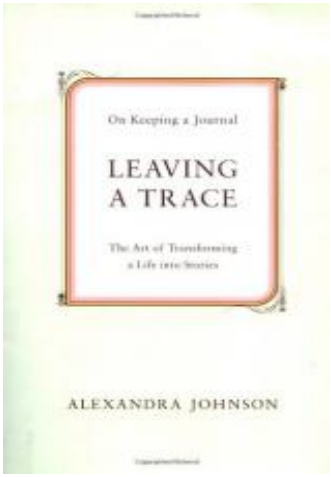
ReadingGroupGuides
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Leaving A Trace

by Alexandra Johnson



About the Book

Leaving a Trace, Alexandra Johnson's inspiring new book, reinvents journal keeping, showing readers how to leave a lasting piece of work about their lives for themselves or others. Whether you've kept journals for years or quit after only a few pages, Leaving a Trace will help you start and keep journals successfully?as well as transform your material into longer projects or creative work.

Identifying ten key patterns hidden in all journals, Johnson offers ways to find the story underneath the surface of recorded fact. She will show you how to play detective to your days, find the "through line" in your life, and frame those stories for journals, family chronicles, or memoirs. Chapters brim with tips and techniques, including five ways to build a narrative. She also shows how, by giving the journal a specific purpose, seasoned and beginning journal keepers alike can move past self-consciousness to productivity.

Woven throughout the narrative are inspiring stories from famous writers and a cross section of private journal keepers that offer invaluable clues into how journals can help you weather a crisis or develop its contents into a significant, and public, piece of work.

An inspirational and practical guide to starting and keeping a diary?and transforming it into something permanent?Leaving a Trace will be to journal writers what Bird by Bird and The Artist's Way are to fiction writers.

Discussion Guide

1. On a separate sheet of paper answer the following six questions: How did a journal first come into your life? Who gave it to you? What was the occasion? Where did you buy your first journal?in a drug store, stationery store, or specialty shop? What did it look like? Be specific and include details, like the cover and the lock. Whether it's a journal, the back of a Visa slip or Post-its, what do you now use to write down occasional thoughts? **Imagining your ideal journal (2-4 minutes)**

2. Choosing a journal is a special ritual for many. Take a minute to note some favorite types. (Classic hard-bound journal, pocket-size journal or 79-cent notebook). What's your ideal time and place to write? (At night; on the subway home; at the stroke of New Years).

3. List all the ways you can now imagine a journal being?photo collage with no writing; dream journal; nature journal. Chapters One and Two focus on all the forms a journal can take.

Group Writing Activity: Part one (10 minutes)

4. List four incidents that were never recorded in your first or earliest journals. It may be a family trip or a first day in school; a summer crush or a moment when life was suddenly different, after a sibling's birth, for example. Select one incident. First just get the facts down. Highlight three key facts. Now sketch the fuller memory. An important trick: don't let the pen lift until you've gotten to the bottom of the page.

5. List all the dead spaces in a day, all the time you spend waiting in a day. For example, waiting to pick up kids or for a meeting to start. This will give you a list of times when you can do many of the quick journal writing exercises in Section One.

Group activity: Part two (5-10 minutes)

6. Sitting in a circle, share from any of the previous exercises. It may be just a sentence or even talking about one of the things that emerged without necessarily reading your piece. As someone else reads, jot down vivid images that you hear. Let the person know why they work.

Finding patterns: Part three (10-20 minutes) Section Two shows how to find patterns even in abandoned, half-filled journals. Even if you've kept a journal for years, do these two simple sketches that will map important memories.

7. Think of an object that has special meaning for you. It may be something you keep on a desk, or the first thing you'd rescue in a fire. Describe the object to a stranger who's never seen it. If it's a photo, for example, is it black-and-white or color? Who's in the photo? Who's missing? Fill one or two pages. Again, don't let the pen lift from the page. When you have finished, write a single sentence about why the object has such meaning for you.

8. Remember a favorite place, somewhere you often go back to in your memory. It may be a childhood haunt?a grandparent's porch, a summer cottage, or somewhere you like now. The house in which your first child grew up, for example. List two details for each of the five senses. Brainstorm things a stranger would notice: faded wallpaper, the smell of lemon and bacon in a kitchen. Why is this place so special in your memory?

9. You now know how to build on such quick sketches and move them into full creative work, as shown in Sections Two and Three.

Final Group activity (10 minutes) Share which object or place you selected. What impressions or memories were

triggered? **Expanding a journal's range**

10. Begin a joint e-mail journal with a close friend or family member. Print out and collect into a three-ring binder.

11. Interview a family member who has never kept a journal as a way to start a family chronicle

12. As part of a school or community project, pair with someone in a hospital, retirement or nursing home and use a journal to record their life's story. Keep a journal of how the process has helped you re-see your own.

Author Bio

Alexandra Johnson's **The Hidden Writer: Diaries and the Creative Life** won the PEN/Jerard Fund Special Citation for nonfiction. Her writing has appeared in *The New Yorker,* the *New York Times* Book Review, and *The Nation,* among other national publications. She teaches memoir at Wellesley College and the Harvard Extension School, where she won the James E. Conroy Award for distinguished teaching of writing.

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