

KATELYNN MILLS

Screen, 2018
Tempera on paper, 60 x 42 in



JOHN MOIR

A Flash of Fire

The dilemma
of four thousand
pages of memories

Each December my family gathers for dinner with a small group of friends to celebrate the winter solstice and to enact a ritual that allows us to symbolically release our regrets, our mistakes, and the things we wish hadn't happened in the past year. We do this with flash paper, which magicians sometimes use to enhance their tricks; when lit, the four-inch treated squares ignite in a dazzling flash. We write on our paper a private word or phrase referencing something we want to let go. I've scribbled about blunders I've made, things I'm afraid of, the names of friends who have died. Then, one by one, each of us touches our paper to a candle flame and flings it in the air, and whatever loss or sorrow we wrote vanishes in a flare of light.

Our solstice tradition came to mind while I was taking a course based on Stephen Levine's book *A Year to Live*. Levine asks readers to consider what choices they would make if this were their last year of life. Doing this, he says, helps us to live more fully right now—no matter how much time actually remains.

Levine's premise raises provocative questions: What have we left undone? Is there someone we might want to forgive? What do we *not* want to do? In one session, we discussed the physical things we wanted to leave behind—and what we wanted to let go. A class member recounted how a friend burned his journal in his final days, not wanting his private thoughts to cause misunderstandings after he was gone. Several of us in class had kept journals, but I had not considered what to do with mine. Should I burn my old journals and watch the past combust like flash paper on solstice? Or were my journals a window into yesteryear and worth preserving?

For most of my adult life I have been an inveterate journaler, writing frequently to process my thoughts. But when I finish filling a notebook, I stash it in a storage box with all the others, where they have remained unread for decades. What would I find in all that writing? I decided to have a look.

The first journal entry begins on Sunday, July 4, 1971, when I uncapped a black felt-tipped pen and on an unlined sheet of paper wrote, *Decided to start a journal today*. I was twenty-two years old, a journalism student living in a run-down, ninety-eight-dollar-a-month apartment in the smog-shrouded San Fernando Valley.

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I wrote how my brother, Jim, and I had gone hiking in a national forest and my delight in breathing the pine-scented mountain air. I described how Jim came within inches of stepping on a rattlesnake, the serpent's tongue flickering, its rattles buzzing with menace. We were miles from help, and the close call alarmed us both. The entry concludes with musing about how long I might keep up the journal writing. The answer would have amazed me.

Regular journaling became integral to my life, and forty-seven years later I am still at it. I counted forty-one notebooks in the storage box, a total of roughly four thousand handwritten pages. It was astonishing how much I had written—and how quickly the years hurtled past.

The early journals were handmade, pieced together from blank paper “liberated” from my university's Journalism Department and assembled with a three-hole punch and string. As the need for such frugality waned, I progressed to spiral-bound notebooks.

Beginning with the 1971 journal, I started reading the story of my adult life, skipping some parts, perusing others that caught my interest. Scenes in the notebooks were like home movies of my mind created by former versions of myself, some of whom I barely recognized. It was disconcerting to read some of the entries. *Who was this person? Why did I get upset about such trivia?* I wish my younger

self could have been more grateful, less critical—happier. But as events oscillated between tranquil and turbulent, converting my thinking into a written narrative helped make sense out of life's randomness.

Themes emerged: my early love of writing and nature, a penchant for self-criticism, my angst over choosing a career path, the comfort of a long, happy marriage in the face of life's challenges, an addiction to long-distance running that eased the anxiety that has been my lifelong companion, the life-altering joys of fatherhood.

As a teenager, I loved the band called the Byrds, who had a hit with “Turn! Turn! Turn!,” with lyrics adapted from the book of Ecclesiastes:

*To everything (turn, turn, turn)
there is a season (turn, turn, turn)
and a time to every purpose under heaven.*

The journal chronicled so many different seasons and purposes as it showed the endless impermanence of thoughts and emotions. When I was younger, I clung to the typical youthful illusion of unlimited time stretching ahead of me. Get old? I couldn't imagine it happening. I harbored the misconception that if only *this* thing fell into place, life would be how I wanted. Ironically, as I grew older and time became limited, I found my life generally arcing toward greater contentment.

The journals also showed the constantly shifting quality of self. As author Sam Harris said, “Self is more a verb than a noun.” In my forty-seven-year narrative, I found no immutable self at its gravitational center. I was no longer *that* person anymore. Or *that* person. Rather, the self was always in flux.

Those thousands of journal pages also served another purpose that at the time went unrecognized. Before I found my bearings as a journalist, I explored many different writing alternatives. Along the way, the frequent journaling not only helped me sort out how to pursue my boyhood dream of publishing compelling stories, but it was also where I regularly wrote material that had meaning and heart. Eventually, I discovered how much I loved writing about the natural world using the storytelling techniques of narrative nonfiction, and a gathering tailwind of serendipity propelled my writing forward. Although myriad

influences supported me on this journey, the constant journaling provided a gentle compass setting a course toward true north.

Over a number of evenings, I completed reading the journal pages while still pondering their future. What kept coming to mind was the man who had burned his journal to preserve his privacy. Even though nothing I had written was surprising or unknown, my journals had never been intended to be shared. The prospect of others someday reading the ineloquent first drafts of my private thoughts was disquieting. Moreover, Levine writes about the wisdom of letting go of the past. The journals were not designed to be a memoir. Might it feel liberating to leave behind what I had outgrown?

I tested this proposition by shredding three of the early notebooks. Then I waited a month to see if turning the pages into confetti brought regrets. All I felt was a weight lifting, a weight I didn't know I had shouldered. Lewis Carroll captured the feeling in *Alice in Wonderland*: “It's no use going back to yesterday, because I was a different person then.”

Contemplating the journals' fate brought into focus the larger question of what we want to leave behind—and what we want to let go. The formidable task of clearing out the accumulated lifetime possessions left by both my parents and my wife's parents convinced me that it's a gift to our loved ones to opt for letting go. I realized this also holds true for the records of our innermost thoughts and explorations—such as an artist's private sketchbooks or a writer's journals—that were only intended for our own edification.

While I had always vaguely comprehended that someday I needed to decide what to do with the journals, now my inertia lifted. It was time to let all the notebooks go. I saved just the one in which I am currently journaling, and I also set aside that first notebook from 1971. I wanted a way to commemorate all that writing, and our December ritual with the blazing flash papers pirouetting above the dinner table gave me an idea.

Early one evening I carried the 1971 journal into my backyard and touched a lighter to the cover. Soon, flames were curling and dancing across the ancient pages. I sat in the radiating heat of bygone joys and sorrows, watching them vanish into smoke and ash. I felt gratitude for how the journal had helped me—and peacefulness in letting it go.

Afterward, I poured the ashes into an old-fashioned glass milk bottle I had acquired years ago and placed it in my writing studio. It sits on my desk—time in a bottle—the ashes embodying so many memories, from coiled rattlesnakes to the fragrance of mountain pines. The ashes are also a daily reminder that the past is gone, the future is unknown, and our freedom lies right here, right now, in the only time we ever have: the present moment. In that mosaic of alabaster-colored ashes lies the turn, turn, turn of every purpose under heaven and all the seasons that slip by as quickly as the flash of fire on a winter solstice.

John Moir is a journalist whose work has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Smithsonian*, the *Washington Post*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and numerous other publications. He is the author of two nonfiction books, including the award-winning *Return of the Condor: The Race to Save Our Largest Bird from Extinction*. Moir has contributed to four anthologies and has received more than two dozen writing awards. His essay “Nature's Blinded Visionaries,” which was published in *Catamaran Literary Reader*, was selected as a Notable Essay for the *Best American Science and Nature Writing 2014*.