There is something rather nauseating about contemporary journal-talk. As Catherine Brekus demonstrates, this revised strategy of self-examination is just another version of modern self-absorption. “How can I like me more?” is the calling card query of nearly every practice advocated within Oprah Winfrey’s multimedia empire. On her website and in many episodes of the Oprah Winfrey Show the practice of “journaling” has been promoted by Oprah and her team of testimonial experts as a way for women to “discover what you love and then find a way to offer it to others in the form of service, working hard, and also allowing the energy of the universe to lead you.” As Brekus explains through her adroit survey of the varied advocates of contemporary journaling, daily writing exercises are to function as the local catechism within the broader auspices of lifestyle “makeovers,” improvements in “attitude”, and the pursuit of “female empowerment.” With the help of “spiritual counselors” Gary Zukav and Marianne Williamson, Oprah Winfrey propagates an entire program of potential revelation and possible rejuvenation bent on spiritual fulfillment. The purpose of all this renewal? To learn to love your singular self against the cruel reductions of an incorporated world.

It is somewhat cruel to propose new book ideas to a scholar embedded in another, yet this paper is too tempting to suggest otherwise. While there have been several comprehensive historical surveys of the self as interpreted through philosophical and polemical tracts, no historian has yet attempted a social history of the self. A study of spiritual journaling practices would be a marvelous initiating method for such an analysis. Should Brekus pursue this project, I think she would only complicate and deepen the dark tones she observes within contemporary journaling. While it is true that Winfrey’s acolytes author celebratory journal entries, the self-assured tone flavoring the majority of these online postings is little more than chiffon overlay to a muddy skirt. Through a study of episode transcripts and contributions to O, The Oprah Magazine, it becomes clear that Winfrey’s viewers are not proud of themselves or the lives they have concocted—after all, this is why they turned to her in the first place. Embedded within every solipsistic journal entry is a carefully repressed universe of familial angst, professional malcontent, and gendered rage. Through the multimedia portholes of her empire, Winfrey encourages self-indulgence and relaxed reflection among individuals who spend too much time on others, not enough on themselves. “Maybe you’re like so many women I’ve talked to over the years who have suspended their deepest desires in order to accommodate everything and everyone else,” Winfrey writes in the July 2002 issue of O, The Oprah Magazine, “You ignore the nudge to finally get on with what you know you should be doing.” Journaling, for Winfrey’s consumers, is one tactic of self-reclamation— a Band-Aid over the bullet wound of their social frustration. The didactic nature of Winfrey’s prescriptions (telling her viewers how many journals to write and which among those is solely “your own”) suggests that the majority of her followers seek the comforting ritual of re-inscription more than the revelation of painful self-discovery.

This is underlined by Winfrey’s own approach to journaling: for Winfrey, journaling is a control mechanism, a certain steadiness against the tumult of life’s experience. For example, she began her own “gratitude journal” upon reading the following quote, from Sarah Ban Breathnach’s Simple Abundance:
If we are alive, we cannot escape loss, because loss is a part of real life. Today might be tough for you, you might not want the next moment to show itself, to reveal the twists and turns of life's mystery, but at least you have it. You still have life, a choice as to how you will live this precious day. Don't wish it away. Don't waste it. For the love of all that is holy, redeem one hour, hold it close, cherish it. Above all, be grateful for it.
(Breathnach 1995)

Winfrey explains that reading these words motivated a complete shift in her own habits, from a woman who donated her time to others to a woman who learned to celebrate herself:

Sarah introduced me to the concept of keeping a gratitude journal. This was over six years ago. I've kept a journal since I was 15, and all of my journals up until Sarah were, “Woe is me. My daddy won't let me go to Shoney's with my boyfriend. So on and-- and so dumped me, didn't call me back,” and all that. I have, you know, 20 years of those. But after reading Simple Abundance and coming across the concept of gratitude, and Meister Eckhart, who was a 13th century mystic who said, “If the only prayer you ever say in your life is thank you, that will be enough.” That was a life-changing quote for me. Because Sarah suggests in Simple Abundance that we write down five things every day that we're grateful for, and so I do this, like-- like, religiously. And in the beginning, most of my journals were filled with food items. I have-- I have developed a greater sense of substance now to begin to appreciate other things. It started a movement, I think, that transformed many people's lives, the idea of a gratitude journal, because we've done many shows on it with you and with other people. (Transcript 11/21/01)

I quote from the transcript at length because it highlights several themes permeating the rhetoric of Oprah journaling: (1) journaling as redirection, (2) journaling as remembering and (3) journaling as a meditation on the material. Contemporary journaling is not about a relationship with God or society; rather, it is a studied distraction from those torments. Oprah viewers are told to stop “looking outside” because everything they need is “within.” But notice that Sarah Ban Breathnach recommends the listing of five “things”—these things could be abstractions (“the love of my dog”, “my new promotion”), but the intimation is that material goods may be the most appropriate items for neophyte writers to celebrate (“my new slippers”, “French fries from Wendy’s”). Journaling, as instructed by Oprah, is simultaneously a practice of humility (“I am only as fortunate as my immediate possessions.”) and of immense materialism (“Oh, how lucky am I!”). All of this is an intentional redirection of intellectual energy from the perceived metaphysical intractability of life’s constants: work, children, dissatisfying marriages, and persistent female exhaustion.

Like Brekus, I perhaps fall too quickly into a bleak representation of contemporary journaling. Consider the following letter from New York City police officer Gail Douglas, who reported to Oprah that since September 11, 2001 she is “more grateful than ever”:

“Dear Oprah, I started my gratitude journal on Wednesday, September 12th, after working 36 hours at ground zero. I had just finished the hardest day ever as a New York City police officer and was having trouble sleeping. At first all I could write was, ‘I can't sleep!' but eventually all my thoughts came pouring out in the form of gratitude. I wrote, 'I am grateful that me and mine are safe.' The next day, I remember noticing that, despite the smoke still in the air, the sky above it had never seemed so blue. In the days ahead spent at ground zero, I found that I took great comfort in finding the little things to be grateful for. Lately my entries are simple but meaningful. I am grateful that the wind was light today so the smell from the buildings doesn't travel all through the city. And for the volunteers from St. Paul's because the hot chocolate they brought us today was so nice and hot, and now I write things down right there as I see them so I will be able to put them in my
journal each night. It has become the way I unwind from long days and release all the sad things I may have seen. It has helped me to change my whole perspective on what matters.” (Transcript 11/21/01)

An intriguing assignment for undergraduate students—new to the doctrinal extremities of Puritanism—would be to ask them how a Puritan might have responded to the events of September 11. Here we have a police officer, undoubtedly affected by the experience of 9/11, providing testimonial as to how she has endured the memory and reality of that day. What sort of entry might a Puritan draft? Whose rendering would we prefer? Brekus’ article suggests that there may be a middle ground between those two theological extremes—how might a “middle ground” journal entry read? And with what spiritual tradition would it affiliate, or borrow, or eschew? The question for scholars is not whether journaling-talk is nauseating or exhilarating, but why and how it brings such inordinate satisfaction to so many.

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Re: Response

Author: Heidi Behr, LCSW, MPH (---.ocps.net)
Date: 02-04-05 16:30

Contemporary journaling IS often about a relationship to God. There is deeper journaling going on than the kind talked about on Oprah.com and encouraged in the self-help section at the bookstore. I am familiar with a type of "prayer journal" that is an open dialogue with one's God. I began this practice years ago, encouraged by family members, wherein prayers are written out letter-fashion. For some I know, this has meant writing to God a daily list of what they need or want, and/or writing about what happens in their life before God, asking for discernment for big and little decisions. It can be a list of those we pray for daily, those we are most concerned about with health or personal crises. I have used mine to reflect on different spiritual readings- those readings are my "jumping off point" for me to respond to God. Reading back on these over the years, I can see times when I was in torment, times when my faith was not as strong and times when I trusted God more. I think the best thing about journaling may be that writers can go back to review what they thought about in the past and see if their thinking has changed. That is the capacity for growth that perhaps contemporary journalers seek and that was not used by Puritans.
Catherine A. Brekus’s “Historical Perspective on Journaling” offers a fascinating cross-historical comparison, and I appreciate the opportunity to reflect briefly upon it. Her balance of perspective is admirable, especially given how both Puritans and Boomers have received more than a few cheap shots at their spirituality—one for being far too austere and the other for being far too self-indulgent. Without wanting to deny the massiveness of the transformation that Brekus documents, I do wonder if it wouldn’t help in our balancing act if we tried to pull the two worlds closer together. Didn’t the Puritans want to feel better about themselves too—their intense self-denial always being held in tension with a fierce longing for assurance? Isn’t all the self-celebration among contemporary journal writers a symptom of more than low self-esteem, tapping into deeper feelings of self-loathing that no amount of writing or anti-depressants really relieve? Or, to do a Weberian riff, should we let the Puritans stand as self-regulating ascetics eventually replaced by headlong consumers, or should Puritan notions of discipline be seen as productive of the very capitalist economy that ultimately makes so many different kinds of frilly journals available? Put differently, how does all this Puritan self-impoverishment open up voids that eighteenth-and nineteenth-century consumers then long to fill? Also, if in some ways (as Brekus hints) the Quakers ultimately win in the spread of an Inner-Light view of divinity, isn’t that too a species of puritan sectarianism, so that we could plot this as a battle internal to a radical Protestant culture? Does the storyline need to be (and I’m putting this question to myself as much as to Brekus) a Calvinist Protestant culture versus a liberal romantic one? In the end, though, I would pull the two types of journaling together only to thrust them apart in the ways that Brekus has done. She is right: this reflects a huge transformation in notions of subjectivity, worthy of close historical and sociological examination.
February 2004

LDS Journaling

Author: Wayne C. Booth (---.dsl.emril.ameritech.net)
Date: 02-04-04 13:42

Although I feel too busy to join in the discussion, I feel I must remind you that for some religions--especially the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons)--keeping a journal is one of God's commandments. At age 14 I was given a book of blank pages by my Grandmother, in effect ordering me, in God's name, to keep a daily record. Most of my Mormon relatives are still engaged in daily--or almost daily--recordings.

It's really an amusing Commandment, since presumably God has all the data already???

Wayne Booth

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