



“I write to find out what I think.”
— Joan Didion *

Dear Faithful Reader,

A funny thing happens when you start to write. I mean, to really write — to let the words go, let the syllables and sequences trickle and tumble out onto the page without too much monitoring or self-censoring as you go. To write honestly and authentically.

You start discovering thoughts you hadn’t known were in there. Feelings you didn’t fully realize you had. You start learning things about people you didn’t know you’d noticed. Seeing your world more clearly, in more shades of color and shadow, more depth and greater understanding.

A lot of the stuff you bump into, you didn’t know when you started, or at least you didn’t know that you knew.

Living is like that.

“Do what you love and the money will follow,” went the pop philosophy of the eighties. The problem there is that often you don’t really know what you love until you bump into it. And the only way to bump into it is to live, honestly and authentically. In the process of which you bump into a whole lot of other stuff you don’t necessarily love. But to find out, you need to go ahead and do the living, without too much monitoring and self-censoring as you go.

In *The Go-Giver Leader*, I put Joan Didion’s words into the mouth of Aunt Elle, the wise business matriarch:

“A writer I admire once said, ‘I write to find out what I think.’ Here’s what I think, Ben. I think we *live* to find out who we *are*.”

My February wish for you: Put a little quiet time aside to explore what you think and who you are.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joan Didion".

* ABOUT THE QUOTE

The Didion quote at the top of this letter is (as happens with so many famous quotations) a slightly simplified version of what she actually wrote, in a 1976 essay titled *Why I Write*:

“I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking, what I’m looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear.”

She penned similar thoughts in other writings (“I don’t know what I think until I write it down” ... “We tell ourselves stories in order to live”), and she was far from alone. Here are a few other writers with parallel thoughts:

“I do not know what I think until I write it.” — George Bernard Shaw

“I write because I don’t know what I think until I read what I say.” — Flannery O’Connor

“I never know what I think about something until I read what I’ve written on it.”
William Faulkner

“Writing is thinking. It is more than living, for it is being conscious of living.” — Anne Morrow Lindbergh

Joan Didion was one of the most influential writers of the last century and well into this one. When her husband of 40 years collapsed from a fatal heart attack right in front of her — all while their daughter lay comatose in a hospital bed from pneumonia and septic shock — Didion went nearly insane with grief.

So she went into therapy: She wrote about it. Her book, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, won the National Book Award and was nominated for a Pulitzer. She later adapted it into a play, starring Vanessa Redgrave, that opened on Didion’s beloved Broadway and went around the world.

Didion wrote to find out what she thought and felt, and the world is a richer place for it.