

The Uncommon Commonplace Book

Debi Watson

Although I attended both college and university, I never got to be part of a sorority. A part of me always longed for that feeling of sisterhood and belonging I assumed would be part of that experience. I will likely never find out if my impression of those organizations is correct, and I have finally reconciled myself to that fact because I have discovered a similar atmosphere here at Art of Womanhood. In fact, I believe that Art of Womanhood in many ways is the ideal sorority: we are a group of women “united in a relationship and having some interest, activity, or purpose in common” (thanks to The American Heritage ® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition for providing that definition).

Those of us studying with Art of Womanhood have a common purpose: we want to strengthen our families by seeking truth, harmony and education and developing our unique gifts¹. Within our study circles (and beyond!) we form relationships and choose activities that help us discover truth and understanding.

Like any good sorority, there is also a kind of code – a shorthand of language that can sometimes leave newcomers feel very much like outsiders. This is not intentional! So without further ado, let me give you your secret decoder ring so you can put the words to use.

Today’s phrase is “Commonplace Book”. A commonplace book is a wonderful tool for discovering truth and furthering our education, as well as reflecting our uniqueness. And all for the price of an empty notebook and a pen!

But what is it?

Basically it is a notebook to hold thoughts, quotes, dreams, poems, ideas – but we’ll go into that a little later.

Okay – so where did it come from?

Commonplace books have been around for thousands of years, but are no longer as well, *common* as they used to be. Originally created by Aristotle for his *topoi*, or basic categories of relationships among ideas, commonplaces were first a place for his students to choose topics for their speeches. This function still exists today: many prominent speakers keep little notebooks of quotes and ideas for speeches.

¹ The Art of Womanhood Mission Statement is: “We strengthen families worldwide by inspiring women to seek truth, harmony, and education and to develop their unique gifts as they claim the fullness of their inherent roles”.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, those men and women who were well educated began resurrecting the practice: as they read passages which moved or excited them, or which they particularly wished to remember, they would copy out the sentences or paragraphs. I suspect this might partially have been because it was much more difficult to access specific books at a moment's notice, so of course they would want to keep a copy of things they especially wished to ponder.

Interestingly, in the 1800s, many women began keeping a commonplace book as a way to think about and create their own identities, and to better understand their role in society. This was before women had the vote, and while they were still struggling to gain equality as people.

Incidentally, the word commonplace does not mean ordinary but of universal application – common to mankind.

When one looks at commonplace books of the past two centuries, one finds an infinite number of approaches. Some are like a scrapbook, filled with items of every kind: medicinal recipes, poems, proverbs, prayers, genealogical diagrams, biographical notes, quotes, letters, legal formulas, meaningful chunks of statistics, tables of weights and measures, collections of inspirational sayings...

Some are more like a journal, with the key points of readings summarized and reflected upon and applied to daily life. Yet others are almost a textbook: an obvious aid for remembering useful concepts or facts; each quote neatly referenced under category headings. Each reflected the creator's unique personality, interests, and approach to life.

Each was a place to capture the wisdom of others and the thoughts of one's own. This is still the main purpose for commonplace books today.

Why should I want one?

What a great question!! Of course, I don't know why *you* should have one – you'll have to gain a testimony of them for yourself. I do know there is a plethora (I love that word!! It means "an excess", but just sounds so much more playfully knowledgeable. It is one of the first words I collected in my first commonplace book in elementary school) of reasons how people on the whole benefit from keeping one:

- A commonplace book can offer insights into your maturing tastes, developing interests, evolving personality and changing concerns. It is a great way to track growth and remember the journey.
- It can help someone safeguard the things they have read and thought about – things they want to access later on and want to be able to find easily. So often, "memorable" does not translate into "memorized"...
- It has obvious value as a written record.

- In addition to being a handy dandy memory and storage device, it can also help construct your future identity: it can serve as a space to rehearse the person you are becoming, and the person you want to be... you can try out your thoughts and attitudes and experiment with ideas here and critique them before others do.
- It can focus discussion, and provide food for thought. It also helps me remember what it was I wanted to think about before real life called me back to wipe noses or bottoms or the kitchen floor!
- It can be a great portrait of who you are, but maybe a little less intimate (and therefore easier to share with your children or anyone else).
- Think back to how you felt when you first read whatever it is you want to put in your commonplace book. You can feel that sense of nostalgia, or wonder, or excitement or whatever it was again.
- Reading your commonplace book can be a quick way of renewing your inspiration, and in some cases, your energy. It can even help you get over mental blocks!
- By copying out the passages, you get to spend more time with those words. You have time to reflect on their meaning, and their meaning to *you*. Sometimes the world doesn't make a whole lot of sense until we can see the big picture. Keeping a commonplace book is a safe place to collect our events and thoughts, dissect them, analyze them ... learn from them.
- It is a relatively painless and inexpensive way to expand your mind.
- It makes fascinating reading later on, and is a good way to spend some quality time with your self.
- Writing burns calories!!

So what do I write in it?

Short answer: anything you find particularly beautiful or insightful or funny or inspiring – anything you know you are going to want to read it again.

Long answer: well, I'll let you write that yourself once you have more experience!

Okay, so what exactly is it again?

A commonplace book is some sort of blank book where you keep “anything lovely, or of good report, or praiseworthy” – anything that is worth re-reading and thinking about. I suppose you could call it a sort of “Day-timer for your Soul”.

All you have to do to start is select phrases, lines, and/or passages that are important or interesting to you and write them down. From there you can begin adding comments and notes about *why* those words are important. For example:

“Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.”

Note to self: this is exactly how I feel about doing the dishes...

If you are particularly organized, you can index your book to group particular topics. I only aspire to that, though, so I have no idea of how you would actually go about it. Frequently I find with my commonplace books that the search is half the fun. I admit it can be frustrating when I want something in a hurry, though.

Modern commonplace books can combine images from the mass media with your own words and ideas so you can explore your own interpretations of events shaping your world (and yourself!).

Blogging (keeping a sort of journal on the internet where others can visit and add comments) is a way to keep a commonplace book!

How Do I Begin?

The commonplace book begins blank. If you want to preserve it for posterity, you should use one created with acid free materials (and lignan free paper if possible) and an acid free pen (scrapbooking stores often have these kinds of things). Really, though, any old blank notebook will do. It does help if you like it – if you are drawn to the way it looks and feels in your hand and even smells. I find thick creamy pages intimidating to write on, but I love to read what others have written on them! A plain lined notebook and a ballpoint pen work for me (I often suffer from Aesthetic Deficit Disorder), but make yours unique to *you*.

You can make a fancy title page – or not. You can print or use calligraphy or just normal handwriting. Don't get hung up on the details – just get reading and writing!

You can buy a notebook suitable for a commonplace book in the school supply section at the grocery store. Going to your local art supply store and buying a blank, hardbound sketch book from your local art supply store is a medium fancy way to begin. I prefer small pages for my first book, so it is not so daunting to fill. I also prefer small pages when I have lots to say so things are easier to find. It's really up to you. Don't be afraid to experiment – that's the whole point, right?

What exactly do I do?

1) Find a sentence or phrase you want to keep. If you are already a reader, then start with the very book you are currently reading. If you are not much of a reader yet, then start with talks at church, or movies, or songs, or however you normally experience words in your life. This can be as short as a phrase or sentence, or as long as a paragraph.

(If the thought of reading a book just to do this scares you silly, or if you are teaching this to children, you can even add the strips of paper from fortune cookies (if you have a profound or funny fortune); the zen sayings on herbal tea bags; cartoons; small newspaper articles; questions you wish you knew the answer to, etc. I like to include ticket stubs and the best quote from the performance – the one or two lines that make the whole experience worth the price of admission.)

2) Write it down!

3) Comment on what you have copied – add some thoughts of your own. Tell *why* you agree or disagree, why you chose this quote, how the thoughts it contains has changed you – or how you hope it changes you. What have you learned from these words? Is there anything you would like to remember from this text for your own life; if so, what and why? Do you have anything you would like to say back to this author?

You will eventually find this changes the way you read. At first, it might seem to hamper the enjoyment of your books (particularly mystery novels), but ultimately you will find you are reading on a deeper level; reading to change your thoughts or actions. You will find you are reading to enhance your life, not just escape it.

A non-threatening way to start this as a family is to keep a group commonplace book. Just get a neat-looking notebook, assign someone to take responsibility for being the “curator”: making sure that it's always in its place with a pen and a box of sharpened pencil crayons. Everyone can make contributions to it, and everyone will keep returning to the book to see what new entries have been made. That's a pretty low key way to start, and to hook your family on the concept!

How should I choose quotes and other things?

Every day we read or hear something worth remembering. Because we rarely think to take down these valuable bits of information we encounter, they often disappear. Here

are a few ways to help you decide what you might like to write down. NOTE: ***don't*** do all these things at once, or you will make yourself crazy! Pick ONE and work on it, and then try another. "Line upon line, precept on precept..."

Just find a line or part that is powerful to you. You can define "powerful" any way you like. It might be very descriptive, or emotional, or lovely, or inspiring, or meaningful. Decide for yourself what powerful means, and then think about why the part you have selected is powerful. Share your thoughts in your commonplace book.

You can also choose to write down something that helps you understand what you are reading, or something that helps you understand your life better. You can even choose to write down something that confuses you; something you wonder if you will *ever* understand. You can revisit this selection periodically, writing down any new things you have read on the subject, or anything you have since heard or learned, or any new thoughts you have had.

Find something you really connect with and ponder (*in writing*) why. For more information on this, read the article "Why To Read a Book".

Find a line or passage which made a strong impression on YOU. It could be something you seriously disagree with; if so, go ahead and counter the argument. On the other hand, if it's something you like, is this something you want to remember and/or live up to in your own life? Would your life be any different if you do?

How do I make it good?

Be careful to choose significant quotes rather than simply inserting random passages. Also be sure to offer a thoughtful commentary rather than just paraphrasing what it says or saying you liked or disliked it, or agreed or disagreed. What makes it good is what it means to *you*.

But what does it really look like?

Honestly, it really looks like a thoughtful choice of quotations and your feelings and ideas about them. As you get more skilled and confident and comfortable, you can start to notice contradictions, or patterns, or moments of "burning in your bosom" power. Even confessing what you don't understand can be of benefit and growth.

Comments on possible meanings, especially personal meanings, are of far more worth than side notes like "boring" or "interesting". Aren't you the least bit curious why MacBeth's soliloquy ("Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow") reminds me of doing the dishes? Instead of just saying you agree or disagree, offer some reasons why.

A commonplace looks very much like a journal in that it is a work in progress. It is only finished when you run out of pages. You don't need to be overly picky about penmanship, spelling or grammar. You will not be graded on your commonplace book,

but you just might find your life bettered by it. It helps you to practice both thinking and writing in a safe environment. It helps you communicate ideas with clarity and precision.

Although a commonplace book might seem very scribble-scrabble in its approach, it will show the development of your understanding. You might find yourself referring back to earlier commonplace books to measure yourself, or trace how your thinking and living has changed. As you continue to use a commonplace book, you will find specific questions being repeated, and you will be able to see how you are getting deeper in your exploration of the issues, and in your understanding.

Why should I bother?

Because it's worth it! As you save key quotations from each book you read, you'll find yourself reading more closely and remembering the text more effectively. It will also allow you to keep your own record of the "great conversation" you hear developing throughout the world, as many people wrestle with the same types of issues and offer their insights.. Most importantly of all, writing in your commonplace book will give you a way of taking part in that conversation by offering your own responses to the comments that you read from others.

On a more practical level, you'll find out that it is a great way to find questions you want to share and things you want to discuss in your study circles. Even if all you do is keep a record of the things you don't understand or that confuse you, you will be making a valuable contribution to the colloquia (if you don't know that word, you should run right now and get a commonplace book and write it down!!) by helping us get right to the important points so that we can work together to build a better understanding.

Do you have a neat quote to get me started?

Doesn't that kind of defeat the purpose, me giving you something that has meaning to me? You should really trust yourself to know what is important to you ... but if you just want something to give you the courage to set pen to paper, here are a few ideas of ways to open your commonplace book:

Something short: "One could, like a busy honeybee, gather the nectar of other people's thoughts." ~ Seneca

Maybe you are looking for something a little more profound. In the *Tao te Ching*, Ram Das said: "From my Guru... I received encouragement to take teachings wherever I could find them and then to trust my intuitive heart to cull the teachings which would be useful from those which were irrelevant or potentially harmful."

Maybe you want something really fancy: "An empty book is like an Infant's Soul, in which anything may be written; it is capable of all things, but containeth nothing. I have a mind to fill this with profitable wonders, and with those things which shall shew my Love. Things strange, yet common; most high, yet plain: infinitely profitable, but not esteemed; truths you love, but know not." ~ Thomas Traherne

Maybe you want to start with a definition: "A personal journal in which quotable passages, literary excerpts, and comments are written." ~ *American Heritage Dictionary*

Honestly, this last commonplace book of mine starts with one of my favorite, most profound quotes from Douglas Adams: "Don't Panic!"

Are you serious?

Absolutely. Any other questions?

Colloquia?

Ah, that is a question for another day...