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## *Write*



I want to encourage you about the fruitfulness of keeping a journal, not just as an excellent practice in itself, but for its spiritual benefits.

Indeed, diary-keeping has been popular for centuries. To the historian's delight, there have been many notable, as well as less-known, figures who were very diligent in keeping records of their lives. I have not made a detailed study of this by any means, but just off the top of my head I can think of figures from Queen Victoria, to Isambard Kingdom Brunel, Charles Darwin, and Gerald Durrell who kept journals which greatly improve our understanding of their lives and thoughts. It is a shame that it has fallen so far out of fashion. All the reasons that the Puritans gave for why it is a good thing to keep a regular journal (see the appendix), still hold. Let us revive the practice of journal keeping for anyone to do as a good thing in itself. In particular,

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what I am encouraging here is that it is an excellent practice for Christians, and a way of increasing godliness in ourselves.

### **Okay. Let me start my online journal**

But wait. That's not actually what I am recommending. I want to encourage people, not just that we keep journals, but that we *handwrite* them. This might seem rather technophobic, not to mention a waste of time, in our age. After all, handwriting takes longer; and if I want busy people to keep journals, why not go for the easier route of the handy laptop or desktop computer? Isn't everything online these days?

True; and if in the end you decide that the only way you will realistically keep a journal is by typing it, then go ahead. But I would just like to give a plug for handwriting. Not only is it very pleasurable and relaxing, and gives the chance to add more artistic visual impact to what you are writing, I think there are actually real benefits to the practice of handwriting.

There is a lot of research on handwriting that emphasises its importance. For instance, there has been considerable investigation into children's learning, which shows that learning to write by hand significantly helps not just with language skills, but learning in general. For most children, handwriting is better in this regard than learning keyboard skills, even in our highly keyboard-oriented age. Chinese children suffer in their reading and comprehension if they do not learn to *handwrite* their characters. This might not be surprising, given the complexity of written Chinese language, but studies bear out the same conclusions for English-writing students.

When children do not learn to *handwrite* well, it can lead to serious consequences, not just for their further academic achievement, but also in such seemingly unrelated things as emotional well-being and the ability to function well in social

situations. The student who can *handwrite* well is more likely to become the student who can *write* well – that is, the seeming purely mechanical skill of being able to put down thoughts, accurately and fluently, by hand, helps build the imaginative and creative power that enables the creation of written prose, whether fiction or non-fiction, even if the later writing is done on a keyboard. Children who learn to use a pen or pencil will become the students who do well in their essays.

Handwriting is actually quite a profound physical and mental process. It uses those parts of the brain that control visual and motor skills, but also calls on diverse cognitive and reasoning powers, and even uses parts of the brain that govern emotional functions. It exercises your powers of linguistics, attention, memory and physical learning.

Handwriting used to be an important part of the school curriculum in Western countries. Fine penmanship was considered a mark of education in itself, and was associated with character. Even gentlemen who could afford to have scribes do the writing for them, were expected to be able to write themselves. As teaching techniques developed, handwriting instruction moved from learning simply by copying models, to breaking down letters into individual strokes of the pen. Students would copy text painstakingly, doing drills of different letter shapes before stringing them together in words and sentences. Later, the idea developed that small children should be taught printing first. Cursive – joined up – writing was a mark of maturity; it involved endless practise of individual letters to be able to create a flowing hand.

Teaching methods changed, and learning started to be about children discovering the world for themselves, rather than memorising information the teacher told them. Handwriting

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drills didn't seem to suit this style of teaching. Moreover, as computers became smaller and even something that you could have at home on your own desk, keyboard skills started to take more prominence. Surely, teachers thought as they moved into the late twentieth century, it is more important for children to be able to type on a keyboard rather than to write by hand? With lessons starting to require homework on computer, and later iPads and other tablets becoming part of the teaching classroom, the ability to work a keyboard or touchscreen seemed to be the priority. It seemed far more relevant than the old-fashioned method of making marks on paper. After all, even if handwriting does require fine motor skills and cognitive development, so does typing – doesn't it?

However, handwriting is having a resurgence. Even with the prospect of much more home or distance learning, exams online or using computers in exam rooms, it seems there is still a place for knowing how to write well by hand. There is something about handwriting that seems to have a stronger connection to our personalities and ourselves than typing does. Research continues to show that handwriting is connected to the self in an intimate way that typing simply does not achieve.

Moreover, even as an adult, you will probably learn better if you use handwriting rather than a laptop to take notes. This is a much-debated question in university classrooms, but it does seem that even if you can take more complete notes on a laptop – because most students can type faster than they write – yet taking notes by hand helps you learn more, understand more deeply, and remember what you learned more successfully. Students who take notes by hand do better when they are tested on whatever it was they were taking notes about. This is true, even when the laptop students were allowed access to

their own notes during the test. Part of this seems to be that, precisely because it takes longer to handwrite, students are forced to summarise as they go. This means that they process the information they are receiving, and so understand it better and remember it better.

I find that the very slowness of handwriting is part of what attracts me to it. When I put down my thoughts by hand, I process my emotions, and come to conclusions, in a far more profound way than when I do the same sort of writing by laptop. Computers are certainly more convenient, not least because if I compose a piece by hand I then have to transfer it to computer for publication, or to send to someone else. However, that piece will likely be better – better reasoned, more satisfying – if I have written it by hand first. Most of this book was written by hand, as I sat with my notebook in cafés, parks, restaurants or even at home by the window.

Handwriting creates a certain relationship between my thoughts and the words I use to express them. There is a kind of intimacy and privacy about writing by hand that is never quite the same on a keyboard. It allows the time for me to think through my thoughts, to see them forming before me. The stroke of the pen has a visceral quality to it, a sort of reality to it, that the feel of keys beneath my fingers, and the standardised typeface on the screen, can never match.

Certainly when it comes to journal writing there seems to be a distinct advantage to writing by hand. It is interesting that although the practice of journal or diary writing is centuries old, unlike other forms of writing it has not really adapted to the machine age. Most journal writers still prefer the handwritten method. When typewriters became dominant in workplaces and official writing, they were still never popular for private

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diaries. Perhaps the sheer noise and mechanical feel of the machine was part of the reason – but even the quieter computer keyboards still have some level of alienation about them. I want my thoughts, my words, to be mine; writing them by hand preserves that feeling far better.

Of course typing still has its place. You are reading my thoughts right now, and I trust they come through clearly even though you are reading a computer-generated typeface. However, imagine if you were reading my handwriting. It's fairly clear; although I'm quite capable of scrawling notes to myself, in general my handwriting is easy to read. Reading it, you would really know that it comes from *me*. A letter handwritten is so much more personal than a typed one; and that is not just a matter of convention or the effort involved in handwriting. My handwriting is like my signature, something that identifies *me*. Your own handwriting will be that to you, too.

The joy of being able to create your own page is part of the joy of handwriting. You may choose simply to write with a biro on lined pages. That is entirely fine. However you might enjoy using a different pen, the light touch of a fountain pen, the free feeling of a rollerball. You might like to use different colours depending upon your mood. Writing a page by hand means you can spontaneously glue in a leaf, or a feather, or a card or invitation that suddenly strikes you as something worth keeping. Scrapbookers know the pleasure of keeping photos in a physical album, adding commentary, small drawings, colourful margins. These things can all be done on your computer, but the sheer joy of manipulating the different materials by hand, feeling their texture and their physical reality, is simply not the same as formatting on your screen.

If you handwrite your journal, what is there is the immediate you. It may not look as pretty or as organised as a page printed from a word processor; on the other hand, it might be a beautiful record of you. You will not be able to delete mistakes, reword sentences or correct spelling as you can on a computer. But that is the point. Your handwritten journal is that much more closely connected to the real you at the time, the handwriting becoming rushed and scrappy as you write out your anger, the tear-blotted page as you write your grief, the sheer exuberance of the small smiley face or the exclamation marks you included as you wrote about your happiness. Your handwritten journal is a record of you. Don't put the extra filter of technology between you and the page. That's not what it's for.

(From an historical point of view, there is nothing like the handwritten draft! This is lost with computers. No longer will the historian have access to early mistakes, to the precious information that reveals how an author's ideas grew and developed. Musicians who compose music online rob the future of the chance to see a first draft of lyrics scribbled on a paper napkin or the back of a coaster, notes scribbled on manuscript paper with corrections and changes. We will lose the earthy impact of a diarist's handwriting, the first versions of novels. A manuscript, after all, is literally 'writing by hand' [*manu* means 'by hand', and *scriptus* means 'written']. All we have otherwise are digital traces in electronic memories.)

Don't ever underestimate the value of your handwriting. Thinking something to yourself can be powerful; saying it out loud even more so; but writing it down has a power to change your emotions and your brain itself. It is no accident that so many cognitive therapies involve writing down your fears, your

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challenges, and their resolution. The pen in your hand can change you, change your life. Take advantage of it.