

For those of us with a compulsion to write, it isn't always—or, probably, not even often—that we have something important to say. For some, the motivation is probably an urge to tell a story. For others, a desire to impart information may provide that little push that results in written pages. And, for at least a few of us, there is something about a clean sheet of paper and a pencil or pen that encourages us to fill the page with handwritten squiggles that—unbelievably, when one thinks of the process—allow other people to look at and come to a consensus about the meaning.

Right now, I don't have any paper in front of me. I am composing this little unimportant essay on the Mac at the desk. But, paper and pencil are still my technology of choice. That procedure will also be used today as I write a letter to a friend, two notes of thanks, and scribbles at various times on the large sheet of paper that lies on the desk waiting for my jottings.

I write down a whole lot of stuff. The most useful is the daily journal I have kept for years. Each evening I write a page, usually nothing very profound—just that day's happenings. So, we can look back and see, for instance, which day Runo lifted the cover on the bull semen tank, and with liquid nitrogen steam rising, extracted a little straw of semen to artificially inseminate Halvan, the little half-Guernsey cow we milk.

Temperature and weather are almost always recorded in the journal. Significant—and also totally insignificant—activities also appear in the little red book.

Today, I will write the last entry in the red journal book I have used since April sixth of this year. Tomorrow, a brand new book—just like the present one but with a green cover—will receive the first scratches from my pen. But, the red book will still reside on the desk for the rest of the fall, because the last page is not a journal entry; it is a compilation of the butter we have churned this season. So, I will continue to write down the weight of butter every other day when I make a new batch. I can tell from the notation when Black Effie started to milk, when Halvan had her calf, when Lily—the best milker of the three—began giving up her bounty for our winter use.

Other notes here and there have little significance, but they are interesting to me. A few days ago, when I did the washing, I wondered how many times I went up and down the basement steps on laundry day. I know that I always make several trips to the basement and back every day, but when I wash, I run back and forth more—moving clothes from the washer to the spinner, then back up to tend something on the stove; down again and back up and outside to hang up the clothes, back to basement to repeat the process. until all the washing is on the lines in the yard.

Then, there are the usual trips—carrying canned pears or tomatoes to the fruit cellar, running down for something from the freezer, looking for a seldom-used kitchen item that is on the basement shelves. So, this week, when I washed, I set a little red plastic device on the corner of the kitchen cupboard that is by the door to the basement.

My cousin Merrie gave this little tool to me several years ago—to keep track of knitting rows in a complicated pattern. I have used it for that, and it is

handy, but it also came to mind when I wanted to keep track of my basement trips. So, I placed the little clicker right there where I would be likely to see it as I passed by from the basement to the clothesline. Every time I came up the stairs, I punched the clicker. That day—if I didn't miss any trips—I made 27 trips to the basement. For anyone who reads these essays, that is, as Dr. Patricia Annable, who taught German when I was in college, called it, “your unessential fact for the day.”

I can look back at my old running journals and see how many miles I ran at any given time for many years. My little reading journal has notes on some—unfortunately, not most—of the books I read.

There is a list on the desk, too, although I am not much of a list maker, of supplies I will soon order. Top of the list is another jar of cat treats. I begin to become a little afraid of Muzzy when that container is low.

And, the calendars have notes, as well. The date we have planned to pick up a new ram, the dates the sauerkraut went into the crocks, the designated time to pick up the roasted coffee beans from Amy Jo—all of these are written down.

When everything is done that needs immediate attention, the most satisfying writing of all takes place. That is when I take my trusty clipboard loaded with a thick pad of lined notebook paper, a sharp pencil or the gel ink pen, and sit down in a comfortable chair, and have a long chat with my most faithful and interesting correspondent. We carry on a conversation that travels by mail—hand written letters on paper, folded and inserted in envelopes (hers often accompanied by handmade cards), addressed, stamped and mailed. Why anyone ever thought that there could be an improvement on this system, I just don't understand. Sitting and writing by hand, one tends to contemplate the words used, the topics chosen, the possibility of a returning discussion of some subject in future letters.

But, still, electronic communication, if that is its proper name, is also useful. My other ongoing exchange of ideas, happenings, and opinions takes place via the e-mail correspondence I enjoy with a friend in Sweden. This is more practical than written letters, since it travels much more quickly, and it is certainly less expensive than international postal services have become. It is also helpful for me to maintain—I hope—my Swedish language skills. Although my friend is perfectly able and competent to communicate in English, she is willing to conduct our correspondence in Swedish to help me and to act as my teacher when it is necessary. We cover all kinds of subjects, and the fact that we will probably never meet each other's usual personal friends leaves us free to pursue all kinds of sensitive topics and issues.

These two friends provide the “dessert” that is so important after a “meal” of essays, lists, journals, calendar notes, and jotted miscellany. And, I love dessert!