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Inspired by Anaïs Nin

My first exposure to Anaïs Nin was as a young woman. My initial interest involved her personal journals because as a diary keeper myself I was fascinated by Nin's honest and easy-to-understand writing style.

My deeper fascination came as a mid-lifer when I was in graduate school working on my MFA in Writing. The year was 2001, a few months after 9/11. I had been contemplating my thesis subject. After a recent breast cancer diagnosis, I decided to write my first memoir based on my breast cancer journey, gleaned from my many journal entries. For literary inspiration, my mentor suggested I read the journals of Anaïs Nin.

I devoured all of her journals, and her writing became a huge inspiration and motivation for me. I was deeply drawn into her style, transparency and the ease with which her words flowed. She seemed to be able to say all those things I was feeling inside, but somehow unable to express. Nin's words resonated with me at a deep level. As I came to learn at a later date, like many other women, Nin's writing transformed and liberated me.

Nin's journals simply gave me permission to be honest, first with myself and then with my readers. The entries were poignant, timeless and written from her heart. I admire Nin's strength of character and vulnerability, while at the same time acknowledging that she was a complex character.

Because she inspired so many of my personal poems, I decided to dedicate my first poetry collection, Dear Anais: My Life in Poems for You to her. In the book's preface I wrote a letter to Nin in which I thanked her for her effect on me as a woman and a writer. I wrote, "You've taught me the intrinsic value of the written word, how to dig deeper into my emotional truth, and the importance of having love in my life. And for all these gifts, I thank you."

The type of writing Nin does is something we psychologists call "embodied writing," which relays experiences from the perspective of the body. Embodied writing invites sympathetic resonance so that when the readers are reading they feel as if the experience is happening to them. It's writing done from the inside out, thus facilitating the sharing of very rich details.

The more familiar I became with Nin's works, sensibilities and passions, the more I realized how much we had in common. For example, we both began journaling as a result of a loss in our lives. Nin began her first journal at the age of eleven as a letter to her father after he left the family for a younger woman. I began writing in my Khalil Gibran journal given to me by my mother when my grandmother committed suicide in my childhood home. In a sense, we both turned to journaling as a way of coping with our losses. Journaling became a way of healing for each of us. Nin has more than thirteen

published journal volumes spanning her life. My writing studio closet holds many boxes of completed, but unpublished journals.

Just after my first cancer diagnosis, my mother gave me my deceased grandmother’s journal depicting her life as an orphan during World War I. It was a compelling fifty-page typed document. In essence, that was the biggest gift my grandmother could have left me.

While reading, I came to learn that my grandmother, Regina Reinharz Klein, and Anais Nin were both born in 1903. After receiving my grandmother’s journal and learning about her life, I became inspired to write a book-length memoir weaving my grandmother’s life with mine interspersed with her journal entries. The book came to be known as Regina’s Closet: Finding My Grandmother’s Secret Journal and was published in 2007.

In 2008, my fascination with Nin took a new form when invited to attend a celebration at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles on what would have been Nin’s 105th birthday. In fact, that’s where I met the publisher of this journal. I also had the honor of meeting some of Nin’s friends, colleagues and confidants. That was one of the most transformative days of my adult years. It was awe-inspiring to hear others who knew and loved her share a sense of her essence. I was also thrilled to have had the opportunity to purchase some of her books and artifacts. It was surreal and was as if I was having an out-of-body experience. It was simply indescribable.

After the event, I had the opportunity to connect with some of the presenting individuals who had been personally connected with Nin. One particular individual who got to know me over time, actually remarked that my characteristics and mannerisms reminded me of her dear friend, Anais. She said that we both were pretty and had seductive mannerisms; we both had a way of bringing people together; we both often bestowed friends with gifts; we had a special way of inspiring creativity in others; and we were both driven by the tenets of sensuality and human psychology. The same person told me, “It’s like she’s been reincarnated in you.” It was spooky, curious and exciting to hear others share their sentiments about someone whom I deeply admired and adored. All this inspired me to dig deeper into Nin’s works, and to understand her as a unique woman.

While Nin was a novelist and a nonfiction writer, it is mainly her journals which sparked my interest and inspired my writing. I keep many of her journal volumes on my bedside table, and when I feel my creativity plummet or if I need a dose of inspiration, I randomly open one of them and am instantly moved by her sensibilities and gift for language. Her words inspire mine. She offers an indescribable magic. Magic cannot be explained. It appears, one bathes in it and relishes every second of its presence in our lives. All we can do is bow our head and in return offer it gratitude.
she suggests that we all carry seeds and baggage from childhood, but the
determination to live with others in harmony leads to the ability to overcome
all those obstacles. This can only be done if we integrate all of our differences.

While Nin has been described as an internationally acclaimed writer, she
has not often been recognized as an essayist; however, one of my favorite
collections of hers is In Favor of the Sensitive Man and Other Essays. In this
collection, which includes lectures and interviews, she shares her vision
of the sensitive and powerful dance between the sexes, both sensually and
emotionally. In one of the interviews in that book, "Out of the Labyrinth," Nin
states that after her father left, she had to create a solid inner life or today what
we would call "a sense of being grounded."

She says,

Even in the darkest periods of social history, outer events would be
changed if we had a center. It is only in the private world that we can
learn to alchemize the ugly, the terrible, the horrors of war, the evils and
cruelties of man, into a new kind of human being. (p. 60)

Nin's diary provided this center for her:

I always felt the inner quality resulted from the trauma of being
uprooted and of losing my father, then of realizing I had to build an inner
world which would withstand destruction. The child who is uprooted
begins to recognize that what he builds within himself is what will
endure, what will withstand shattering experiences. (p. 76)

As a poet and sensual individual, I was also taken by Nin's erotica, which
she wrote to supplement her income while living in New York in the early
1940s. Reading Little Birds inspired me to publish my most recent poetry
collection, Lust, and even though Nin wrote erotica to make money, the
impetus for my book was to share some deep sentiments about intimacy.
My poems are a merging of the confessional and fantasy. Admittedly, Nin
liberated me and gave me permission to tap into the messages of my heart
and subconscious mind. While there's no reference to Nin in this book, her
inspiration was apparent from its inception. Poetry is about capturing images,
feelings and emotions in a way that the reader feels your presence. In the
Mystic of Sex, she wrote:

It was while writing a diary that I discovered how to capture the
living moments. Keeping a diary all my life helped me to discover some
basic elements essential to the vitality of writing. (p. 36)
For me, *Little Birds* also served as a reminder of how puritanical Americans are when it comes to sexuality compared to other cultures such as the French. What Nin did in *Little Birds* was to link eroticism to emotion and romance—something women do more naturally than men. In the book's introduction, Nin said that when we do sensual or erotic writing, the rest of our writing needs to be put aside, and we need to focus just on that. She also said that it was difficult to bring her erotic musings into the light. "The sexual life," she said, "is usually enveloped in many layers, for all of us—poets, writers, artists, it is a veiled woman, half-dreamed."

Another one of our mutual interests is our interest in psychology. Nin was very curious about people, understanding them and documenting their experiences. She believed that what connects us as humans is not necessarily our stories, but rather the emotions which are evoked as a result of the stories.

Other commonalities are that both Nin and I adored our fathers, we were both publishers, we both wrote erotica, we both yearned for creativity, we both needed to be loved and wanted by men whom we love, and we both engaged in transformative writing. In fact, my dissertation research examined the healing and transformative qualities of memoir writing.

Nin and I also both loved reflecting upon and examining our lives and the lives of others. We were also sensitive and intuitive. As children, Nin and I both felt as if we understood others way beyond our years, sort of like old souls in young bodies. I recall having those feelings, but not being able to identify them and certainly not being able to express them to the adults in my life. Nin once said in her interview, "Anais Nin Talks About Being a Woman," that as a child she was intensely aware of what people felt. She said, "I tried to confirm my intuition by studying psychology. My tendency to romanticize made me want to verify what I felt. Now I trust my intuition and strength."

Nin often referred to the duality in her life—the duality of being a dependent woman and an independent artist, a conflict I've often encountered in my own life—the balance of being a mother and wife, but also being committed to the literary community.

One of the reasons I became a writer was that I was silenced as a child. My mother, an Austrian, was of the belief that children should be seen and not heard. She was also not a great role model as a woman for me. In some ways, Nin filled that role as a mother, someone to admire and aspire to. She shared a philosophy and belief system that resonated with me. My mother rarely shared her life's philosophies and this made me somewhat insecure and uncertain about my belief systems. Nin helped me in this way. Kate Millett once said that Nin was a mother to us all. She's also been called the best psychologist of women.

Since my initial introduction to Nin's work was through her journals, I often quote from them. She has quoted Ira Progoff and what he calls the
personal well, and goes on to say that the things that unite humans universally are our emotional selves and the feelings we encounter with our lived experiences. Nin believed, as I do, that our experiences are not as important as our emotions associated with the experience or how we respond to the experiences. Nin said that during the moments of emotional crisis humans reveal themselves most accurately, that those are moments of revelation, and since much of my work is about transformation and revelation, this really resonates with me.

Nin and I most likely became writers as a result of an early loss in our lives. Like Nin, many of my longer works originated on the pages of my journals, such as when I wrote about being on bed rest with my three kids, my daughter’s drug addiction and finally my two cancer diagnoses. For both Nin and me, our journals were our lifelong companions and confidants.

Friends and colleagues have often asked me where I get my energy from, especially being in my 60s and as a two-time cancer survivor. My answer is always that I’m an over-achiever and that writing is not work for me because it’s my passion. Nin has also been described as a woman with inexhaustible energy, and when she was asked where she got her energy from, she said that she never thought about it, but added that she thought she got it from her sense of curiosity. Like Nin, I feel very alive, and when you feel alive you’re curious and want to transcend all your experiences. One experience tends to propel you to your next one.

In my future years as a writer and research psychologist I hope to do a more in depth study of Nin. At this time, I’m unsure what that will be, but Nin has been my muse for more than forty years, and I truly want to continue to honor her in whatever way I can.

Works cited


