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Flesh Made Word

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Flesh Made Word

E. Michael Brady

Recently I celebrated my thirty-second anniversary as a journal writer. As is the case with many diarists, my beginning was rough and uneven, characterized by fits and starts and weeks of silence. Over time, however, my practice developed and settled more or less into ritual. I write early in the morning. I write almost every day. I write about anything and everything that comes to mind: recent events in my life and in the world, family and other relationships, current projects, large and small decisions with which I am confronted, and dreams.

Journal writing invites me to participate in three dimensions of time. I write in the present. My writing includes recollections of the recent and long-term past. And, at least in part, my journal is intended for the future.

Often I precede my journal writing each morning by sitting quietly in my study—it is usually dark and the house is nearly soundless—to center and focus my attention. What am I feeling? What thought or image rises into consciousness? Am I troubled by a question or problem? Is there some word, message, or meaning lying deep inside me that wants to come out and be expressed? Most mornings when I eventually walk over to my desk and turn on the computer, a tool with which I have written my journals for exactly half of these thirty-two years, I do not know how I shall start my narrative or about what theme or question I shall write. The path I shall travel with my forthcoming sentences and paragraphs remains obscured. I am living in the present. And I have learned over these many years that the present moment is a deep and mysterious cosmos unto itself, one which invites mindfulness and a spirit of exploration.

But the past—both recent and distant—is an important constituent of the present. In the act of remembering I call upon people, events, and feelings that helped to construct the stories which make up the larger narrative of my life. Through the miracle of memory I transport these people and events forward in time. Journal writing helps me to build bridges to past experiences and express the meaning of these events and relationships in my current life.

In the act of recollection, I am able in good measure to “re-collect” parts of my life that had been left behind. Remembering and journal writing help to make me whole.

And the future? In some ways this daily practice casts an eye to what Ernst Bloch called the “not yet.” Keeping a journal will give me a chance, some distant day, to read my own life. Although I am still in my active (and perhaps too busy) “high middle years,” I look forward to the time when the shadows will be longer and my movements more still. In my later years I hope to sit for long periods and visit with my many manila file folders filled with journal entries. I look forward to casting a net across the horizon of my adult life span and harvesting, even if only in small measure, the joyful, startling, tragic,

challenging, and sublime moments that I managed to express in my daily writing. I shall recall names of people long lost. I shall once again encounter the shades and textures of events experienced in my youth and middle years. It

my hope that, upon re-reading my life, I shall gain insight, make connections, see the whole landscape and perhaps even, to quote T. S. Eliot, “know the place for the first time.”

My journals, and the future they portend, also invite the question of audience. In my reading journey with these chronicles and reflections, I expect to be my own best audience. But what about my children? Grandchildren? Will they be interested in reading about their father and grandfather and the thoughts he managed to set down on paper over his adult years? Will their lives provide them with the time and curiosity about their family history to want to make even a modest effort to read these reflections? And if not my own children and grandchildren, will others—perhaps their children whom I shall never meet—show interest in these reflections: these times, this singular life?

Sometimes I think it is merely an act of hubris to imagine that future generations will care about my life and writings. Each of my progeny will have his own life to live and express. But then I think about how much I would have enjoyed and benefited from

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having parents or grandparents who kept a journal. To enter their private lives and discover the bonds—even beyond those of blood—we share as members of the Brady and all other human families. What did my grandfather think about the Great War in which, although of eligible age, he did not fight? What were my father's experiences during the Second World War in which he did fight (beginning at the age of eighteen)? What were my mother's thoughts about my father when she first met him, or about her eldest son when I first came into her life? Unfortunately, my family never discussed these important matters, nor was any of it written down, so I can only surmise.

In the end my thousands of pages of journals tell a story. Unlike a well-crafted novel, this book is not seamless with artful transitions. It is rough-hewn and spotty. In places it provides too much detail about minor matters and in other places barely paints the

parameters of dramatic and important episodes in life. At times my journal is petty with complaints and judgments. But at other times it is lucid, generous, and forgiving.

More than anything else, however, thirty-two years of journal writing have helped me to take the basic elements of human life—its sinew, bone, and blood—and transform them into something even more magnificent than they already are. By struggling to write my day-to-day life I have gained a deeper awareness and appreciation of its unfathomable mystery. I have touched what at times feels like the spiritual and the eternal. My journals have been, are, and I trust will continue to be the core ingredient in an alchemy I experience every morning in the dark quietude of my study as I sit at the keyboard: larynx made voice, experience made expression, flesh made word.