

Journaling – Navigating Possible Futures by Creating Maps of Undiscovered Territory

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At present, our most sophisticated way of acknowledging the world's complexity is to build elaborate systems and process maps, which are often influenced by a Newtonian quest for predictability. If we create the map to reveal all the variables, and expect that from such knowledge we will be able to manipulate the system for the outcomes we desire, we are thinking like Newton. What we hope for is not possible. There are no routes back to the safe harbor of prediction – no skilled mariners able to find their way across a deterministic ocean. – Margaret J. Wheatley in *Leadership and the New Science*

What I want to talk about today has to do with Margaret Wheatley's assertion that changes in our perceptions transform the way we practice living, leadership, and management. This seems obvious enough, but what it means to us as leaders is not always so obvious. I will return to her quote before I conclude but first will discuss some theory about journals and offer some advice about practice based on that theory.

Theory and philosophy are descriptions of what is going on and how to best do something. There are, for example, theoretical descriptions of about everything from physics to bowling. For our purposes, it is necessary to invest some time in describing the reasons why we journal and then to take a look at the ways in which journals can contribute to our leadership style and the way we live. If you have had difficulty working with journaling or if you find yourself stuck in a particular way of writing and journaling, the following may provide some relief and some reasons for practicing the art and science of journaling.

Those of us who have been through a leadership academy know that journaling is one of the tools we are asked to pick up in becoming transformative leaders. I have had a

number of conversations with my cohort members about journaling. In most cases, people wonder “why” and wonder “how” to journal. Along with the “how” comes the inevitable question about why it is so hard to do sometimes?

1. Why should we journal? We are asked to journal because it is a reflective act, and reflection on our practice is essential. It is of course possible that we can just take time to think and meditate, but a journal gives us a worksite where we can record our reflections, inspirations, meditations, observations, and plans so that we can come back to them and reconsider. It is also a record for each of us of what we are thinking, how we are thinking, and what we believe. In short, the first benefit of journaling is that it slows us down and encourages us to be deliberate about what we are thinking and the actions we are taking.
2. Answering the question of “how” to journal is at once easy and difficult. Journals, notebooks, diaries, and sketchbooks (artistic and scientific) are all possibilities. If we add to this the possibilities of technology – websites, sound, and video – we begin to understand that journaling is flexible and accessible to about every learning style and interest. Writing in small journals and on large paper, on index cards, painting, drawing, and establishing an electronic journal are all ways of moving across the wide variety of choices for formats and media. If you do, you will probably never really be stuck. During this session we will conclude with some exercises that take advantage of this “crossing over of media and genre.”
3. Journaling is hard for us because writing is hard work. It slows us down. It reminds us of all our struggles with writing, thinking, and communication. So, much of our reluctance to journal comes from our more or less natural and learned fear of writing and its consequences. The fear of journaling and writing (hopelessness in the face of the writing culture or tasks) are very often the result of being stuck in one way of writing and thinking.

All of us are good at writing something and none of us are exceptionally good at writing for every purpose or audience. Much of what we have to do to write in a journal is to gain flexibility and have a variety of writing approaches so that we can pick up a tool or instrument and get started. In addition, journaling and writing are hard because we have a narrow view of what writing itself might be. This narrow view has been handed down to us in writing classes, and our established ways of thinking about writing get in the way of writing in general and journal writing in particular. For example, although we most often think of writing as a mental activity, writing is also a physical one. It is physical because it requires us to respond to ideas – our bodies get emotionally involved and emotions trigger physical responses. Also, although most people think of writing as an isolated activity, we know from experience that writing is a social activity because at one time or another we have to consider others while writing and even include them in the writing process. Thinking of writing as a physical and as a social act changes the way we approach writing tasks, including journaling.

With these three principles in mind, I want to suggest some approaches to journaling, ending with a perspective of journaling that is useful in developing our skills and habits of transformative leadership.

- In order to get started and keep moving, work with a variety of media and kinds of journals. Familiarity with the kinds of journals, notebooks, and sketchbooks, both artistic and scientific is helpful. I happen to like Moleskine notebooks because of their history and compactness. They were designed as travel journals, and they do travel well. On the other hand, even loose paper works fine if you keep your paper in a folder.
- Study notebooks and journals from history – they are inspirational and give us some practical examples as well.
- Don't think of a journal as a diary unless you want to keep a particular chronological history of an event. If you keep a diary of an event – not just a day to day record of what happened – you should save space for returning to your record and commenting on what happened.
- Use visuals to give you perspective and provide you with a place to start in your thinking and writing. I know people who cut things out of magazines and put them in journals or who use there doodling as a way of getting started. Your own photographs are often even better.
- Type, write in long hand, and use a variety of writing instruments and colors. Again, the principle is that variety is a good thing when it comes to journaling.
- Have a place to store your journals and notebooks and explore that place now and then when you want to remember what it is that you were up to and where you might be going next.
- Add quotes from other people and also find ways of sharing parts of your journal with someone. Remember writing is a social act.
- When you are asked to take responsibility for a project or become aware of a new leadership possibility, explore the implications and possibilities in your journal. In this case, the journal can lead to specific planning and the description of the relationships among people, ideas, and resources. Sometimes you can work through the journaling process to specific plans of action. It is one way to chart a course of action and practice the interesting possibilities on paper. For example, take a project and explore it for its historical, ethical/spiritual, and community dimensions.
- Practice journaling enough to recognize it as a useful and important tool for leadership and for improving your life. Again, the idea is to use a journal to explore as many aspects of something as possible and see those aspects in relation to other things you have been thinking about and working through.
- Try out some role playing in your journal. Try writing out the thoughts of someone who appears at first to be a stranger or strange. It helps to gain empathy for ideas of people who at first seem to be opposing us.

These suggestions have something to do with Margaret Wheatley's assertion that we can't simply draw a straight line to where we want to go and expect to get there. Parts of a journal can be used for writing reports or policy statements but this, in practice, is usually only 10% or so of journal writing. So, to return to our original starting place: What does journaling have to do with transformative leadership?

In order to explore this question, I need to summarize a basic attitude and approach to journaling. If journaling is important to coming to understand a different way of thinking and acting, a way that supports being a transformative leader, what is that way of thinking and what are its characteristics? I would suggest that journaling is a worksite for engaging in the complexities that so often seem to get in the way of traditional management because traditional management is in the terms used by Wheatley "Newtonian" and linear. Transformative leadership, of the other hand, requires an understanding and engagement in complex relationships so we can practice interplay between the linear approach to leadership (traditional strategic plans for example) and the unpredictable nature of living in a real and complex world.

I want to finish by offering a strategy for journaling and working with notebooks that matches up with transformative leadership. Much of what I have already said here contributes to that project. It is the variety of ways of writing and thinking that contributes most to what we are trying to do – especially working against our habitual way of thinking. For example, I am by nature and habit an artistic thinker and feel at home with images and language. So, I am deliberate in my journaling about exploring the meaning of charts, data, and scientific or technical information. I am also, by the

way, often delighted and surprised at how my habitual way of thinking interacts with science and technology.

Journals can be a worksite for thinking and transformative leadership if we accept the idea that part of transformation is being able to gain flexibility and to practice a variety of ways of thinking. On the one hand, we have to think every day. On the other, we are used to thinking in particular patterns, like Newtonian patterns, and when called upon to think and react in a different way are challenged often beyond the limits of our skills.

Anne E. Berthoff, a mentor and teacher, has a particularly useful way of crossing over and thinking about how we think and what this means to our practice of leadership. She is the advocate for reflective journals or “double-entry” notebooks, where the writer first records something and then returns to that record and comments on what was written before. This is a process used in the writing of scientific journals and notebooks, especially when it comes to notes on experiments. The habit of rethinking and examining what we thought gives us flexibility and an awareness of our habits.

Ann also likes to practice the “pragmatic question.” That question is in summary: “If we believe this and think it is true, what difference does it make in what we do?” That question, applied to any journal entry allows us to move from abstract speculation and commentary into the realm of action. We begin to see the consequences of what we believe about others, our institutions, and those who see us as leaders. If we try to answer this question in our journals, we gain further flexibility in finding ways to transform the environment – to be a transformative leader. We will create maps of undiscovered territory and find ways to navigate the sea of change and enrich those who interact with

us by understanding them better and understanding the relationships so necessary to building a better future.

Works Cited

Berthoff, Ann E. *The Making of Meaning*. Boston: Boynton/Cook, 1981.

Wheatley, Margaret J. *Leadership and the New Science*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1994.