Be Here Now: Young Women’s War Diaries and the Practice of Intentionality

I grew up hearing about Anne Frank’s diary. Though I hadn’t read it, I bowed with everyone else whenever it was mentioned. It was an icon to be worshipped from a distance, but in my mind, it was also a diary—or I should say, just a diary. That brought up images of the stereotypical little pink, dime-store booklet with its tiny, ineffectual lock and key. Then, one day while digging for material on peace and writing, I came across an excerpt from the diary of another young woman, Dang Thuy Tram. Although the book was not yet available, the bit I read was so powerful, so unlike my naive stereotype, I decided to actually read Anne Frank’s *The Diary of a Young Girl*. My eyes were opened to my earlier ignorance, and I wanted to know more about war diaries, particularly the diaries of girls and women. The more I read, the more I realized the diary form had a great deal to offer our understanding of how and why we write and how we might be able to do it better.

This is what I’ve learned. The diary is more than the self-absorbed chronicle of a young girl’s emotions that it is often portrayed to be. It is a coming to terms with the world, an “in the moment” act of intentionality that invokes an individual’s power. Anne Frank, Dang Thuy Tram, Zlata Filipović, Riverbend, and other girls and women have found, within the diary, a vehicle for expression, growth, rebellion, and creation. The diaries of these remarkable young women offer guidance in how, through writing, we and our students might harness the power of intention.

The Zen Buddhist concept of “Be Here Now” tells us to live fully and consciously in the moment. As profound as it is, it often seems trite (Life is now; This is the first day of the rest of your life; etc.), but it is not trite, and it is not so easy to accomplish. It requires intentional living. The four girls and women I discuss here find themselves literally trapped inside restricted spaces and, more broadly, inside war, and there they discover their voices and choose to live as fully as possible within those circumstances. That intentional existence is reflected in, and largely a result of, the diary. The writing in these diaries reflects clear rhetorical underpinnings and intentionality that can help us and our students to write for change—change in our writing, change in the world, and change within ourselves.

Here, I look at four diaries, more specifically three conventional diaries and a blog: *The Diary of a Young Girl*, by Anne Frank; *Zlata’s Diary*, by Zlata Filipović; and *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace* by Dang Thuy Tram. *Baghdad Burning* is the transcript of a web log, a blog, by a young Iraqi woman who went by the pseudonym Riverbend. My thesis is that these are not merely adolescent scribblings, romantic fantasy, naive reminiscences and wishes—the stereotypical and so-called girl’s diary. These are intentional, ultimately public texts, and we can learn to use that intentionality in our writing and to help our students make the transition from expressive and private discourse to the kind of public text that has the power to elicit action and create change.

Diaries provide us with ways of being in the world through words. In fact, we might even say...
the authors are writing themselves into the world. And it is important to understand that this isn’t simply an exercise in self-absorption. As they write themselves into their own worlds, they are also writing themselves into our world, our consciousness, our conscience. So Anne Frank, Dang Thuy Tram, Zlata Filipović, and Riverbend speak not only about the secret Annex, the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the battered apartment in Sarajevo, and the ruined neighborhood in Baghdad; they speak to us about our world, our hopes and fears, and, ultimately, about ourselves.

The Diary

Although men have kept diaries in one form or another throughout much of history, the diary is traditionally seen as a forum for women. According to Margot Culley, although men were just as likely as women to keep diaries up to the 19th century, they were not the kind of personal, first-person texts we’ve become accustomed to seeing, but tended to be logs of daily events, expenditures, and such. In the earlier centuries, women were writing similar works chronicling the daily lives of their times. Christina Sjoblad notes that men and women kept travel journals “as early as the Renaissance” (2), but women would begin to keep books of family notes, recording “births, weddings, deaths, and rights of inheritance.” In time, these texts took on the introspective, first-person tone we now identify with the diary. British literary historian Linda Anderson tells us that at a time when women were not supposed to have a public voice, the diary “made it possible for them to develop their thoughts and still remain hidden. In the diary, women found a place to confront their inward life, ask questions, and develop their identities outside the roles that society offered them” (60). Male diaries tend to be less personal, more factual, and more what James Britton labeled “transactional” than the more expressive and poetic woman’s diary. The women’s form is often deeply personal, yet these works are written with a clear sense of purpose. They are clearly intentional and, at their best, literary.

The very intentionality of these texts guides the writers to create a level of literary quality that might not have seemed important to earlier, more pragmatic women. Diarists begin to think about how their writing sounds as they compose. In many cases, they understand that they are telling life stories for posterity.

We can demonstrate the consciousness and intentionality of the four modern works I discuss here through their intimacy, purpose, form, and situation.

Intimacy

Diaries are deeply intimate works. Anne Frank and her fellow diarists did not write because they expected to be famous, to change the world, or even to be published, even though each of the writers may have come to anticipate or hope for some form of publication, and each clearly hoped for a better world. Not one of these writers could have anticipated fame, and if they had, the writing might well have been stilted, careful, guarded, and sterile rather than sincere, natural, and rich. These are deeply personal, deeply intimate works. Even so, each writer demonstrates awareness that her words are not simple reflection but are meant to be read by others. Even Riverbend, the Iraqi blogger and most overtly public of the four writers, could not have foreseen the notoriety her writing would achieve. In fact, she expresses surprise early on when she writes, “I was astounded. I guess I never thought so many people would end up reading the blog” (10). Like her literary sisters, she wrote out of a need to tell her personal story. It is almost as if she were writing to a close friend. Even so, she and the other writers seem to understand that they have an audience. It is an audience based largely on a kind of reader she invokes, inevitably a friendly reader who may take issue with some of what is written, but is generally sympathetic with the writer. This implied audience suggests that the women write with a clear awareness that their work could have import in the world and with an intimacy that suggests a shared vision and trust.

Consider that each writer confesses/expresses deep emotions. On September 27, 1942, Anne’s anger at her mother and frustration with the circumstances compel her to write, “Just had a big

Ralph L. Wahlstrom
bust-up with Mummy for the umpteenth time; we simply don’t get on together these days” (30); Dang Thuy Tram expresses disappointment with the Communist Party and her own shortcomings on July 6, 1968, when she writes, “I’m not a part of the Party’s vanguard. My heart lacks the warming fire of the Party. I have come to the Party with a devoted and open heart, but it seems the Party has not treated me in kind” (32); Zlata’s fear is palpable as she says, “I’ll never forget the stench of the cellar, the hunger, the horrible shelling” (141); and we learn of Riverbend’s fury at the myriad contributors to Iraq’s destruction, especially the United States. Here she reacts to the pictures coming out of Abu Ghraib, the Iraqi prison: “The pictures are horrific. I felt a multitude of things as I saw them . . . the most prominent feeling was rage, of course” (258). The intention of each writer is to create an authentic, deeply felt truth within that small intimate world of the diary.

Purpose

The diarists bring us into their worlds with passion and purpose. As Anne Frank wrote, she projected a deeply felt hope and a belief in the future that is all the more bittersweet for its youthful energy and naiveté and because we know the ending to her story. On April 11, 1944, she writes, “If God lets me live . . . I shall not remain insignificant, I shall work in the world and for mankind! And now I know that first and foremost I shall require courage and cheerfulness” (208).

Strangely, even locked away in the Secret Annex, deprived of wide spaces and the more mundane joys and tribulations of the outside world, she seemed to recognize the power of her words. In this often cited passage, “How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world” (Tales 181), we see infinite hope, faith, and optimism, and we see a young girl’s conscious recognition of her power, the power of intention.

Zlata Filipović’s diary is, perhaps, the most like Frank’s, even self-consciously so at times. It is compelling in itself as the story of an eleven-year-old girl caught up in the horrors of war in Sarajevo. Like Anne, Zlata will begin to dream of seeing her words in print and, indeed, her diary is chosen for publication by the Sarajevo City Assembly in celebration of UNICEF some months before she and her family are able to leave the war-torn city for Paris. Zlata’s writing lacks the depth and art of the other diarists, but she is very young, and the reader cannot deny the terrible power of a child’s writing from inside a war zone. Furthermore, she is a remarkably good writer for her age and, like the other three diarists, moves between the mundane, poetic, philosophical, and political as she narrates life surrounded by the violence of war.

Last Night I Dreamed of Peace, Dang Thuy Tram’s diary, is especially powerful to me, and I imagine, many people of my generation. I was a Vietnam-era sailor, and three brothers served in the American military during the war along with my brother-in-law and many friends. Thuy speaks directly to us and our personal and collective confusion about that time, but she does it through the lens of a young woman who also happened to be Viet Cong, our enemy. It is to this remarkably vulnerable, universally human appeal that we owe a debt of gratitude. When Fred Whitehurst, an American Intelligence Officer, happened upon this enemy diary, he was moved to save the small
Ralph L. Wahlstrom

wrote, “Isn’t it amazing that one need not wait a single moment to begin to change the world,” she was voicing a deeply held conviction and the intention to make it real.

Rhetoric and Situation

Form is function. It plays an essential role in the way language does its work. This is no surprise. We take many of our cues in interpreting text from its organization, syntax, and presentation or format. Over time scholars have measured intention in writing through conventional rhetorical models. Aristotle’s rhetorical appeals (ethos, pathos, and logos) demonstrate a general but clear sense of intention in the use of language. For the past several decades composition classes have required students to write from a selection of modal perspectives including definition, persuasion, compare and contrast, description, exposition, and many others. James Britton offered his developmental model of writing: the expressive, transactional, and poetic forms. Each of these, and many others that are often variations of these models, speak to intention in written discourse. The diaries I consider here demonstrate these various forms.

It would be difficult to miss the pathos in a young voice crying out from a war zone. Anne Frank writes, “It is terrible outside. Day and night more of those poor miserable people are being dragged off, with nothing but a rucksack and a little money. On the way they are deprived even of those possessions. Families are torn apart, the men, women, and children all being separated. Children coming home from school find that their parents have disappeared. Women return from shopping to find their homes shut up and their families gone” (63, Jan. 13, 1943). This pathos is echoed in Zlata’s plaintive plea for peace, in Thuy’s loneliness and confusion, and in Riverbend’s righteous disappointment in America. Fortunately, most of us do not have to experience war to express pathos. We live in a complicated, emotionally confusing world, and writers need to know that emotion is a legitimate, important part of effective discourse.

Riverbend’s Baghdad Burning is a chronology of events, yet it is also a carefully crafted blog aimed at an international audience, particularly the American public. Yet she starts the blog almost as innocently as the others begin to write in their diaries. Only after readers around the world begin to pick up the message in Riverbend’s words does she begin to fashion her writing for a specific target audience. She wants to open American and other minds to the real import of the war and violence that has plagued her people and country. On September 3, 2003, she writes, “September 11 was a tragedy. Not because 3,000 Americans died . . . but because 3,000 humans died” (46).

Intentionality enriches the writing and gives purpose and form to the task. The diaries are so compelling and effective largely because they are not simply the ramblings of young writers. They are a rare combination of private and public discourse in which the author lives in and through the words while creating a very public narrative, a story of character in conflict. Each writer has a clear purpose in mind and fulfills that purpose.

Writing should be useful. It doesn’t matter if the writer is 10, 20, or 90 years old. These diaries, creations of four young women, born out of violence and suffering and loss, have become creative forces. They have created the personae in each; they have created and continue to create hope, understanding, and change. Myles Horton, in We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change, writes, “If you have a conviction, you have a responsibility to act on that conviction where you can” (Horton and Freire 146). Useful writing is an act of conviction and intention. When Anne Frank wrote, “Isn’t it amazing that one need not wait a single moment to begin to change the world,” she was voicing a deeply held conviction and the intention to make it real.
public and personal ethos. Anne Frank appeals to Churchill, de Gaulle, and the great figures in the Allied cause. On June 6, 1944, she quotes General Eisenhower’s speech to the French: “This is D-Day. Stiff fighting will come now, but after this, the victory” (244). Although Thuy is, by definition, the enemy to Fred Whitehurst, he is able to see her as a virtuous, decent kindred spirit through her diary. Zlata’s plea is aided immensely because she is a young girl, a child, without political bias or nationalistic motive, and Riverbend is the voice of reason in the midst of unreason. Each, in her way, establishes a powerful, effective, persuasive ethos.

Each writer also makes a clear-headed appeal to logos, or the logic of peace. Young Zlata calls the leaders of the warring factions “the kids.” She says, “All I know is that the result of their little games is 15,000 dead in Sarajevo, 3,000 of them children, 50,000 permanent invalids . . . . Maybe that’s why this madness should stop” (188). Anne describes the Secret Annex in almost clinical detail and generally appeals to logic through demonstrating the illogic of the war and anti-Jewish sentiment. Each text has instances of reasoning that are difficult to dismiss. In fact, each is, as a whole, an extended argument against the illogic and brutality of war and persecution. As Whitehurst discovered, the definition of “enemy” cannot stand up to these “human truths.”

These realities form a backdrop for the creation of powerful writing in which the taxonomies we’ve depended on fall short. As C. H. Knoblauch tells us, as much as we gain through the narrow categories identified by Aristotle, Kinneavy, Britton, and others, “the sense of purpose that shapes [writing] strategy is something more concrete, more immediate, and less encompassing: it is not generic but operational” (154). That is, the tidy categories we’ve created to help us understand and teach rhetorical purpose are not adequate to express the motivations that give rise to our writing. When we add the situations of war, those motivations are intensified. They may include fear, excitement, fervor, inspiration, love, and even joy. The depth of intimacy, strength of purpose, and clarity of form are partly the consequence of the writers’ situations. Indeed these diaries could not exist without the experience of war narrated through experience.

Lessons in Intentionality for Students

Ludwig Wittgenstein suggests that when I talk about my intentions, I am not so much interested in telling others about my intentions as I am in telling them “something about myself” (142; italics in original). I continue to be dismayed when my students tell me they were forbidden to write in first person. Even most of my advanced undergraduate English and Social Studies education majors and graduate students come into my Teaching Writing classes affirming the rule against I. Among the lessons we learn in studying diaries is that writing in the first person, telling the reader “something about ourselves,” is a path to writing about the larger world, even the world(s) we assign. That is not to say we ignore rigorous requirements, but, like the diary, several forms of writing can bridge that gap between I and he, she, and it.

The act of writing regularly is a catalyst to better and more productive writing. Freewriting, journaling, and reflection all give us permission to “Be here now,” to live in the moment inside our writing, and to create a world and ourselves in the bargain. Anne Frank and her fellow diarists had little choice about their situations, but fortunately for us, they chose to write. This is the first step and the first indication of intentionality.

Oddly enough, I have had little success using classroom diaries to provoke the kind of intentionality we find in authentic, self-sponsored diaries such as those I discuss here. Although the diary form is powerful, especially for students who have the habit of writing regularly in journals and diaries, for most others the school-sponsored diary can lack intimacy and purpose. I have no doubt that some of my colleagues have been successful with diaries in their classes, but I find other approaches more effective.

Freewriting is the foundation of all student writing in my classes. Like Peter Elbow, I believe it can be almost magical if it is practiced regularly and is used as a tool for scaffolding to countless other writing forms and assignments.

Reflections

I ask students to write reflections at least once each week. In summer classes, they do it daily. At first, most struggle, writing in the artificial, rigid, pseudo-academic voices they’ve learned to see as
correct. I tell them to think in text, blending observations about class, the readings, their peers' reflections, and their experiences. All students see all reflections and, little by little, the more informal, personal narratives hold sway, and even the most rigid adherents to conventional academic text will loosen up and, consequently, draw important connections between themselves and the subject matter. Typically, some students take advantage of their freewriting time to begin a required reflection, blending the forms and creating a continuity that, in some instances, flows into high-stakes assignments. I encourage that kind of cross-pollination because, frankly, that is how we write.

River Teeth
In this activity, I ask students to search for significant, even universal, truths in their own small worlds. I ask them to locate and use what David James Duncan referred to as "River Teeth" (3), to go back into their memories to identify those moments and events that stand out like rocks jutting out of a river and catching bits of this and that as the current passes. First, we talk about what that might be: watching a meteorite shower with my parents at 3 a.m. when I was six; listening to my grandfather as he read his own magical stories to me; a first kiss; a moment of tragedy; a moment of great joy. Each is unique to the writer. These are the river teeth that our moments catch upon and which give our lives meaning and substance as we get older and more able to reflect on them.

First, I ask students to relax, take a few slow deep breaths, close their eyes, and allow themselves to remember their earliest days and notice what memories appear. Then students write about the memory. I tell them to do this quickly, to turn off the censor and the editor, and simply get words, images, perceptions down on paper. Next, they freewrite about these memories until one emerges more strongly than the others.

In a second writing, I ask students to show the memory in a coherent scene, in which they describe the people in the memory: their faces, bodies, and voices. Then I ask them to describe the place in a richly sensory way: sounds, smells, tastes, sights, and physical sensations. They do this quickly to capture the moment with as much immediacy as possible.

Then I ask, "Why this memory?"

Students write again to explore the meanings and importance of the memory, of why it stands out so prominently in the river of the past. Here they are free to consider any other images, memories, sensory reactions, and emotions that occur to them.

The next steps depend on what connections I’d like my students to make. I may simply ask novice writers to do a final freewrite and move on. Such intentional writing is never wasted. Because it emerges from a student's inner world, and because it is undeniably important, it will rise again. On the other hand, I may ask them to zero in on one significant theme in the writing, to look at a class topic from the perspective of the memory, or to link it to a particular theme or a moment in world events. In response, one student remembered scuba diving off the Florida Keys. He wrote about a vivid memory of swimming over colorful coral reefs among the barracuda and clown fish. He later developed this small personal memory into a wonderful paper on the destruction of the coral reefs and the oceans' environmental degradation. Another student wrote about his experience as a teenage boy growing up in a rugged Western town where on any given Saturday alcohol and violence would punctuate the night. The writing was fluid and forceful, creating a momentum that made even the early river teeth version a pleasure to read aloud. Eventually, the student crafted a creative nonfiction essay on the solitary nature of that existence.

Writing that connects students to their world in intimate ways helps to shake the misconception that good writing has nothing to do with them. That connection is evident in the works of our most celebrated writers. Virginia Woolf captures the power of small moments in "The Death of the Moth," E. B. White in "Once More to the Lake." I once read that beginning writers write about their first love, broken hearts, weddings, fights, dreams, and numerous other clichéd themes because that’s what they know and because those moments are important.

It is a powerful thing to acknowledge that and to give young writers permission to discover that in these little dramas are the universal truths we all seek and that are so beautifully expressed in these diaries. We understand when Anne writes about her strained relationship with her mother, “her heart sank when she realized there was no more love between us" (Diary 94–95). When Zlata writes about MTV, supermodels, and Bugs Bunny, we are
transported ever so briefly to our own teenage years (17). When Riverbend describes the abductions and killing of friends and loved ones by both Americans and Iraqis, we feel her anger and fear. And, when Dang Thuy Tram writes, “I only hope that our love is still bright and vibrant despite the bombs and bullets” (181), only the hardest of hearts can be unmoved. These are the River Teeth in writers’ lives that intersect so profoundly with ours. They catch us and force us to see the universal nature of human experience, the “truths of the human heart.”

The writing activities we call River Teeth, reflections, freewriting, journals, and many others can be structured to draw on the principles of intentionality that loom large in the diaries of Anne Frank, Zlata Filipović, Dang Thuy Tram, and Riverbend, and, when they are, they can help students become better writers. I believe that however we choose to learn and teach the lessons of these diaries, intentional writing can transform lives. In the end, we have a good deal to learn about writing and teaching writing from these works, but it is clear that the diary form can foster intentionality and invites writing that is structured, purposeful, and intimate.

Works Cited

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION
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In “Writing for Audience: The Revision Process in The Diary of Anne Frank,” students will learn that while Anne Frank wrote a diary, she did not write it only for herself. By examining her original entries and comparing them to her revisions, one can witness the revision process in action. Students will be able to identify what she revised as well as her intentions behind the revisions. Students will assist one another with revision strategies as they produce journal entries for an audience beyond themselves. http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/writing-audience-revision-process-30656.html