic. They aren't careful about how they say what they feel is important. For this, I see note taking as a necessity for people in their youth. If we pay no mind to how life is now, how will we be able to pinpoint how we have changed? How will we be able to pause, to be sentimental, to be sincere? Notebooks allow us to keep tabs on who we are, and they allow a self-reflectiveness, encourage messiness, and thrive off of inconclusiveness that no other forms of writing allow.

Joan Didion's essay, "On Keeping a Notebook," explores the ideas of why she, herself, has a intimate relationship with keeping notes: "We forget all too soon the things we thought we could never forget. We forget the loves and the betrayals alike, forget what we whispered and what we screamed, forget who we were. I have already lost touch with a couple of people I used to be." To me this earnestness reeks of youth and nostalgia, and in a good way. I am in favor of sentimentality, earnestness, and sincerity - whose true depth I have only ever seen expressed in literature, and when discussing youth. Being nostalgic, and longing for the past is only appreciated in art and writing. Think about how odd it would be to be consistently earnest, how dangerous it would be to always being thinking about what came before, how sick your friends would become of you if you spoke solely of the past. These are topics reserved for the note takers, the sentimental, the nostalgic, and the young. It's for those of us who refuse to see life only at face value. For those of us still grappling with an unrealized desire. The act of documentation of self-aware or embarrassing thoughts gives room for brains to breathe and excuses for hands to write what must not be forgotten. The diary is not just for the teenage girl, the accomplished writer, or the journalist - it's an act that is simple and rewarding with time. It is an act of self reflectiveness and requires exercising your self awareness, you invest time into your notes, and they will invest knowledge into you.

Didion argues that only a certain type of character feels this anxiety to remember, and of course, it is those of us who have lost something or have a great fear of losing. Writing, for those of us who feel such a need, is the only way to ensure that we have not missed out. It's the only way we can go back in time, relive things, and make sure that every little detail matters. We, note book keepers, make things "meaningful" in the act of writing them down. Didion describes this as a, "compulsion," a drawing of a person to a page. Keeping a notebook is a rather necessary act for those of us who are simply unsatisfied with the way in which the world presents itself. So, we take to the pen and paper in order to rewrite our histories while they are being made, even if we are unaware that we are doing so. Little unconnected notes can tell stories we weren't aware of at all in the midst of them, we are restless to connect the dots as writers. Didion confesses that part of writing what is "true," is also writing what we wish to be true. What we wished had happened is a large facet of what indeed occurred. To leave out our ramblings, our embellishments of plot, is to take away from the potency of life's many happenings. Writers don't only feel a need to document, but to redo, to control and connect unlikely things in order to find solace in the entropy of life's many unprecedented happenings. This lack of control, this need to be heard, to be honest, to find meaning summarizes that annoying state of "ennui" in teenage life. The diary is marketed to us in our youth for a reason, we are trying to grapple with who we are and who we wish to be. Writing is cathartic in that way, and our recollection of this period of life is key to understanding our development.

My notebook pages are filled with lyrics by Cat Power, for she is the only person who captures youth with sincerity and rawness. Her lyrics capture what it truly feels like trying to unveil the person we want to be, and feel freed of who we thought we should be - her early albums touch on such intimate details of childhood memories and adult fears, she delves into what it means to *be* a young woman with such care and sentimentality; much like the way one keeps a diary in their youth. In her 1998 album, *Moon Pix*, she delves into feelings of grief, loss of innocence, and vulnerability in young relationships. Much of the album also captures nostalgia in a way that feels more honest than any film, song, or book I've seen surrounding this topic, because she shares rather private ramblings with her audience. Her words are so relevant to this subject matter because her lyrics reveal what our notebooks often do too; all the things we

cannot quite articulate anywhere else in any other form. But, almost magically, she does articulate them. In *Metal Heart*, Cat Power belts out, "It's damned if you don't and it's damned if you do/ Be true, cause they'll/ lock you up in a sad, sad zoo/ Oh, hidy-hidy-hiding, whatcha trying to prove?/ By hidy-hidy-hiding/You're not worth a thing." She touches on this idea that there are so many versions of ourselves; who others wish we were, who we wish we were, who we could become if we do everything as planned, who we could become if we fall off the wagon. Power's words resonate so much with me because she explains this part of growing up that is so difficult to understand: in someone's eyes your ideals, dreams and hopes could be seen as obsolete, but that doesn't matter, you should be true to your desires because someone's always going to tell you, "you're wrong." The way she puts it is so empowering to someone who is young. If you follow other's blind perceptions of who you are, you will get trapped, in this "sad zoo," where those who sell their hearts; their truth, spend their lives. This is a great fear that arises in adolescence. Who am I really? Which version of myself will I become? Do I even get to decide? All of these questions echo in Power's music. "Sew your fortunes on a string/ And hold them up to light/ Blue smoke will take/A very violent flight." Again, this very adolescent fear that who we really are is not who we say to be. If we were to hold up the things that define us in the world, our "fortunes," to light, many of them would burn, few would shine. They would be seen as vapid, transparent, and irrelevant. Her lyrics highlight this angst toward being a "fraud" when we are in the midst of becoming ourselves, because we don't know quite yet who to be. The things that define us are hard to measure, and that's why I believe it to be so necessary to keep record of your emotions when they are most raw. Cat Power's lyrics are so heartfelt and easy to relate to because they don't shy away from earnestness, they don't hide behind irony or other very human tactics employed to avoid judgement. Her words tell stories of horrendous and melancholy things, but they do it boldly, they read the way a diary does, and in this way she reveals so many facets of who she is; as if to reveal there is not just one version of her living in these songs. There are voices of the past, the future and the present. A voice that is worried as well as hopeful. What she chooses to write, and the way she chooses to write these narratives - reveal so much internal conflict. It's a history of herself, written by her, for her. You can tell from her words, like Didion, she feels this great compulsion to write it all down, to capture it all as it was in her mind.

The sentiment that I hope echoes through this paper is that our notebooks are places where we are allowed to be raw, to be scared and to be absolutely unsure of what we are and who we will become. When we look back on what we write, we can see these threads of thought, we can see themes; and therefore: we can see what has brought us to where we stand now. Didion concludes, as her reason to write notes: "Remember what it was to be me: that is always the point," but I think it's a bit broader than that for me personally. The act of writing is not about remembering, it's about capturing a moment when we are in the zone, when we have that feverish need to get it all out. In the afterglow, it's about what those compulsive words reveal to its reader. It's about looking through your old middle school journals with old friends and laughing at how important the littlest things seemed, and maybe shedding a tear; wishing that those things still mattered. And then just because of that thought, it's like you're in middle school again and it does matter. Notebooks are time travel, they are cathartic in their making; taking us from the past to the present to the future, and they are magical with age; they can take us back to who we were the way that nothing else can. Notes explain the unexplainable in our own language. They remind us of who we are, and why we are no longer that way. They tell us why we have changed. They so often, like most text: tell us exactly what we need to hear, but it's

even more remarkable to hear it coming from ourselves, in our own words. I keep notebooks because I love that feeling of finding some incoherent writing, some random address or name written and then wonder, "What made me write that down?" Then a story spills out right in front of us. That is the point. To have a place where our old selves can live and be honored, to have a place where our most private thoughts can be revealed, to have a place all to ourselves - that is always the point. All this nostalgia, rememberings and storytelling; that cannot be predicted or planned when taking notes, that is all time's doing. If you do keep a notebook, write what feels real when you feel it. Then, years down the line, you'll look back and you cannot help but see your own story unravel. Youth is such an important time to write because our feelings are so potent, and we are just learning how to express them. It's a shame not to put those feelings down on paper; maybe one day you'll need to talk to your old self, or maybe you're children will need to talk to you, and you won't be around - that is what this is all about. Notebooks are where our words can live, when we are no longer. When we are all grown up and we think we have it all figured out, it will be a great relief to visit ourselves in a time when we did not have it figured out at all, but we tried to hash it out nonetheless. There are so few instances where we allow ourselves to be raw and emotional, and the places we allow ourselves to be such is most evident in our youth, in our notebooks.