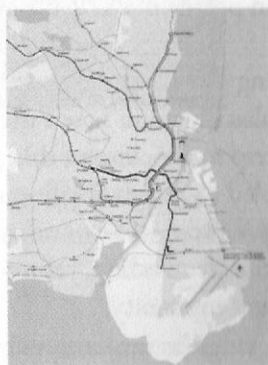


Writing Exercises to Engage the Spirit of Travel

by Ellen B. Ryan



JOURNALING ABOUT A TRIP — BEFORE, during, and after — can contribute to the impact of travel upon your growing self. Setting intentions beforehand can expand possibilities. Then, jotting down brief images and impressions during travel can sharpen attention and enhance perception. Despite our best intentions, recall for travel events and personal responses fades quickly without memory aids. Afterwards, savoring the meanings of diverse experiences and observations through reflective or creative writing can foster imagination, generate insights into your way of being in the world, uncover lessons learned, and raise questions for further exploration.

*May you travel in an awakened way,
gathered wisely into your inner ground;
that you may not waste the invitations
which wait along the way to transform you.*

— John O'Donohue¹

Journaling can include different styles of writing — lists, questions, memory-based reflections, imagination, poems, and creative writing. Many people also sketch images or incorporate quotes and reactions to ongoing reading. Fast writing, keeping your pen on the page, fosters depth and creativity. Journaling has become part of my experience of the world and of my daily spiritual practice — even when I travel!

People often use different formats to match varying circumstances. As a writer myself, and as a leader of writing groups, I have divided my regular journal into three sections — diary of day-by-day activities,

solitary reflections, and exercises completed during writing group sessions. I also keep a separate "to-do" list nearby while journaling — an action page to take away. As well, I carry paper and pen wherever I go, including frequent walks. From time to time, I harvest my journals — first with colored markers, then typing key sections into computer files for use in personal, work-related, or creative writing.

Below I set out ten writing exercises that can support journaling during the three stages of travel. Drawing examples from a recent journey, I also illustrate how I used some of the exercises for our intergenerational trip to Stockholm this past summer. In August my husband and I traveled to Sweden with our daughter and her baby to visit my son, Swedish daughter-in-law, and grandchildren aged 3 and 5 years. The trip was busy and demanding, yet my practice of journaling supported my intentions — and my sanity!

Set Out Curious

Journaling can help you sort out the usual details of planning and packing for your trip. More importantly, you can free yourself for a deeper travel experience by writing about your hopes and uncertainties. Seeing these in black and white can help you set intentions.

Exercise 1: Sometimes travel can be disorienting or overwhelming. In the week before you are to leave, set intentions for how you want to be during the journey (e.g., be open to surprise, treat the inevitable disruptions as opportunities, move lightly through new lands).

MY INTENTIONS for our Family Trip to Stockholm

- Stay calm
- Lose myself in play
- Write daily impressions
- Spend time alone with each person



Travel Mindfully

Carry a small notebook. Write out your intentions on the first page. Frequent reminding can help you stay grounded as you move from place to place, experience to experience.

Exercise 2: Use in-between moments to record impressions of sights and people in brief phrases, or try to write a haiku poem. Focus on the small (e.g., preschooler reaching out to pat baby cousin's cheek) and on the big (e.g., Stockholm's city hall gleaming at sunset with Nobel pride).

Exercise 3: Collect postcards for describing your experiences. Write on the back of a postcard in the evening after you saw whatever is on it, or when you know you will not see it.

Exercise 4: Look at a scene as though you are a camera and record the details. Embellish with the other senses. The scents of travel — how seductively the cinnamon assails you as you trundle sweaty and frayed from the wrong terminal in the airport to the right one. Or the sensual: the wild massage of the sea breeze in your hair on the ferry.

Exercise 5: What surprised you today? For example, conversation with the café waiter, silvery stream found by following its trickling sound, other side of the story you learned in history class, or even what the baby did.

You might write the facts of your trip on the left-side pages of your notebook, with the surprises, moments of wonder, disappointments on the right-side pages. The right sides will be especially useful for sharing your trip with others.

Weekend Cruise from Stockholm to Estonia

30 minute bus to cruise ship harbor —
Inexpensive link unknown to tourists without local connections

It feels good to be “in the know” through our family here in Stockholm.

Watch Swedish archipelago as we travel
north from 6-10 p.m. into northern sunset

I feel as though I’m on a river, rather than the sea. Being able to almost touch land makes me feel safe. Spying the next island reminds me of finding Easter eggs as a child.

Tallinn, Estonia — capital city for 8 centuries, crowded cobblestone streets with colorful narrow buildings all head for Town Hall Square

Old Town an easy walk from the harbour, even for the children. Tallinn (especially the orthodox cathedral) reminds me of St. Petersburg. I certainly had no family connections with this part of the world back in 1968 when I spent a summer in Russia.

Alexander Nevsky Cathedral (late 19th c) crowns the hill overlooking Old Town — from the second last period of Russian empire

Wish we had more time, no chance to explore hidden steps on the other side of the cathedral. Enjoyed getting a bit lost on the way back to the ship.

Return Inspired!

These exercises can be used to focus on your most recent trip, or a significant trip from long ago.

Exercise 6: Draw on metaphors of similarity (or difference). You can try describing your travel experiences in terms of colors — not only the many hues of green in a particular forest, but how the range of colors is so different from home; the pearl grey of skyscrapers, but also the shades of your feelings. For example: the fall-in-the-ocean blue of your grandbaby’s eyes, flaming flag in your mind’s eye when you realize the tourist agent made a big mistake about which terminal, the burst of primary colors when you finally spot your family waiting at the gate, and shades of sepia for the ache of saying goodbye.

Exercise 7: The impact of a story or poem often depends on the power of the verbs. List 20 action or feeling verbs to describe your trip. Then include as many as possible in a story about the trip.

Part I

Part II

Verbs	Five adults cannot plan a weekend escape from the crowded apartment in
Partial List	Stockholm. We eventually let our son steer through the Internet options
steer	— pleased eventually that we were to sail on our first cruise. Once on the
sail	ship, grandchildren were able to jump on the fifth-floor play gym, swim
jump	in the second-floor child-size pool, and dance their way past bedtime
swim	with a hundred kids — speaking so many languages. My daughter-in-
dance	law could relax finally — as we dined on tuna steaks, Thai curry, and red
dine	wine. The five adults took turns looking after the scampering children
scamper	and occasionally walking a gurgling baby. That evening we stood on the
gaze	10th-floor deck, gazing intently as island after island slipped by in the late-
slip	summer northern light, and wondered how it must have felt to be Vikings
wonder	of yore setting out for adventure through the Baltic.

Exercise 8: Select 10 photographs from your trip, then work into your story the names, places, and activities displayed in the photos.

Exercise 9: Juxtapose imaginatively! Describe how your trip was like a day in a new school, reading the newspaper, visiting a toy store, walking in the woods, or some other part of your real or fantasy life.

Exercise 10: Share your journey! For example, write a letter to grandchildren after joint travels or traveling to visit them. These can be wonderful keepsakes for both young and old (and the middle generation). Put a copy into the scrapbook you keep for that child.

I recently created a ten-page booklet for our grandson's fourth birthday based on the sports experiences we enjoyed with him during our summer visit — making use of photos and a repetitive refrain to help him learn to read English.

Finally, you can journal about the spirit of travel using quotations such as these, selected from *The Tao of Travel*.²

*Being invisible — the usual condition of the older traveler,
is much more useful than being obvious.*

— Paul Theroux

*All good trips are, like love, about being carried out of yourself
and deposited in the midst of terror and wonder.*

— Pico Iyer

*Perhaps, then, this was what traveling was,
an exploration of the deserts of my mind rather than those surrounding me.*

— Claude Levi-Strauss

There is a meaning in every journey that is unknown to the traveler.

— Dietrich Bonhoeffer

An unexpected boon from our family reunion delights us all. Our Swedish granddaughter is keen to master English so she will be able to talk with her Canadian cousin. As always, young spirits look ahead. As for grandparents — we are rewarded with close ties among the next generations. How can we burnish ties and cultivate shared values in a cross-national family even when oft-imagined travel to be together is not feasible?

The more attentive we are as we travel and the more reflective afterwards, the more likely our travel experiences enhance our sense of self and purpose. We contribute to the upward spiral of living and growing, returning home inspired each time.

¹ O'Donohue, John (2008). "For the Traveler" in *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings*. New York: Doubleday.

² Theroux, Paul (2011). *The Tao of Travel: Enlightenment from Lives on the Road*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.