

# Silent Companion

A M Carley

*“[T]he habit of writing ... for my own eye only is good practice. It loosens the ligaments. ... What sort of diary should I like mine to be? Something loose knit and yet not slovenly, so elastic that it will embrace anything, solemn, slight or beautiful that comes into my mind.*

—Virginia Woolf, Diary, 20 April 1919

## How I Started

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One winter night when I was young, I sat looking out my bedroom window at the dark street in front of my parents’ house. My parents and I were on a long-distance phone call –

they in the kitchen, I on the long-lobbied-for extension recently installed in my room – catching up with a family friend. The friend had called cross-country to give us the good news that a recently married couple we all knew and loved were expecting a child in May, and wasn't it great?

A green notebook  
comes in handy

As I listened, my parents' unseen reactions seemed tinged with something. Hmmm. I'd gone to the November wedding. I counted on my fingers: one for December, two for January, three for February, and so on. When I got to six for May, I started over again, to find my error.

I knew about a mostly unspoken rule that said babies are supposed to be born more than nine months after the wedding. I also concluded this couple had broken the rule. I had questions. Lots of questions. It would not be smart, however, for me to ask my parents. While Bohemian in many ways, they each had a strong Puritanical streak that manifested from time to time, and this had all the earmarks of such an occasion. I didn't want to be in the room when they hashed it out between them.

I didn't have any friends to talk to about something like this. I grabbed a green spiral-bound notebook from my schoolbag and wrote out the months, to be extra sure. Wow. The mother-to-be must have been pregnant already when I helped her get dressed on her wedding day. I had no idea.

I turned to my green notebook. I needed to sort out my feelings about this good news that turned sideways when it revealed a transgression. I found a steadfast companion that night.

## A place to confide

After that night, I kept pulling out the green notebook before I slept. It soon became a habit. I appreciated the safety of having a place to try out my thoughts before I spoke them or acted on them. I had a place where I could confide in complete privacy. As a thirteen-year-old girl I had many questions and puzzlements and uncertainties. The best place to express them, it often turned out, was in my green spiral notebook.

Many years have passed. I still maintain a blank notebook. After the green wirebound notebook filled up, I experimented with form. For a few years I made entries in a miniature bound journal my choirmaster gave all the choristers every December. This may have been to foil my eyeglass-wearing parents in the event they got nosy. I can now barely decipher my tiny handwriting – full of abbreviations and codes – in those volumes. Once I was out of my parents' house I settled on the sewn and taped binding of a “composition book” with a marble-pattern cardboard cover. The main thing didn't change: now as then, my journal is a welcoming open creative space. I seek a coherent narrative for this life, and the pages of my journal are where I conduct that search.

## Why I Treasure My Silent Companion

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Following are one big and three small gifts I have received from cultivating a journaling practice.

### 1. Three Timeframes

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Unprescribed, unsupervised, unlimited, the regular putting of pen to page gives back so much. And it doesn't just happen while you're writing. I find that an ongoing journaling practice takes place in three timeframes – during, after, and before.

### *During*

While I'm writing in my journal, I'm in the moment, and can let the words pour out, often unexamined. The passage of time is unimportant. I remain uncritical, open to what the pen in my hand puts onto the page. This process becomes a deeply ingrained habit. It helps keep me going, sustains me when I'm feeling under pressure, rewards me with insights revealed through the act of writing them, and gives me the place to puzzle out answers so I can gain understanding and take action on incomplete pieces of my life.

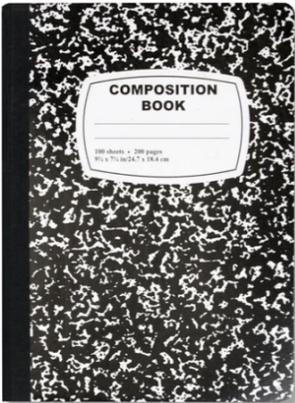
### *After*

From time to time, I flip back and review pages already covered with my handwriting. Here, I can examine everything. Retrospectives of prior years' entries can be useful and enlightening. Some patterns permit detection only in hindsight. From a longer view, I can appreciate genuine progress, and also note ongoing themes that recur in cycles of a year, or a decade, or longer – like the rings in a tree trunk or geologic strata. As Virginia Woolf discovered when she returned to old volumes of her diary, “I found the significance to lie where I never saw it at the time.”

### *Before*

Once the journaling habit became embedded, I began to notice, as they cropped up during the day, ideas and observations that felt like they belonged in

my journal, even when it wasn't at hand. One approach is to just carry the book around with you wherever you go so it's always at hand. When I did that, I asked myself the clever question, *If I'm carrying a bag big enough to hold my journal, why not toss in a few more things?* Some unpleasant neck and shoulder issues ensued. Instead, I now can opt to carry small, lightweight methods for making temporary jots that I can add to the journal later. Smartphones make this easier (although sometimes, I find, things really want to be written, not typed). These 'before' contributions to an ongoing journaling practice are worthwhile additions to the contents, and are also reassuring and self-reinforcing evidence of the centrality of this relationship between my journal and me.



Silent companion  
central

## 2. Good Enough

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Journals are wonderful [antidotes to perfectionism](#). Uncritical and impossible to shock, patient and unfazed, my journal can handle whatever I introduce. Its quality just does not matter.

## 3. Other Voices

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When you allow yourself free rein in your journal, you “invite your quieter, more thoughtful voices to come forward and be acknowledged.” A M Carley, [FLOAT • Becoming Unstuck for Writers](#). Accept the possibility that there are sources of wisdom within you that are not accustomed to being heard. Make them welcome.

## 4. Positivity Rebalance

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My journal is a time-tested method of correcting for [negativity bias](#), our human hardwired focus on what's wrong at the expense of appreciating what's working well.

### Beyond Study Hall

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I use my journal for much more than I did all those years ago in my bedroom at my parents' house. No longer an adolescent, I am less interested in parsing out who said what in study hall. Crucially, I now have a sturdy community of friends and loved ones with whom to share life's questions. The value of my journal has only increased over the years. It remains my silent companion. Open to whatever I write, annotate, or doodle, it welcomes me every time. Virginia Woolf's ideal, a framework "*so elastic that it will embrace anything, solemn, slight or beautiful that comes into my mind,*" is attainable.

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