

## Chapter One

### About this book

Every life passage we go through shapes us, each one differently, each one forever. Often we tend to think there are only a few of these - childhood, adolescence, middle years, old age. In this book you'll find that there are many more, and I'd contend that it is only by understanding them that we can come to know fully who we are. Sometimes, though, it feels as if we're so busy living we just don't have the chance to put our lives in any sort of perspective.

This book can give you that chance, and supply that perspective.

For if we don't know where we've been and what we've been doing, how can we expect to learn from our experiences? And if we don't know where we are now, then how can we open up the future for ourselves?

In these pages you will find the tools you need to come to a deeper understanding of yourself, so you can claim your selfhood and live your life more fully. You'll learn that you can do much of this work yourself, and that you don't have to rely on the specialists for meaningful self-exploration to occur.

For ours is an age dominated by experts, and sometimes the reverence we have for them leaves us unsure about how to begin the work of unraveling the mystery of ourselves.

It wasn't always like this.

I'll explain by telling you a story. In the sixties, when I was a boy, every weekend I would watch the parents in our neighborhood go through a familiar series of rituals. The men would tinker with their cars - check the oil, adjust things, and the women would do household improvements, or sew, or they'd can and preserve foods. Today I'd venture that except in rural areas, these tasks are extinct. Modern cars don't lend themselves to the tinkering my father's generation thought of as normal. Computerized circuits and microchips are specialized service items. Even changing the oil, once a rite of adolescent car ownership, is now unpopular. So we go to the service station instead. Similarly, very few women preserve foods anymore. Who has the time? And as for as sewing one's own clothes ...

We've stopped doing things for ourselves, and we've started paying other people to do them for us.

I do not wish to belittle the benefits of our age: far from it. All I wish to point out is that we routinely hire experts to do what we need. The trouble is that we have also given over a portion of our self-hood to the so-called experts. Anxious parents buy and read books on child care, and then agonize over whether or not they are doing the right thing for their children. The newspapers tell us that inner cities are a mess and that social services, relief agencies, and social workers are there to ease the problem. Every day children are removed from their parents and handed over to state care facilities, and often for very good reasons. Yet behind this lies another message, one that is not so benign. Through it all comes the sense that we are perhaps not expert

enough; we, the ordinary citizens, need the experts to tell us how to run our lives. I'm sure there are some benefits. But on the whole this 'expert culture' this 'consultant ethos' has had the effect of leaving us feeling de-skilled. And so that is the way we tend to run our lives. We feel ill, we call a doctor, or a dietician, or a trainer. We feel sad, we call a therapist or a counselor. We agree to take medications, perhaps, and accept what the psychiatrist has to say, even though we may only just have met him. We have money problems, we call a financial advisor, a stock broker, a debt restructuring consultant. More experts. There's a growing tendency to hand our lives over to the experts.

The other side of the coin is that I notice with delight the number of home improvement and do-it-yourself places that have sprung up over the last ten years. For me, just walking through these places is empowering. I see tools, products, and inventions that let me know I can improve my home myself. I don't necessarily have to pay a contractor who may or may not appear on time and finish the task inside a year. I can do it myself, if I choose to.

This book is a version of that empowerment. In these pages you will find a series of writing exercises (and sometimes drawing exercises, too) all of which are designed to help you reflect on your life so that you can understand yourself better. The exercises will give you the tools of the trade, as it were, that can enable you to undertake the vital work of personal exploration yourself, rather than having to rely on the experts - the psychiatrists, the analysts, the therapists - in the way that many of us tend to do now.

Please don't think I'm trying to by-pass these people. Far from it. As with my previous book, The Sanity Manual: the Therapeutic Uses of Writing, which also uses writing exercises, I do not pretend that any book can automatically provide all the answers. What you can discover from these

pages can be enormously useful, life-enhancing, and vital, but ultimately it depends upon your efforts, not mine, and not upon anyone else's. And sometimes a qualified counselor can be enormously helpful in aiding you in the process.

What I'm suggesting is that we can help ourselves by maintaining a sense of mental awareness. Just as an athlete has to be fit and supple before she can expect a trainer to bring out the best in her, so it is with our mental health. You may choose to visit a therapist. I, personally, think it is a very useful component of self-exploration for most people. But your progress will be immeasurably enhanced if you appear, like the athlete, in a relatively 'trained' state, an aware state.

Or perhaps a different comparison may help - also a physical one. The overweight individual who discovers at age 65 that he has all sorts of health problems connected with poor diet and lack of exercise - such a person certainly needs the advice of a doctor. But this individual is inevitably far less prepared than the person who has kept fit, eaten wisely, and taken care of his body. The task of regaining full health is likely to be much easier for the fit person - indeed, the fit person may never experience the illness at all. That's what this book is. Fitness exercises for the Spirit.

There are several ways to use this book. You can turn straight to the sections that are most important to you. If divorce is causing you distress, you can choose to turn directly to that section, or to whichever chapters seem to answer your needs. Under each chapter heading you will find exercises that can help you with specific issues. If you choose to work this way, I'd advise you to read the next sections, and specifically the one entitled 'Getting

Started', before you begin. It may help you to start with some assessment of yourself before you move on to your individual concerns. In fact, I'd strongly advise working your way through the chapters as far as 'Schooldays' before you select specific themes to examine. The reason for this is that the more you know about yourself the better you'll be able to use the chapters on your specific issues. Discussions of birth, the family, and school will help you with this.

Another way you can use this book is by reading it straight through as a way of elucidating human nature in general, and yours in particular. That is why I've organized the chapters as a chronological sequence of emotional landmarks or mileposts that we can all expect to encounter. These are the Life Passages of the title. We will all experience each of these life passages in one form or another in our lives. We may face these passages ourselves, directly; or it may be indirectly as we see those close to us struggling to understand their lives in the light of illness or divorce, perhaps. One thing we can be sure of. Whether it's us or someone else, each life passage will change us.

As you go through the exercises I will be attempting to do several things. The first is to raise awareness about your own experiences, the events you will write about, and to encourage reflection on them. Often we don't make time to think about what things may mean. The significance and value of an event can easily be lost this way. Just as a photograph album can surprise us with a rush of memories - 'Yes, I really did this' - so we can reclaim our past experiences and gain from them only if we take the conscious effort to recall them.

The second thing this book sets out to do is to provide some sort of a context for the information and the emotions that will arise, so you can see

them more clearly. After all, it's not much help if you access a poignant and beautiful memory and then are not sure what to do with the emotions that emerge. The paragraphs that follow each exercise are there to make suggestions to you, the reader, so that you can put these memories, or stories, into some sort of context that will enable you to see them in a clearer light. If you are working alone this will be an important way for you to put your responses into a new perspective. If you have arranged to work with a friend and compare results, or if you are working with a group or a class then you may find it helpful to note what the others' responses were. Often people who are quite dissimilar in all outward respects turn out to have faced similar difficulties, and can learn from each other as well as offer support. It is context that allows each of us to see that our concerns may well be important, and that they are also concerns others have dealt with, and found solutions for. An unclimbed mountain peak has a forbidding quality to it. When we know that others have made it to the top before us the task can seem far less daunting, and we know we're not alone.

Behind all this lie two questions: why do negative feelings linger so long? And why is it that we remember anger and pain more than we recall peace and happiness? The challenge facing us is that if we don't come to terms with the negative emotions, they will inevitably weaken us, sap our energy, and undermine any sense of inner peace. The aim is to shed those items that weaken us. Remember, for a moment, a successful vacation you may have had. You came back feeling refreshed, thinking how much more fun life had been over the previous few days, and wanting to bring that frame of mind with you into the everyday world. Four days later you're back in the grind and you can't believe how quickly all the good feelings faded. See how quickly the negative feelings cut into the positive ones?

It is my aim for you to access the insight and wisdom each writing exercise can put you in touch with. In this way you can reclaim your life experiences, feel them, value those feelings, and then be able to move beyond them. You could say that retrieving these memories and thoughts is the reclaiming of knowledge, and that the understanding of them is the first step towards wisdom.

That is why I have found writing these exercises so successful in my work with clients over the past two decades. They are short - they may ask you to write a response to a question, for example - and each can be completed in less than five minutes. No longer is needed than that. This may seem very sudden, but sometimes one's first response is the best, and I certainly wish you to value those initial reactions, and to trust them too. You'll also find that the exercises are cumulative - they lead on one to another, and each seeks to extend and deepen the understandings already uncovered.

Why do I insist on a writing exercise? Simply because at the end of each exercise you, the reader, will be able to see, clearly before you, an evolving record of your progress, in which that progress itself is visible and can be referred to again. This is important. I have come across frequent instances of clients who have gone to therapy, made break-throughs and an hour later they have 'forgotten' almost all of it. Repression and denial have taken over, and they work more swiftly than we realize. A written exercise, on the other hand, is a physical record that cannot be so easily denied. In this way, I'll emphasize the process rather than the end product. The things you will discover as you write are far more important than whether or not your prose rivals Tolstoy's. It's important to recall, though, that Tolstoy was only able to become the writer he was because he had spent a vast amount of time discovering, first and foremost, who he was. Once he knew that, his fiction

flowed more rapidly than it could otherwise have done.

When we reclaim ourselves in this way we can begin to deal with some of the aspects of our lives that have caused us grief and before they can, in the future, cause further upset.

At intervals throughout the book you will find sections that urge you to review your writing as a whole. It's a good idea to read those no matter which way you choose to use the book, since those sections will ask you to consider your writing not just from the point of view of what you said, but how you may be choosing to say it. Very often we can see habitual patterns emerging, and noticing them is a way of asking whether or not there may be another way to respond. It's as if we're all wearing spectacles - some are rose tinted, some are deep blue. It's only when we know we're wearing them that we can take them off and see things differently, perhaps challenging our preconceptions as we do so. Preconceptions are like noses: Everyone has one but we always look straight past our own. The reflective sections can help us with this.

At this point it's probably a good idea to move straight into an exercise, but before we do here is a word of caution: if you find during the course of doing these exercises that you are feeling frightened or deeply agitated I would advise you to get professional help. The purpose of these exercises is to uncover issues and emotions within you that may need attention. If some of them feel too big for you to deal with yourself then you may need the experts to help you. There's no point in delaying under those circumstances.

Exercise: Read the following poem.

The owl and the pussycat went to sea  
In a beautiful pea-green boat  
They took some honey and plenty of money  
Wrapped up in a five pound note  
They sailed away for a year and a day  
To the land where the bong tree grows  
And there in a wood  
A piggy-wig stood  
With a ring at the end of his nose.

Edward Lear's charming nonsense poem conjures up, for the most part, pleasing and slightly absurd images, as these two decidedly un-nautical creatures set out for far lands.

Imagine you are going on such a trip. What would you take? Who would you go with? What would you expect to find - hope to find - when you arrive? You can write a list, or a description, or draw a picture.

I've had many responses to this exercise. One woman, a gifted artist, spent several weeks perfecting her response - a series of pictures done in pastels, dramatizing the major events of the poem. Most striking was her initial picture in which two tiny creatures sat in a boat that was not pea-green, on surging and turquoise waves, underneath a vast blue-black sky. The feeling this picture conveyed was positively epic - suddenly the figures were not two rather silly animals but bold adventurers heading into an enormous, beautiful and wondrous future. In this woman's case the picture conveyed

her sense of the wonder of future possibilities in her relationship, but to "explain" the picture in such naked terms would be to rob it of all its life. It was, above all, an optimistic picture.

Others have written lists of essential items to be taken along, and those lists have sometimes been extensive. Often the apprehension of the unknown, and the desire to be ready for anything, is expressed in the amassing of objects. How much did you choose to take with you? Were you optimistic, taking only things that would add enjoyment, or were you fearful, and intent on carrying extra lifejackets?

One young man of twenty-two was quite clear that he'd need charts and 'a bilge pump' for when the boat sprang a leak. Other responses have included on the boat such figures as trained gourmet chefs, and the full crew of an oceanic liner. Since the type of boat in the poem is not specified (although Edward Lear's original sketches showed a rowing boat) some responses have assumed this to be a cruise ship heading for the Caribbean. For others this was a white-water rafting expedition, while one woman chose long barges such as one encounters in Europe on canals. In each case the poem was hardly adhered to faithfully or even logically - white water rafting for a year and a day? Now that would be taxing.

The point of this exercise is to ask you to look ahead. How do you see your life ahead? Is it placid, rowing down a gentle river, or is it storm-tossed? And is that what you want? Many people enjoy storms. And who did you choose to take with you? Some people take siblings or parents in preference to spouses or significant others. What does your choice say about you? Some people choose to take those they've never met; film stars appear fairly often. I find for such people it is the fantasy that is clearly the most important aspect, and it's worth asking them to explore further what they may expect from

someone they cannot know. The choice of a companion says a huge amount about what relationships are important to the individual, and what each person hopes for that relationship. Remember, cruises have always been romantic, and in these days of jet travel, one chooses to go on a boat because it is slow, relaxed and trouble-free. "I'd like to get you on a slow boat to China..." that much-broadcast song of early 1960s, was a love-song that spelled out how hard it was to get time alone with the person one might be attracted to.

There are other aspects of this exercise that may reward closer scrutiny, also. The size of the boat may indicate a desire for pleasure - the cruise liner, for example - while a smaller boat may hint at a valuing of emotional intimacy. In addition a sea voyage involves dealing with water, traditionally seen as moody, emotional, and challenging. Poseidon, the Greek god of the sea, and Neptune, his Roman counterpart, were both characterized as passionate, emotional and unstable, although very definitely male. If we add to this the fact that the sea moves to the tides, which are controlled by the moon - traditionally seen as a feminine force linked to the menstrual cycle - the watery element can be seen as symbolic of the female emotions also. Since the moon itself waxes and wanes, it is often connected to the idea of the ups and downs of the emotions. When looking at the way you respond to the sea, this exercise can give insight into how you feel about the emotional demands and expectations you see ahead. How comfortable are you with your emotions and the emotions of others?

Usually, when I give this exercise the responses place the two animals in broad daylight. Lear's poem goes on to describe how the Owl sings to the Pussycat "to the sound of a small guitar" and looks up "at the moon above." This knowledge can lead people to provide a night scene. On the whole

though, the night scenes I have come across have been very few in number, and those that I've encountered often have less to do with romance than with a sense that the individual has a dark night to pass through before reaching the sunlight again. If you produced a night scene, ask yourself if this is a representation of what you see ahead for yourself on your journey through emotionally demanding times.

Broadly speaking, fearful people tend to focus on the things they'll take with them. Optimists will tend to take less, or take items that have to do with physical comfort. Those who have strong family ties or relationships they wish to cultivate will concentrate on the duration of the journey and who they spend it with, rather than the destination. In this way the exercise can be seen as a metaphor for where you want your life to go, and under what circumstances, and what you expect your life to provide for you. If we expect life to be good to us, the chances are we won't settle for second best, and so the list of things, and the places you may discover on the journey, can indicate how you see yourself in relation to what the world will provide. One young man imagined having to subdue the hostile population of a small island, using his shotgun. His sense of violent struggle was entirely different from that of a woman of thirty-eight who had her five siblings on board the large cruise ship she was sailing in, and no destination was even being aimed for, let alone arrived at. The harmonious, pleasurable, journey was everything, and arriving was purely coincidental.

The question this exercise asks us is to consider that, ultimately, we have to provide for ourselves on our journey through life. We have to make things happen. If we don't spell out to ourselves what we want and need, how can we hope to get it? If we don't see our fears and challenge them, how can we move beyond them? This whimsical exercise can help.

For younger people what's often most important is what they find at the end of the trip, "In the land where the bong tree grows." The ring in the pig's nose can be seen as a reward, or a trophy, earned at the end of the voyage. One young man of twenty one saw himself arriving at the island only in his advanced years, and the ring was to be sent back to his relatives, after he was dead, to show what he had achieved. The ring in the original poem was used as a wedding ring for the Owl and Pussycat, as you may recall, and there have been any number of people who have written about taking a loved one on this trip and giving the ring to that person. In these instances the value of the ring is obvious. I would like to take it a little further, however. Just as one gives oneself in marriage, so we could see the ring as being a metaphor for one's relationship with oneself. Did you value the ring? Did you wear it, either on your hand, or as an earring, or even on a string around your neck? Did you hide it? It may be worth writing more about the story you produced in response to this poem.

In fact, if the ring can be seen as symbol of the achieved self it can work, as many symbols do, both ways. There are some people who will value the ring, wearing it around the neck for status. "I'd wear it to keep those pigs in order, let them know who's boss," wrote a man of twenty-three who had a history of struggling to gain respect. A young woman of twenty -four was equally sure she didn't need a ring at all, so confident was she of who she was. And so the symbol can work both ways. What's important here is how you felt about the ring. Another example may clarify this.

A young woman who was a survivor of incest described how she would like to take her boyfriend on the trip to a desert island. When she had the ring she said she would stand with him on the edge of a large freshwater lagoon and throw the ring high in the air so it landed in the center of the

water. This would be the sign of her connectedness to him. This wonderfully poetic statement links, I feel, the life-giving and refreshing aspects of the water (which, as I have suggested, has a great deal to do with the emotions) with a desire to throw off an old sexual attachment (symbolized by the ring) and have that experience washed clean so the new attachment can grow. It was fairly clearly a story of redemption and renewal.

And this leads me into a larger discussion, which I shall call 'the stories we tell ourselves'. The exercise we have been looking at is a very effective way of mirroring back to ourselves the unacknowledged 'stories' we may use to shape our past experiences, and which can, in turn, limit our future. If we see our lives as being spent on a leaky boat, lost in a watery waste, then we are telling ourselves 'the world is like this for me'. We can choose another version - we can choose anything we want to. We could select the luxury liner, heading towards a beautiful destination, if we wish. So why did you choose the boat you did? What we choose is worth looking at because it can reflect to us our ideas of 'luck'. "Just my luck!" a friend of mine used to say whenever anything went wrong. And when things went well he could be heard saying, "I don't believe it. Something's bound to go wrong soon..." I used to be amused by his pessimism until I realized that because he expected things to go badly, he looked only for events that would confirm his bleak outlook. As a result he was, literally, blinding himself to the good things that were around him. He just could not see them.

This is what I mean by 'the stories we tell ourselves'. There are many, from simple roles we find ourselves slipping into to the whole way we run our lives. A simple role may be something like this. I knew a man who pretended to be mechanically incompetent because he discovered that other men and women were only too anxious to come and help him out - and

show off as they did so. The strategy worked, but at the expense of making the man believe he was less competent than he really was. This was an interesting example to me because that role is often played by women when they want men to do things for them. The manipulation of the gender stereotype is easily accomplished. The person sends out a signal that says 'please help poor little me', and those who wish to appear competent are happy to oblige. The trouble is that we may actually become the roles we adopt.

A more complex example of this sort of 'story' came to my attention some years ago when I was traveling in India. A young Indian man asked me why I was traveling and what job I had. I replied that I had given up my job as a teacher, sold everything and had set out traveling, and that I did not know what job awaited me in the future. He laughed, because, he explained, he couldn't believe anyone would do that. In his world, he said, no one would dare to leave a job, certainly not a teacher, unless there was another job waiting. His mindset, his 'story', was that one found a job and stayed in it. Mine was that I'd held one job and could track down another when the time came.

I give these examples because we all have these stories. If I had accepted the young Indian's story I would never have traveled as I did, and my life would have been the poorer for it. If he had accepted mine, he might well have risked poverty. Every story seems reasonable to the individual who owns it. There are, however, many culturally determined versions of these stories, which have become so pervasive as to be almost imperceptible to us. With this in mind let me outline a few. See if you recognize any of them. The chances are that you'll see aspects of several of these stories in your life.