

On keeping a notebook essay sample



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Joan Didion's essay, "On Keeping a Notebook" concretely shows the importance of everyday objects and persons we encounter in our daily lives. To a certain extent, beneath all the stresses of being a working person and encountering different kinds of people, there are certain little, sometimes even grand things which utterly provide us glimpses of very important moments of our past. It actually transports us back into almost forgotten memories by the simple recognition of certain objects and persons in our minds which might even be totally unrelated to what we were exactly thinking of during several moments in time.

In the essay, one good example is the sauerkraut. The thought of the sauerkraut, evoked memories of drinking Bourbon and going to bed at ten, among other memories of her childhood. While the sauerkraut was a mere relish for hotdogs and sausages, alongside the ketchup and Dijon mustard, the sauerkraut was not a simple relish but a gateway to her cherished childhood days. To other people, it might simply have been the sour relish which everybody eats with their hotdogs during baseball games or one of the many the relishes produced by a food technologist in a multi-national food corporation. But for the author, the sauerkraut is far more than what many people would ever contemplate.

In all of these thought processes, an essential requisite for the gateways to her thoughts and memories would be her notebook. She may not have always written the exact same factual circumstances as it actually occurred, but it is not as important as the certain objects in her appreciation of facts which evoked much substance in her existence. Even if many of her family members would assert that her contemplation of a series of events were

falsities, such as her imagination of a cracked crab, such an event in her mind made the actual event of a party with her family members makes the afternoon with them seem real once again - " a home movie run all too often, the father bearing gifts, the child weeping, an exercise in family love and guilt." (Didion)

As far as the author was concerned, the actual factual circumstances of the event did not matter, but only what she felt during those events. It is no import if "...perhaps there never were flurries in the night wind, and maybe no one else felt the ground hardening and summer already dead even as we pretended to bask in it, but that was how it felt to me, and it might as well have snowed, could have snowed, did snow." (Didion) While there were no actual flurries in the night wind, it was thought and feeling of such flurries that evoked the return of these memories. On the other hand, some of the events she observed were not even directly related to another event that occurred in her life yet these events serve as memory cues to bring back these memories. One example would be Mrs. Minnie S. Brooks and her mandarin coat which pulled her back to her childhood even if she only knew Mrs. Brook when she was thirty.

At the center of all the flurry of her memories would always be the notebook she always kept. It was the handiest way for her to bask in the glory of her experiences, joys and pitfalls. The notebook has made her life all the more interesting as statements blurted out by people she meets does not remain simple statements but words loaded with her personal history. One example would be hearing a sentence on the whiskey business. To a liqueur businessperson, he might answer that the business is affected by the

impending economic slowdown in the United States. But for the author, it means, “ The blonde in a Pucci bathing suit sitting with a couple of fat men by the pool at the Beverly Hills Hotel.” (Didion) Her notebook was very powerful in evoking these memories and emotions, most of which might be lost in her mind had she not jotted these ideas and events down.

In all of these, the essay was able to convey its message very powerfully, as it showed concretely how the dynamics of imagination and reality play out in the access to a person’s memory. It had also shown that no exact formula exists in making persons remember their past although the keeping of notebooks and the simple words and statements written down in these notebooks can unleash a plethora of memories and emotion that may be totally unrelated to an actual event in one’s life. For example, for a rock fan, the sounds of Metallica’s *Nothing Else Matters* may simply make him remember the mosh pits he joined during his college days in the University of California-Berkeley. But it may not be the case for a rape victim who was hearing the Metallica song above while she was being mounted and exploited by unscrupulous men in an apartment in the Bronx. The song would then evoke different emotions and meanings to very different kinds of persons even if the same be the same recording. Another example can be the collective American experience of invading Iraq in March 2003. For a mother who had lost her son in the 9/11 terrorist attack, a feeling of justice might have resulted in that event, while an Iraqi mother might have felt fear and sorrow when the planes bombed Iraq on those fateful weeks.

In all of these, Keeping a Notebook has fully shown the depths of the human capacity to relate totally unrelated events into a seeming flowing fabric of

human thought and imagination in the context of a person's personal history. It makes for a better understanding of the dynamics of a people's emotions and actions as they go on with their lives while reliving past experiences, learning from it, even if not immediately. While the notebook only shows how handy it is to keep one for the preservation of memories, it does not preclude any person from keeping one's memories alive by the memory cues of every single and simple event, person or object which had a lasting effect on the lives of persons.