

Author Kate Walter of ‘Behind the Mask’: How Journaling Can Help You to Be More Calm, Mindful and Resilient

An Interview with Heidi Sander



Heidi Sander

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Journaling is a powerful tool to gain clarity and insight especially during challenging times of loss and uncertainty. Writing can cultivate a deeper connection with yourself and provide an outlet for calm, resilience, and mindfulness. When my mom passed on, I found writing to be cathartic. When I read through my journal years later, there were thoughts that I developed into poems, and others just provided a deeper insight into myself. In this series, I'm speaking with other leaders who use journaling to become more mindful and resilient.

As a part of this series, I had the distinct pleasure of interviewing Kate Walter.

Kate Walter is the author of two memoirs: Behind the Mask: Living Alone in the Epicenter; and Looking for a Kiss: A Chronicle of Downtown Heartbreak and Healing. Her essays and opinion pieces have appeared in The New York Times, Newsday, New York Daily News, AM-NY, Next Avenue, The Advocate, and many other outlets. She taught writing at CUNY and NYU for three decades. Walter has documented her life in downtown Manhattan since 1975. She has been dubbed "that world's Samuel Pepys." Kate Walter views writing creative nonfiction as a way of understanding her life, healing personal pain, and making changes in society.

Thank you so much for joining us in this interview series! We really appreciate the courage it takes to publicly share your story of healing. Before we start, our readers would love to “get to know you” a bit better. Can you tell us a bit about your background and your childhood backstory?

I grew up in Paterson, New Jersey in the 1950s and 1960s in a conservative Catholic family. I attended Catholic schools from kindergarten through college. I was the rebellious middle child who always had the rockiest relationship with my parents. I went from being a hippie to being queer. At first, my parents had a hard time accepting my being gay, especially my father, but they came around over the years. After my father died, my mother became more open and accepting. She helped me after the breakup of my 26-year lesbian relationship. Her reaching out at that time healed our stormy relationship and we had a good 10 years until she died.

Let’s now shift to the main part of our discussion about journaling. Have you been writing in your journal for a long time or was there a challenging situation that prompted you to start journal writing? If you feel comfortable sharing the situation with us, it could help other readers.

I started seriously keeping a journal in the 1980s when I got into psychotherapy. I still keep a journal. I have boxes and boxes of old journal books and wonder if I should keep them or toss them.

How did journaling help you heal, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually?

I used journal writing to process the therapy sessions and review what we had discussed and analyze it even more. I often came up with new insights that I could bring into the next session. I’m an analytical person by nature.

Did journaling help you find more self-compassion and gratitude? Can you share a story about that?

Journaling helped me find more self-compassion and to stop being so critical. (I had a critical mother.) At some point during the lockdown, I realized I had journaled so much, I had a book, a memoir in essays, and I approached my publisher, who loved the idea and gave me a deadline. I'm excited that my pandemic memoir was recently published: *Behind the Mask: Living Alone in the Epicenter* (Heliotrope Books.) After finishing the book, I decided to create and include 12 journal writing prompts offering this as a tool for others to heal from this traumatic period. The writing was my salvation. The response to the writing prompts has been very positive, and it makes the books more interactive.

What kind of content goes into your journal? For example, do you free-write, write poems, doodle?

I recap and analyze each of my therapy sessions. Sometimes my therapist asks me to free write about a topic or a dream that I brought into the session. I also record everyday events. I might describe a day at the beach or a museum visit or a walk in the river park.

How did you gain a different perspective on life and your emotions while writing in your journal? Can you please share a story about what you mean?

Writing allows me to step back and gain perspective. As I'm writing about what I did, I also describe how I feel.

In my journal writing, I ended up creating poems from some of the ideas and one of them won an award. Do you have plans with your journal content?

I have been a professional writer for a long time. I often use ideas and topics from my journal writing to develop into essays I will publish. But basically, my journal is a place where I can write in a relaxed manner, not worry about a deadline or an editor's reaction. That feels very freeing. The entries about therapy tend to be the most serious.

Fantastic. Here is our main question. Can you please share with our readers “five ways that journaling can help you to be more calm, mindful and resilient”?

I was journaling and writing essays all during the lockdown and I continued writing as the pandemic evolved Five ways this helped me:

- 1.) I live alone and writing helped me deal with loneliness and isolation.
- 2.) Writing allowed me to process upsetting things that happened, such as, my church burning down last December and a friend getting sick with covid.
- 3.) Writing enabled me to appreciate the acts of kindness of neighbors during the pandemic.
- 4) Writing made me grateful for my financial security and ability to donate to others less fortunate.
- 5.) Writing made me realize what I'd taken for granted before the pandemic and what's important to me.

You are a person of great influence. If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of peace to the greatest amount of people, what would that be?

A movement to ban the sale of assault weapons in the USA. This is the only country where this is allowed. No civilian needs a gun like that. Easy access to assault weapons has resulted in mass murders in schools, clubs, shopping centers, movie theatres, etc., taking away innocent lives and destroying families.

We are very blessed that some very prominent names in Business, VC funding, Sports and Entertainment read this column. Is there a person in the world, or in the US with whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch, and why? He or she might just see this if we tag them. :-)

Dr. Jill Biden. I think we have a lot in common. I taught at a community college for two decades, and Dr. Biden still teaches college classes, even though she is FLOTUS. I admire her commitment. She seems very down-to-earth. And we're around the same age.

How can our readers further follow your work online?

Readers can follow my work at: www.katewalter.com. Also, *Behind the Mask: Living Alone in the Epicenter* includes four additional bonus essays written before the pandemic that share my perspective as a writer.

Thank you so much for sharing these important insights. We wish you continued fulfillment and success with your writing!

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