

NOTEBOOKS CAN BE A TREASURE TROVE OF WRITING IDEAS

BY DANNY HEITMAN, *FORUM* EDITOR

In an earlier “On Writing” column that suggested seven habits for highly effective writers, the first helpful habit I mentioned was keeping a notebook. Although I didn’t intend to list my proposed habits for successful writing in order of priority, I’m not surprised that keeping a notebook is the first thing that came to mind. I’ve found it an invaluable tool in cultivating ideas, and many other writers have, too.

One of them was the late Wiley Hilburn, who for many years taught journalism at Louisiana Tech University. I didn’t attend Louisiana Tech and have Hilburn as a teacher, but Beth Colvin, my predecessor in editing *Forum*, is an alum of the university and counts Wiley as a formative influence. As she told me a few years ago, Hilburn required his students to carry a notebook everywhere they went. They lost points if he spotted them on campus without one.

I carry a notebook and pen in my pocket all the time. Eudora Welty, the celebrated short story writer and novelist, was required to take a lot of pictures as part of her federal job during the Great Depression. For Welty, merely having a camera nudged her to remain alert for neat images to capture on film. In a similar way, having a notebook at the ready is a good prompt, reminding you to keep open to good material for essays, stories, poems, or whatever kind of writing you like to do.

There’s no right or wrong way to keep a notebook, no litmus test for what it should include. I place inside it anything that interests me: an interesting quote, something funny I’ve overheard, lists of

future projects, a stray thought or two that might, over time, germinate into something bigger.

Here’s an example of what ends up in my notebook. While out walking recently, I heard a voice from above telling me good morning. Was I being greeted by a deity in the clouds? I looked up, quickly spotting the source of the message. A cable repairman was atop a ladder, being friendly to pedestrians as they passed.

The man and his ladder were clearly visible from a distance, but I hadn’t noticed him until he spoke. Obviously, I had been lost in thought while I walked, oblivious to what was around me.

This made me wonder what else I was overlooking on these daily walks and whether I was missing a chief benefit of strolling the neighborhood – namely, to connect with other people.

Could this be a newspaper or magazine essay? I wasn’t sure, but a few blocks past the repairman, I stopped on a park bench, pulled out my notebook, and jotted down a few impressions of that voice from on high that had changed my day.

If my thoughts grow into something else to publish, I’ll be able to thank my notebook, where so much of a writer’s work begins.



Forum editor **DANNY HEITMAN** has written about the writing craft for numerous publications, including *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, and he’s taught writing to university students.



EMMETT P. “BUZZ” BURNHAM (University of Kentucky) was celebrated in a recent cover story of UK’s alumni magazine for his

pioneering efforts over several decades in recruiting minority students to campus. “He was the main reason so many of us went to UK, and stayed there,” said UK alum and ESPN *SportsCenter* anchor Michael Eaves. “His impact is immeasurable.”



ELLIOT CERTAIN (Middle Tennessee State University) and **BRIAN MAXWELL** (Middle Tennessee State University) were given the 2024 Harold Love Outstanding



Community Service Award, which recognizes individuals

for community service, volunteer work, public service, charitable service, and leadership roles in community organizations.



HOWARD H. ERICKSON (Kansas State University) was named the 2024 Alumni Fellow in the College of Veterinary Medicine

at Kansas State University after a 65-year career in veterinary medicine, beginning with about a year in private practice, 22 years in the Air Force, and 43 years at Kansas State University. “My presentation to our faculty, staff, and students was ‘Mentors, Colleagues, and Hometown Legends,’” he told *Forum*.



MARY ANN GUNTER (University of Louisiana at Monroe) presented her paper, “Some Kind of Unfolding: A Micro-to Macroscopic