Keeping Secrets

To keep a meaningful journal, you need to be comfortable and feel your secrecy is respected. Here are some techniques for keeping your words hidden from others—and even yourself.

In this excerpt from her book *Raw Art Journaling*, Quinn McDonald shares techniques for creating journaling that is Hiding in Plain Sight. You’ll learn first how to write things you want to release yourself from, to forget or put behind you. Then you’ll learn two techniques for hiding those words so they can’t be read.

To learn more about or purchase *Raw Art Journaling* by Quinn McDonald, click here.


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Secret
To keep a meaningful journal, you need to feel comfortable and believe your secrecy is respected. Do you want your writing to be yours to process, but kept private from everyone—even yourself—years from now? In that case, choose to hide your words in your journal in such a way that they make a good design or background, but are covered with other journal entries. If you want to make your journal entries hard for anyone to figure out, but easy for you to remember years from now, you can choose a way to hide your words that isn’t obvious, but that can be reversed. Both ways have advantages and disadvantages.

The advantage of hiding it all is that you won’t keep warming up emotions that are better left in the past. By using one of the Hiding in Plain Sight techniques, you can write down things that you want to release, to let go of, to put behind you for good.

The disadvantage of permanent hiding is that it is truly gone. You cannot predict today how you will feel years from now. Perhaps it’s useful to know that you keep repeating the same choices, but in different ways. Those choices aren’t always obvious while we are making them. Sometimes they need the passage of time to become clear.

The advantage of hiding techniques that are reversible—what I refer to as Just Plain Hiding—is that you can recall memories, lessons learned, choices that changed how your life unfolded. It can be a big advantage to know what it took to make positive change.

The disadvantage of reversible techniques is that you have to remember how to reverse them. You’ll have to leave yourself instructions where you can find and remember them. What seems so clear today may become more difficult down the line.

The important part of journaling is that it is the real history of life—not just yours, but other people’s lives. History books focus on the changing power of war. Journals focus on the changing power of community, art, culture, family. You can contribute to the way the world is remembered.
How important is your privacy? If you hide your thoughts permanently, you'll be able to get your emotions out and think through your choices today, but you won't be able to know how you came to your conclusions, and you may not remember exactly what it was that you were thinking or feeling when you go back through your journal later. If privacy is most important to you, the “forever hidden” ideas on the next several pages are useful tools to try.

Secrets’ Flip Side

Every time I teach a raw-art journaling class, someone worries about revealing secrets in a journal.

“What if someone finds my journal and reads it?” a woman asks. (Men don’t ask this question often.)

“Is it one thing you want to keep private, or is the whole idea about someone reading your thoughts creepy to you?” I’ll ask.

“I just don’t want anyone sitting around after I’m gone, poking through my things. And I really don’t want my kids finding out the stuff I wrote in the journal,” is the answer I hear most often.

If you use social networking sites like Facebook, LinkedIn or Twitter, your life is probably not as private as you think. All of your remarks, hints and comments are read by the people you consciously shared them with, but also by those same people who then went on to share your ideas with others. It’s as true in day-to-day living as it is on the Internet: If you really want to keep a secret, keep it to yourself. Nothing else is guaranteed.

I’d rather have my relatives know about me than marketers and spammers who troll the Internet looking for information. In real life, I tell my classes the story of finding my mother’s love letters to my father after both had died and discovering a completely different mother than the stern, talented, needle-arts disciplinarian I had known. In the letters, I found a hopeful, funny, loving woman and much about her life that was completely new to me. She had kept it hidden and would not have wanted me to see it in her lifetime, but I am so grateful that I now know more about her as a young wife and mother. My father’s nature journals and sketches, which show the difference in his vision when he got his glasses as a youngster, as well as the changing landscapes of his life, are among my most treasured possessions. Your children will have different views as they grow up and have adult lives of their own. Once you are gone, is there really a reason to hide who you were and all the circumstances that created you? People gain different perspectives. Do you really need to control your life after you are no longer living it?
Many of our secrets are emotions we want to hide. One of the gifts of keeping a journal is that you can write to forget—what you put in a journal spills out of you, onto the page and out of your memory. These are excellent secrets to use as backgrounds for over-writing (adding new writing right over the top of the initial writing). Here are some suggestions for topics:

• **Get rid of your anger:** What makes you angry? How do you react to anger, and how do you get rid of it again? Do you feel better if you act out, or does that make you feel guilty?

• **Confront the bully:** When was the last time you read about or saw a bully? What memory of bullies in your life did that bring up? Be detailed. Write about the frustration as well as what you did. Then add a paragraph about how you would have liked that incident to end. You can end this in any fantasy way you want, from the bully melting to your reaction creating a change in the bully’s life and heart.

• **Say what you mean:** Think back to the last disagreement you had with a loved one or friend. You may have backed off because you wanted to be liked. What would you have wanted to say or do, something that you would never do in real life? If this is not safe emotionally, think about the last time-wasting meeting in the office and how you would have ended all that senseless posturing.

• **Release dull or pesky thoughts:** If your gremlin has been noisy and complaining all day, group the thoughts together on one page.

**What You Need**

- fresh journal page or paper that can stand up to a bit of water
- watercolor pencils in various colors
- clean water
- watercolor brush, cotton swab or sponge makeup applicator

Write your thoughts down in watercolor pencils. You may want to try using one color per page or one per paragraph or perhaps one per sentence. Use colors that blend well, because that’s exactly what you will do—blend it together. You can use any watercolor pencil, water-soluble crayon or graphite. Fill the page, changing pencils often if you want a mixed-color blend.

Palimpsest
You are in good company if you use this method. It's called palimpsest and is an ancient method of overwriting. The Greeks scraped off layers of clay tablets and wrote over the original material. The Egyptians scrubbed papyrus scrolls with milk and oat bran to fade manuscripts so they could be overwritten. The fading didn't remove the writing entirely, so the first writing was done horizontally, and the second vertically, to make the most recent writing clearly visible.

Intense Color
I used Derwent Inktense watercolor pencils in this example because the bright colors make a good background for later writing with blue or black ink. Inktense colors won't hold a point well— they are meant for color, not detail— so you might not like them if you tend to write small.

Use a wet watercolor brush, cotton swab or sponge makeup applicator and dab it over the letters to blend the colors. If you are using a brush, start with short, light strokes to blend the colors. If you are using a sponge, use blotting or light pouncing to keep the transparent color on the page, not your sponge. Leave some of the words and letters to create visual interest. Avoid scrubbing. Continue blending until the words are no longer clear and you have a good color mix to use as a background.

Once you have blurred the words enough, decide how much color you want on your background. For less color, use more water and lift off color by blotting and rinsing the sponge or brush. When you are happy with the result, let the page dry completely. This may take longer than you think. Don't place your journal in direct sun to dry it, as the colors may fade and the paper warp. You can use a hair dryer to speed the process along, but avoid heat guns held too close to the journal pages. Glues, waxed linen, beeswax and metal connectors react differently to the intense heat of a heat gun, and you don't want to damage previous pages for the sake of drying the current page. Once dry, the faded page is a perfect background for a regular journal entry—you write over your secrets, hiding them in plain sight.
Using Your Computer as an Accomplice

Are you keeping your journals on your computer? It does help you write faster, but a raw-art journal helps you involve your hands, heart and spirit through meaningful art. I find raw art just isn’t as satisfying on a keyboard. But you can use your keyboard for some of the writing in your raw-art journal. Crossing over from a computer-written to a handwritten journal can lead to interesting results, as the next three exercises will show.

Fading the Memory
Using any writing prompt that you like (see page 4 for suggestions if you feel stuck), compose your thoughts on the computer, instead of writing them by hand. If your journal page is smaller than the page you are going to print on, that’s fine. You are creating a background, not a journal entry.

Highlight the entire page and, using your computer’s word processing palette, select a pale color (choose a pale tint of a color that contrasts with the pen you’ll use to write over the top of it—green, orange, brown). Change the typeface to something interesting and blow up or shrink the size of the type. If you love traditional black print on white paper, choose a 10 or 20 percent gray tint for printing. Once you’ve created an interesting background, print out your secret.

Tear the edges by hand, use decorative-edge scissors or trim them with a paper cutter. Complete your overwriting on the page and then glue it into your journal.

What You Need

- computer and printer loaded with standard copy paper
- pen you wish to overwrite with
- scissors or paper cutter (optional)
- glue or gel medium
- your journal