

THE MORNING PAGES

In order to retrieve your creativity, you need to find it. I ask you to do this by an apparently pointless process I call *the morning pages*. You will do the pages daily through all the weeks of the course and, I hope, much longer. I have been doing them for a decade now. I have students who have worked with them nearly that long and who would no more abandon them than breathing.

Ginny, a writer-producer, credits the morning pages with inspiration for her recent screenplays and clarity in planning her network specials. “I’m superstitious about them by now,” she says. “When I was editing my last special, I would get up at 5:00 A.M. to get them done before I went in to work.”

What are morning pages? Put simply, the morning pages are three pages of longhand writing, strictly stream-of-consciousness: “Oh, god, another morning. I have NOTHING to say. I need to wash the curtains. Did I get my laundry yesterday? Blah, blah, blah ...” They might also, more ingloriously, be called *brain drain*, since that is one of their main functions.

Words are a form of action, capable of influencing change.

INGRID BENGIS

You need to claim the events of your life to make yourself yours.

ANNE-WILSON SCHAEF

There is no wrong way to do morning pages. These daily morning meanderings are not meant to be *art*. Or even *writing*. I stress that point to reassure the nonwriters working with this book. Writing is simply one of the tools. Pages are meant to be, simply, the act of moving the hand across the

page and writing down *whatever* comes to mind. Nothing is too petty, too silly, too stupid, or too weird to be included.

The morning pages are not supposed to sound smart—although sometimes they might. Most times they won't, and nobody will ever know except you. Nobody is allowed to read your morning pages except you. And you shouldn't even read them yourself for the first eight weeks or so. Just write three pages, and stick them into an envelope. Or write three pages in a spiral notebook and don't leaf back through. *Just write three pages ...* and write three more pages the next day.

September 30, 1991 ... Over the weekend, for Domenica's biology project, she and I went bug hunting on the Rio Grande and Pott Creek. We collected water crawlies and butterflies. I made a crimson homemade butterfly net that was quite functional although dragonflies eluded us to our dismay. We did not catch the tarantula strolling down the dirt road near our house. We just enjoyed spotting it.

Although occasionally colorful, the morning pages are often negative, frequently fragmented, often self-pitying, repetitive, stilted or babyish, angry or bland—even silly sounding. Good!

Oct. 2, 1991 ... I am up and have had a headache and have taken aspirin and feel a little better although still shaky. I may have that flu after all. I am getting to the bottom of a lot of unpacking and still no teapot from Laura whom I am sorely missing. What a heartbreak ...

All that angry, whiny, petty stuff that you write down in the morning stands between you and your creativity. Worrying about the job, the laundry, the funny knock in the car, the weird look in your lover's eye—this stuff eddies through our subconscious and muddies our days. Get it on the page.

The morning pages are the primary tool of creative recovery. As blocked artists, we tend to criticize ourselves mercilessly. Even if we look like functioning artists to the world, we feel we never do enough and what we do isn't right. We are victims of our own internalized perfectionist, a nasty internal and eternal critic, the Censor, who resides in our (left) brain and keeps up a constant stream of subversive remarks that are often disguised as the truth. The Censor says wonderful things like: "You call that writing? What a joke. You can't even punctuate. If you haven't done it by now you never will. You can't even spell. What makes you think you can be creative?" And on and on.

Make this a rule: always remember that your Censor's negative opinions

are not the truth. This takes practice. By spilling out of bed and straight onto the page every morning, you learn to evade the Censor. Because there is no wrong way to write the morning pages, the Censor's opinion doesn't count. Let your Censor rattle on. (And it will.) Just keep your hand moving across the page. Write down the Censor's thoughts if you want to. Note how it loves to aim for your creative jugular. Make no mistake: the Censor is out to get you. It's a cunning foe. Every time you get smarter, so does it. So you wrote one good play? The Censor tells you that's all there is. So you drew your first sketch? The Censor says, "It's not Picasso."

Think of your Censor as a cartoon serpent, slithering around your creative Eden, hissing vile things to keep you off guard. If a serpent doesn't appeal to you, you might want to find a good cartoon image of your Censor, maybe the shark *from Jaws*, and put an X through it. Post it where you tend to write or on the inside cover of your notebook. Just making the Censor into the nasty, clever little character that it is begins to pry loose some of its power over you and your creativity.

A mind too active is no mind at all.

THEODORE ROETHKE

The events in our lives happen in a sequence in time, but in their significance to ourselves, they find their own order ... the continuous thread of revelation.

EUDORA WELTY

More than one student has tacked up an unflattering picture of the parent responsible for the Censor's installation in his or her psyche and called that his or her Censor. The point is to stop taking the Censor as the voice of reason and learn to hear it for the blocking device that it is. Morning pages will help you to do this.

Morning pages are nonnegotiable. Never skip or skimp on morning pages. Your mood doesn't matter. The rotten thing your Censor says doesn't matter. We have this idea that we need to be in the mood to write. We don't.

Morning pages will teach you that your mood doesn't really matter. Some

of the best creative work gets done on the days when you feel that everything you're doing is just plain junk. The morning pages will teach you to stop judging and just let yourself write. So what if you're tired, crabby, distracted, stressed? Your artist is a child and it needs to be fed. Morning pages feed your artist child. So write your morning pages.

Three pages of whatever crosses your mind—that's all there is to it. If you can't think of anything to write, then write, "I can't think of anything to write...." Do this until you have filled three pages. *Do anything until you have filled three pages.*

When people ask, "Why do we write morning pages?" I joke, "To get to the other side." They think I am kidding, but I'm not. Morning pages do get us to the other side: the other side of our fear, of our negativity, of our moods. Above all, they get us beyond our Censor. Beyond the reach of the Censor's babble we find our own quiet center, the place where we hear the still, small voice that is at once our creator's and our own.

A word is in order here about logic brain and artist brain. Logic brain is our brain of choice in the Western Hemisphere. It is the categorical brain. It thinks in a neat, linear fashion. As a rule, logic brain perceives the world according to known categories. A horse is a certain combination of animal parts that make up a horse. A fall forest is viewed as a series of colors that add up to "fall forest." It looks at a fall forest and notes: red, orange, yellow, green, gold.

Logic brain was and is our survival brain. It works on known principles. Anything unknown is perceived as wrong and possibly dangerous. Logic brain likes things to be neat little soldiers marching in a straight line. Logic brain is the brain we usually listen to, especially when we are telling ourselves to be sensible.

Poetry often enters through the window of irrelevance.

M. C. RICHARDS

Logic brain is our Censor, our second (and third and fourth) thoughts. Faced with an original sentence, phrase, paint squiggle, it says, "What the hell is that? That's not right!"

Artist brain is our inventor, our child, our very own personal absent-minded professor. Artist brain says, “Hey! That is so neat!” It puts odd things together (boat equals wave and walker). It likes calling a speeding GTO a wild animal: “The black howling wolf pulled into the drive-in ...”

Artist brain is our creative, holistic brain. It thinks in patterns and shadings. It sees a fall forest and thinks: Wow! Leaf bouquet! Pretty! Gold-gilt-shimmery-earthskin-king’s-carpet! Artist brain is associative and freewheeling. It makes new connections, yoking together images to invoke meaning: like the Norse myths calling a boat “wave-horse.” In *Star Wars*, the name Skywalker is a lovely artist-brain flash.

Why all this logic-brain/artist-brain talk? Because the morning pages teach logic brain to stand aside and let artist brain play.

The Censor is part of our leftover survival brain. It was the part in charge of deciding whether it was safe for us to leave the forest and go out into the meadow. Our Censor scans our creative meadow for any dangerous beasts. Any original thought can look pretty dangerous to our Censor.

The only sentences/paintings/sculptures/photographs it likes are ones that it has seen many times before. Safe sentences. Safe paintings. Not exploratory blurts, squiggles, or jottings. Listen to your Censor and it will tell you that everything original is wrong/dangerous/rotten.

Who wouldn’t be blocked if every time you tiptoed into the open somebody (your Censor) made fun of you? The morning pages will teach you to stop listening to that ridicule. They will allow you to detach from your negative Censor.

It may be useful for you to think of the morning pages as meditation. It may not be the practice of meditation you are accustomed to. You may, in fact, not be accustomed to meditating at all. The pages may not seem spiritual or even meditative—more like negative and materialistic, actually—but they are a valid form of meditation that gives us insight and helps us effect change in our lives.

Inspiration may be a form of superconsciousness, or perhaps of subconsciousness—I wouldn’t know. But I am sure it is the antithesis of self-consciousness.

AARON COPLAND

Let's take a look at what we stand to gain by meditating. There are many ways of thinking about meditation. Scientists speak of it in terms of brain hemispheres and shunting techniques. We move from logic brain to artist brain and from fast to slow, shallow to deep. Management consultants, in pursuit of corporate physical health, have learned to think of meditation primarily as a stress-management technique. Spiritual seekers choose to view the process as a gateway to God. Artists and creativity mavens approve of it as a conduit for higher creative insights.

All of these notions are true—as far as they go. They do not go far enough. Yes, we will alter our brain hemisphere, lower our stress, discover an inner contact with a creative source, and have many creative insights. Yes, for any one of these reasons, the pursuit is a worthy one. Even taken in combination, however, they are still intellectual constructs for what is primarily an experience of wholeness, rightness, and power.

We meditate to discover our own identity, our right place in the scheme of the universe. Through meditation, we acquire and eventually acknowledge our connection to an inner power source that has the ability to transform our outer world. In other words, meditation gives us not only the light of insight but also the power for expansive change.

Insight in and of itself is an intellectual comfort. Power in and of itself is a blind force that can destroy as easily as build. It is only when we consciously learn to link power and light that we begin to feel our rightful identities as creative beings. The morning pages allow us to forge this link. They provide us with a spiritual ham-radio set to contact the Creator Within. For this reason, the morning pages are a spiritual practice.

It is impossible to write morning pages for any extended period of time without coming into contact with an unexpected inner power. Although I used them for many years before I realized this, the pages are a pathway to a strong and clear sense of self. They are a trail that we follow into our own interior, where we meet both our own creativity and our creator.

It always comes back to the same necessity: go deep enough and there is a bedrock of truth, however hard.

MAY SARTON

Morning pages map our own interior. Without them, our dreams may remain terra incognita. I know mine did. Using them, the light of insight is coupled with the power for expansive change. It is very difficult to complain about a situation morning after morning, month after month, without being moved to constructive action. The pages lead us out of despair and into undreamed-of solutions.

The first time I did morning pages, I was living in Taos, New Mexico. I had gone there to sort myself out—into what, I didn't know. For the third time in a row, I'd had a film scuttled due to studio politics. Such disasters are routine to screenwriters, but to me they felt like miscarriages. Cumulatively, they were disastrous. I wanted to give the movies up. Movies had broken my heart. I didn't want any more brainchildren to meet untimely deaths. I'd gone to New Mexico to mend my heart and see what else, if anything, I might want to do.

Living in a small adobe house that looked north to Taos Mountain, I began a practice of writing morning pages. Nobody told me to do them. I had never heard of anybody doing them. I just got the insistent, inner sense that I should do them and so I did. I sat at a wooden table looking north to Taos Mountain and I wrote.

The morning pages were my pastime, something to do instead of staring at the mountain all the time. The mountain, a humpbacked marvel different in every weather, raised more questions than I did. Wrapped in clouds one day, dark and wet the next, that mountain dominated my view and my morning pages as well. What did it—or anything—mean? I asked page after page, morning after morning. No answer.

And then, one wet morning, a character named Johnny came strolling into my pages. Without planning to, I was writing a novel. The morning pages had shown me a way.

Anyone who faithfully writes morning pages will be led to a connection with a source of wisdom within. When I am stuck with a painful situation or problem that I don't think I know how to handle, I will go to the pages and ask for guidance. To do this, I write "LJ" as a shorthand for me, "Little Julie," and then I ask my question.

Like an ability or a muscle, hearing your inner wisdom is strengthened by doing it.

ROBBIE GASS

It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our lives that we must draw our strength to live and our reasons for living.

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

LJ: What should I tell them about this inner wisdom? (Then I listen for the reply and write that down, too.)

ANSWER: You should tell them everyone has a direct dial to God. No one needs to go through an operator. Tell them to try this technique with a problem of their own. They will.

Sometimes, as above, the answer may seem flippant or too simple. I have come to believe that *seem* is the operative word. Very often, when I act on the advice I have been given, it is exactly right—far more right than something more complicated would have been. And so, for the record, I want to say: pages are my way of meditating; I do them because they work.

A final assurance: the morning pages will work for painters, for sculptors, for poets, for actors, for lawyers, for housewives—for anyone who wants to try anything creative. Don't think they are a tool for writers only. Hooey. These pages are not intended for writers only. Lawyers who use them swear they make them more effective in court. Dancers claim their balance improves—and not just emotionally. If anything, writers, who have a regrettable desire to *write* morning pages instead of just do them, may have the hardest time seeing their impact. What they're likely to see is that their other writing seems to suddenly be far more free and expansive and somehow easy to do. In short, no matter what your reservation or your occupation, morning pages will function for you.

Timothy, a buttoned-down, buttoned-lip curmudgeon millionaire, began writing morning pages with a skeptic's scorn. He didn't want to do them without some proof that they would work. The damn pages had no label, no Dun and Brad-street rating. They just sounded silly, and Timothy hated silly.

Timothy was, in street parlance, a serious player. His poker face was so straight it looked more like a fireplace poker than a mere cardsharp's defense. Practiced for years in the corporate board room, Timothy's invincible facade was as dark, shiny, and expensive as mahogany. No emotions scratched the surface of this man's calm. He was a one-man monument to the Masculine

Mystique.

“Oh, all right ...” Timothy agreed to the pages, but only because he had paid good money to be told to do them. Within three weeks, straightlaced, pin-striped Timothy became a morning-pages advocate. The results of his work with them convinced him. He started—heaven forbid—to have a little creative fun. “I bought guitar strings for this old guitar I had lying around,” he reported one week. And then, “I rewired my stereo. I bought some wonderful Italian recordings.” Although he hesitated to acknowledge it, even to himself, Timothy’s writer’s block was melting. Up at dawn, Gregorian chant on the stereo, he was writing freely.

Not everyone undertakes the morning pages with such obvious antagonism. Phyllis, a leggy, racehorse socialite who for years had hidden her brains behind her beauty and her life behind her man’s, tried the morning pages with a great deal of surface cheer—and an inner conviction they would never work for her. It had been ten years since she had allowed herself to write anything other than letters and bread-and-butter lists. About a month into morning pages, seemingly out of nowhere, Phyllis got her first poem. In the three years she has used pages since, she has written poems, speeches, radio shows, and a nonfiction book.

Anton, grumpy but graceful in his use of the pages, accomplished unblocking as an actor. Laura, talented but blocked as a writer, painter, and musician, found that the morning pages moved her to her piano, typewriter, and paint supplies.

While you may undertake this course with an agenda as to what you want unblocked, the tools may free creative areas you have long ignored or even been blind to. Ingeborg, using the pages to unblock her creative writer, moved from being one of Germany’s top music critics to composing for the first time in twenty years. She was stunned and made several ecstatic transatlantic calls to share her good news.

Often, the students most resistant to morning pages come to love them the best. In fact, hating the morning pages is a very good sign. Loving them is a good sign, too, if you keep writing even when you suddenly don’t. A neutral attitude is the third position, but it’s really just a defensive strategy that may mask boredom.

Painting is just another way of keeping a diary.

PABLO PICASSO

Experience, even for a painter, is not exclusively visual.

WALTER MEIGS

The most potent muse of all is our own inner child.

STEPHEN
NACHMANOVITCH

At the height of laughter, the universe is flung into a kaleidoscope of new possibilities.

JEAN HOUSTON

Boredom is just “What’s the use?” in disguise. And “What’s the use?” is fear, and fear means you are secretly in despair. So put your fears on the page. Put anything on the page. Put three pages of it on the page.