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March 2023

### The First Journal and the Last

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#### Recommended Citation

Mirriam-Goldberg, Caryn, "The First Journal and the Last" (2023). *Essays*. 19.  
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## The First Journal and the Last

It started with a journal, a small 6" x 9" notebook that I held in my terrified hands as I sat on the cement steps of what was called "a garden apartment" in central New Jersey. It was summer and eternally too hot, my parents were in the middle of a horrendous divorce, my best friend had just cast me out of her life, and my father was threatening suicide. All I had at a certain moment on this July day was my 14 years of life experience, a journal, and a pen. Luckily, it was more than enough.

I wrote to understand, or at least try to understand, actions and reactions beyond my scope. I wrote to use the page as a mirror. I wrote to unleash and release and even take back in whatever was rocking my boat. I wrote to make something out of words that could nourish me at a moment of great soul hunger. I wrote for solace, I wrote for depth, I wrote for escape, I wrote for homecoming.

The page, to paragraph writer Annie Dilliard, is what taught me to write, far more than the yards and yards of books I've read over my life (for true education including and beyond school). Having read over my early journals, it's quite clear I wasn't born with a golden pen in my hand. Yet through the act of filling up lines and pages and journals, I taught myself to be a writer, or maybe more accurately, writing itself taught me how to make poems, stories, novels, essays, songs, and more.

The first journal led to the second, and then to the third until, 40 years later, I've lost count of the worn tiny spiral notebooks, handsome leather, or cloth-covered and padded journals I've carried and filled. Most of these journals have all manner of poem and story starts or breakthroughs among many false turns made by too much or too little editing. All have accounts of moments I got lost, happy, confused, angry, broken, found, and lost again. Early journals focus on a string of crushes, and later ones on worries or marvels about time and health. Some of the entries tell the same old story of spinning my habitual wheels in the mud when it comes to the sturdy pile of my issues and crazinesses.

Most have numbers scribbled on back pages as I calculated how to make rent, when various freelance checks might and should arrive, and what it would cost to feed the family on a camping trip that would inevitably involve lots of carsickness and losing the tent poles somewhere in eastern Colorado.

No matter what the journals hold, I hold them. I've never without a journal in my purse, and beside my bed are my small collection of what I call "spirit journals," larger books with more expansive pages for contemplation or just pasting photos and greeting card images that involve glitter or jewel tones. I've just herded together a pile of even larger books, art journals, with my very non-professional renderings of gel-penned mandalas, collages drawing heavily on *Oprah* magazine images, and charcoal drawings.

I cannot imagine now traveling with, waking to, or sleeping near a journal. These friends show me how to return to imagination, and with imagination, how to come home to whoever I am beyond the stories others or myself might tell me about identity. Like a forest that makes its own quiet and wind, my journals make their own rhythm and weather, bringing me right here to experience yet again the mystery and joy of the scribbled full or still blank page.