



Wellbriety!

White Bison's Online Magazine

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State and Municipal Governments Stand up for Recovery Month

also in this issue:

Keeping a personal journal for the Wellbriety Journey



Mayor John Hickenlooper of Denver, Colorado (left) and Governor Dave Freudenthal of the State of Wyoming, issued proclamations affirming Recovery Month, September, 2005. We hope these and other examples (see next pages) of men, women and organizations in leadership coming forward for addictions recovery will gather strength in the coming year.



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2005 Wellbriety Month Proclamations

Juel Fairbanks Chemical Dependency Services
Janice Lindstrom, Executive Director
806 North Albert St.
St. Paul, MN 55104
P: 651-644-6204
Email: lindstrom@juelfairbanks.org

United American Indian Involvement, Inc.
David Rambeau, Executive Director
1125 West Sixth Street, Ste. 103
Los Angeles, CA 90017
P: 213-202-3970

Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation
Louis Cloud, Chairman of the Yakama Nation

Wind River Shoshone and Arapaho Tribal Substance
Abuse Court
Dawn Bitz, Tribal Substance Abuse Court Coordinator
PO Box 1561
Fort Washakie, WY 82514
P: 307-335-8374/8375
Email: satsac@direcway.com

Blackfeet Community College
John E. Salois, President
Box 819
Browning, MT 59417
P: 406-338-6111

State of Wyoming
Governor Dave Freudenthal
State Capitol
200 West 24th Street
Cheyenne, WY 82002-0010

Chickasaw/Choctaw Council of NWLA, Ventura & SW
Kern
Hochfoiksho "Bill" Rice Honoshe, Director
NAI-GSO Council
23413 Victory Blvd.
West Hills, CA 91307-3327
C: 818-667-2792
Email: William.rice@nbcuni.com
Website: www.naigso-aa.org

City and Counter of Denver
Mayor John Hickenlooper
City Hall
Denver, Colorado



White Bison Speaks

Keeping a Journal

by Richard Simonelli

Journaling is a powerful tool and support for living. Keeping a personal writing journal is a good habit to get into because it gives you a simple and reliable method for discovering and working with thoughts and feelings on a daily basis. Our thoughts and feelings are sacred, but do we really know in a clear way what we are thinking and feeling? A regular practice of journaling is a way to stay clear about what's happening in our hearts and minds so that life will be happier and harmonious. Journaling may bring more balance to our lives after we begin this practice because we can say anything that is on our minds in our journal. Saying what's up lets us release it and move on.



What's a Personal Journal?

A personal journal is writing done regularly about your own life. It's a book you keep in which you can write anything you want about how you are thinking, feeling, or what's happening in your day. The writing style and content of each person's journal book will be different and distinctive to that person—once you get the idea you'll do it in your own way. It's a writing book that you can keep entirely private, or perhaps share some of it with others. It's up to you. It's a way to stay clear by having a "conversation with yourself" on a daily basis.

Why Keep a Personal Journal?

A journal is a tool for living. By keeping a journal, our own self-awareness deepens because it is a way we can take a look at ourselves very easily. Knowing ourselves better helps us make better choices about things coming up in our lives because we will have visited issues in quiet times when we have the space to think about them. For example, if there is a problem with a personal relationship a journal entry might look like this:

"I feel bothered by so and so, because... I feel foolish and unhappy when I'm with so-and-so. I begin to feel like I'm 'less-than.' Hey! I didn't know I felt inferior when I'm with so and so."

From an entry like this, you can see that keeping a journal can help a person actually discover things they didn't know about themselves. Another benefit of keeping a journal is that it helps you stay in practice as a writer. If you are a student—high school, college or grad school—your writing skills will gradually improve as part of keeping a journal and you'll benefit at school.

How to Get started—the Actual Book

It's best to purchase a dedicated low-cost writing book to begin a journaling commitment. This could be a spiral bound notebook from the supermarket or office supply store. It can be a ruled book as large as 8 1/2 " by 11" in size, or maybe one as small as 5" X 7" It's probably not a good idea to start off with one that's smaller than about 5" X 7" because you might feel cramped for space. You can also purchase one of the fancier journal books that office supply or book stores offer. These would be fully bound books with special, attractive features, such as woven covers or interior designs. They might be lined or un-lined. In general, you might want to use a lined book to get started and then later on switch to an unlined book if it seems better for you. You can use an ordinary ball-point pen, or maybe a fancier pen that makes writing

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a comfortable experience. For example, gel-ink pens make writing effortless and smooth.



How to Get Started—Your First Entries

First, date the page. Each new day could be on a separate page, or you can leave a space from the previous day's entry to place the current date. It's up to you. What to write? If you have something on your mind, just plunge in. Here's an example:

June 21, 2005

It's summer solstice today. Sundances and other traditional summer events are starting to take place all around. We went fishing over by so-and so's and caught some nice bass. Cooked them up for supper and fed everybody. I've been thinking about school. I'm wondering about the fall semester...

To write a journal entry, you might imagine you are writing a letter to someone, talking to a friend or Elder, or just listening to your own internal self-talk and putting it out on paper. Maybe you are having an internal conversation with someone. Write it down. That's a way to get started. Put it out on paper. Sometimes talking about the weather or something casual can be a lead-in to what is really on your mind—just like in everyday life.

If you do some writing at one time of day, and then pick it up again at another time, you can draw a star between the entries to separate them. A journal might be your ongoing conversation with yourself. For example:

Now it is later in the afternoon. I went over to ...'s house and we talked. It really helped clear things up. I feel like some of the confusion from this morning is gone. Hey! I feel really good!

More Tips About Journal Entries

There are many books out there about keeping a journal and lots of information on the internet. Once you get started, you might want to take a look at one or two. But remember to keep it simple. Rachel Naomi Remen is a popular writer who advocates personal journaling. Here is what she says about getting started:

"Ask yourself, 'What surprised me today? What moved or touched me today? What inspired me today?' Begin your journal entry with those questions. Often, people are surprised eight or nine hours after something happens when they look back on it deliberately. But that gap shortens until eventually they are able to see in the very moment what surprises them, what touches them, and what inspires them. And then everything changes. The world has not changed, but they have begun to be able to see the world, and they can then communicate that experience."

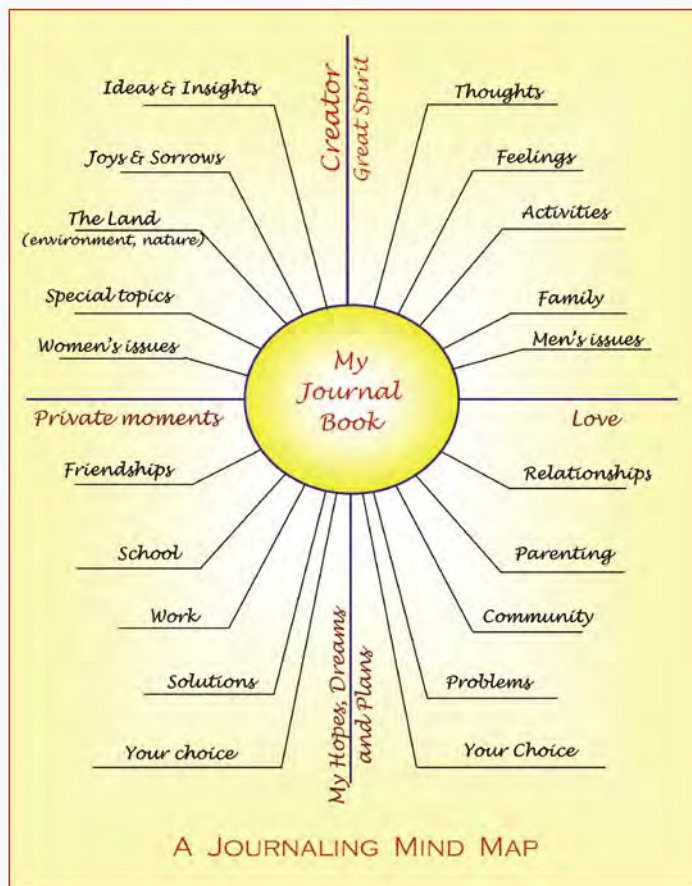
Keeping a journal is something that can go along with other personal self-awareness experiences in your life. For example, by keeping a regular journal it might become easier to speak in group process situations such as talking circles, or at meetings, or in class because you will have been discovering how you think and feel about things through the journal. If you are in counseling, it might make those sessions stronger. It might help clarify relationships with family, friends or children, or teachers.

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Another way to begin is to write down a favorite prayer or quotation under the date and write about why that inspires you. For example, Black Elk said, “Behold this day, for it is yours to make!” How does this relate to your life at this very moment?

You can also keep a **Gratitude List**, as well as a list of resentments, because your journal is a place for honesty.



When or Where to journal

Try setting aside regular times during the day to open up your journal and write. Early mornings might be a good time, or just before bedtime. Think of it as a discipline just as you would prayer or meditation, if you have regular commitments to

those. Once journaling becomes a reliable practice or tool, you'll find that you can write short entries during lunch, during a break, or maybe on an airplane flight. Learn how to go off by yourself for short periods of time to write in your journal book. Journal at a quiet place in your home • Outside with nature • In a favorite coffee shop • Sitting on your bed • On a bus commute to work or school • During a period of retreat • During breaks at conferences or workshops • Carry your journal with you so you can take advantage of other times and places that work for you.

A Sacred Practice

For some of us, keeping a journal will become a sacred practice, just as private prayer or meditation, sweat lodge, vision quest, talking circle, or whatever your own Way encourages. For this reason, it is good to keep a journal book in a special bag or container, just as you would a Sacred Pipe or Eagle Feather. You can make your own bag or personalize one that you purchase, or use one that might be a gift. It does make a difference to keep a journal book in a good way like this. Sometimes you'll want to smudge with sage, cedar, sweetgrass or whatever your tradition calls for before beginning a journaling session. Sometimes you might even want to hold an eagle feather or other sacred object as you write. You might do this while in private, but not, for example, if you do a short journaling session during lunch at school or on an airplane. Experiment with this to see what best gives you those feelings that make your thoughts flow out onto the paper easily.

A journal is also the perfect place to talk to God. There will be times when the heart has no words for the ordinary things of life, but is in the mood to talk with Creator, Great Spirit, Jesus, the Mystery, or however you understand the sacred in your own heart of hearts. This is one way some of us pray. Your written prayer can be as beautiful as, “Oh Great Spirit, Whose voice I hear in the winds, and whose breath gives life to all the world—hear me!” Or it

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can be, “God, why am I having such a hard time today? Why have you placed stumbling blocks in my path? I know and trust your presence. Please show me what I might be doing wrong...” Your journal is the perfect place to talk to Creator.



Other Ideas for Journaling

Once you get established in keeping a written journal, other kinds of writing or self-expression might naturally want to come out in your journal book. Some of that “self-expression” can be some very pragmatic and practical record-keeping because, after all, day-to-day practicalities are important parts of life and the purpose of your journal is to report the happenings of your life. So for example, one entry might read:

August 8, 2005

Went to the dentist today and learned my own oral hygiene was not too good. I must remember to brush and floss every day. What is keeping me from doing that? What goes on with my feelings or my energy causing me to forget?

Or this:

September 1, 2005

My doctor increased the dosage of my medication today. She asked me to keep track of how I feel, on a scale of one through ten on a daily basis. Well, here goes. Today it is a six.

Or this:

September 15, 2005

My brother Paul and his family visited today on their way back to Seattle. We haven't seen them for such a long time. Thumbing through this journal, I can see it has been almost a year since their last visit.

Journal entries can also switch between ordinary writing (prose), and poetry, if that suits you. Poetry opens up writing and is closer to prayer or music. It allows you to say things that might come more from feelings. Everyone has a poet inside themselves. Give it a try. Here is an example that was mixed in with some journaling:

Healing Song

Root by root
Stem by stem
Branch by branch
And bit by bit,
The sacred tree is growing.

Little by little
We heal our hurt,
Our families heal,
And the people again
Become whole.

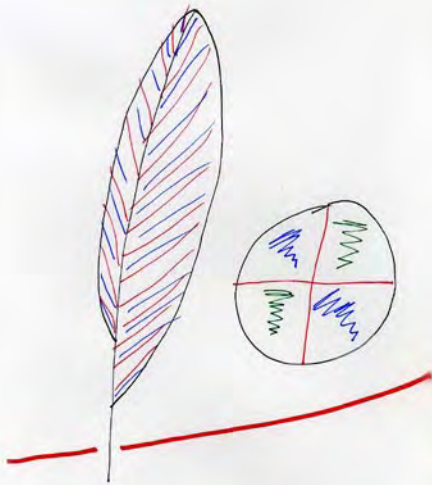
You might also want to do sketches or other kinds of graphics mixed in with your journal entries. For example, you can draw a mind map of something you happen to be talking about in a journal entry. This can help get us out of the literal, left-brained mind, just as poems can.

Another possibility is to do a small sketch with colored pencils right in the journal book when it seems appropriate. Once again, visual art can take us into the right brain, revealing feelings and insights we didn't even know were there. Sometimes this kind of

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daily sketching is called a *visual journal*. Your visual journal can be part of your written journal book. Or, if you find yourself drawing as much as you are writing, you can keep a second book for the visual journal.



Journaling Topics

Writing about a specific topic or subject is another way to use the personal journal. We all have thoughts and feelings taking place as we go through a day. If you find a particular subject coming up in your mind over and over again, why not write about it? You don't have to be an expert, and you don't have to be "right." This is your own personal journal to use as you see fit. Suppose you find yourself thinking about the difference between spirituality and religion—and the topic won't let you go. Let it become a journal entry:

September 21, 2005

Spirituality and Religion

Are spirituality and religion the same or different?

My spirituality is so big and so encompassing. I can't even really talk about it. But when I am involved with religion, there is always this and that to say, all those ideas and things that are "right" and "wrong." Our traditional ways were always spiritual. Did we ever have religion, the way people speak about it today?

Sometimes a group of people can agree on certain topics to write about in their journal books as part of regular meetings or a talking circle process that you attend. By thinking and writing on particular topics over a time period of, say, a week or two, the next gathering of your circle or group might be very fruitful or lively because you've had time to "live" with a particular subject that is of importance in your life through your journal entries. Here is a suggestion for some topics that people in recovery, self-discovery, or circle process might want to consider:

Topics for Journaling



- Getting on the path;
- Spirituality;
- Sobriety;
- Family of origin;
- Hostility;
- Father/son or Mother/daughter issues;
- Fatherhood or Motherhood
- Communications;
- Interdependence; and
- Generosity/service

Give it a Try

Journaling can become a valuable, enjoyable, and useful life-practice. Sometimes it's "all you've got" when going through a difficult or challenging period, always part of the healing journey or path. It's a great instrument to use if your temperament is to work alone on some parts of the healing journey.

It is also good fun to write about joyous, happy and beautiful things taking place in your life. So give it a try. It might become a lifelong friend. ✚

