

The Post-Traumatic Gazette No. 26

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Taking Inventory: Knowing Where I Am

I've noticed that it is really difficult to stop doing things if I don't know that I am doing them. In 12-Step programs we find out what we are doing by an inventory of ourselves. It says in AA's "Big Book," Alcoholics Anonymous, an inventory is "a fact- finding and fact-facing process. It is an effort to discover the truth about the stock-in-trade."

What is your stock-in-trade? Is it rages and self-righteousness, being nice and nursing grudges, over-extending and then forgetting to do things, always saying yes so people will like you? Those were some of my stock activities. I practiced them without really being aware of it. The Big Book goes on to say why we do an inventory: "One object is to disclose damaged or unsalable goods, to get rid of them promptly and without regret." I always laugh at that. Can you see me trying to run a sale on my resentments? Used resentments, half price!

It is better for me to rid myself of damaging patterns. Then I spend my time and effort on growth, recovery, happiness, serenity and peace.

If your stock-in-trade has been dissociation, emotional numbing, lack of concentration, sudden rages, constant thoughts and dreams of the trauma, an inventory can help you identify these, see how they began as survival skills, and how they may gradually have become some of your biggest problems.

In Al-Anon's *The Courage to Change*, August 17th's reading says, "What once allowed us to function in a nearly impossible situation is now an obstacle to further growth. An asset has become a deficit."

Sometimes it's because it is out of proportion: "a genuine desire to help a loved one can be exaggerated into a desperate need to fix..." Finally, it says, when you notice that "a characteristic that once allowed me to survive

is no longer necessary... an asset that has lost its proportion makes my life unmanageable... This shows a willingness to face reality and a readiness to choose health.”

Inventorying is not about blame; it is about reality. When you are trying to change, knowing what you do is as important as acknowledging why you learned to do it.

Taking the time to do any form of inventory means you are worth your own time. Being worth your own time will automatically raise your self-esteem. It is important for everyone to take time, quiet time, each day to simply be there with/for yourself.

Another kind of inventory, the examen, can help guide you towards the type of activity that is healing to you. In their new book, *Sleeping with Bread*, Dennis, Sheila and Matthew Linn explain the examen, a simple exercise St. Ignatius Loyola (a wild soldier who became a saint) incorporated into his spiritual disciplines. As a matter of fact, he told his followers that if they had time for only one thing, do the examen, which consists of:

For what moment today am I most grateful?

For what moment today am I least grateful?

The question can be phrased in various ways, but over the course of time, asking these two questions will point you towards finding a more fulfilling life because you will see what makes you happy and what doesn't, what triggers you and what doesn't, what gives you joy and peace and what doesn't, and what makes you feel heard and what doesn't.

True healing is based in self-knowledge, not in trying to be what other people think you should be. Different people need different things in order to heal.

The Linns point out that addictive behaviors may feel good as you do them, but they feel bad when you look back afterwards. Recovery behaviors may be uncomfortable at the time, but looking back you feel relief or a sense of accomplishment, despite the pain. The Linns suggest lighting a candle and making a small ceremony out of the examen. The three of them do it together and share their insights.

The examen may also gently lead you to identify patterns that are so ingrained in your thinking that you can't see them. If you can't see them, you can't make a choice about whether they are useful or detrimental. Maybe one of them is “there's no time for self-indulgence!” Yet you feel

better after you take the time to do the examen or some other form of quiet time your family would have considered “selfish.”

How about the “family comes first” pattern that pervades alcoholic/dysfunctional families? It keeps abuse survivors trapped in a pattern of trying to get healthy normal needs for love approval and attention met by people who have harmed them in the past. “Family first” is an injunction, in the language of Transactional Analysis, a deep underlying message you don’t know is there. Do you feel used, drained, miserable and misunderstood after family functions? Maybe you have never considered not going because you grew up knowing in your bones that family must come first. The examen can help you discover this. Then you can choose.

Other ones can be “You are nothing without a man,” or “Don’t tell our business to outsiders.” Doing an examen may show you that whenever you tell your business to outsiders in a healthy setting like therapy you feel great relief, and yet you also feel pain, shame and guilt, like you are breaking the law. That awareness shows you that you are breaking a family injunction. Ask yourself why would a family have that injunction? Don’t tell strangers we are happy? No. It’s don’t tell strangers we’re living in hell. Secret-keeping protects abusers. It is not right. It is pure selfishness on the part of the parents.

Are you doing that to your own kids? If you are, perhaps you learned it at home. It takes tremendous effort to grow and change and recover from that kind of ingrained message. Working towards healthier patterns will not only help you, it will model to your kids that it is okay to change, grow, to ask for and to find help.

One of my favorite young women in the world was emotionally abandoned by her mother and molested by her father. She decided to take parenting classes with her infant son because she knows she didn’t learn healthy patterns as a child. Her insights are further on in this issue, PTSD and Parenting. Inventorying how you interact with your kids can inspire you to find help.

The inventory process is mentioned twice in the 12 steps. The fourth step is a thorough inventory of the past, meant to clean out the garbage and give you a clear idea of what you have been like. Start by listing your resentments, which for some of us is a lot of fun. Then you examine what part of you this person’s behavior affected: self-esteem, personal or sexual

relations, ambitions, security? Finally, look at your part in each situation. The Big Book suggests four words to describe your part: dishonest, selfish, self-seeking and frightened. I was always afraid: afraid I deserved it, afraid I'd never get what I wanted, afraid they were right and I was wrong, so afraid that I couldn't be honest about my needs. It was enlightening. After I wrote my fourth step, I could see that my sometimes aggressive and controlling attitudes and actions were a measure of fear!

Another way of doing this is suggested in a book I recently read on weight loss. (Lots of trauma survivors and family members seem to eat their feelings, so it is a common concern.) In *The Solution*, Laurel Mellin suggests writing out "Thinking Journals" about the things that have affected you. Write down the facts. *The Solution's*, Thinking Journals are focused on eating disorders, but they could be adapted to cover a trauma history. She suggests having a support system, either a therapist or group, because sometimes the trash is pretty overwhelming. After each journal, you follow up with a number of "Feelings Letters" written to people or to situations. In a Feelings Letter, first you write out all the anger about the person or situation. Then write out all the sadness. Next write all your fears about the incident or person, and then, once you have cleared out those emotions, you will be able to see if you have some associated guilt or any of it was "your fault." Write about that and you will probably have processed most of the major emotions about that incident. She calls this "taking out the trash."

If you are working the 12 Steps, you have a built-in support system in the groups you attend and in the person you have chosen to be your sponsor. You will read your fourth step to your sponsor and find acceptance and love.

The daily inventory, Step 10, "Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it," can be done in various ways. A written inventory, done either at night or the next morning, helps me look at my progress on a daily basis.

In your inventory, you can list tools you learned in therapy that you used today. Did you breathe instead of blowing up? Did you tell yourself, "I don't need to argue?" Did you take a nonjudgmental stance? Say excuse me and leave the situation? Set a boundary? Take care of yourself?

You can list your major feelings, how you reacted, and whether this was an old pattern or a new way of dealing with the feeling. You can list old patterns that came up: (Someone cut in front of me in line and I wanted to jump him) and then new actions you took: (I spoke up using I statements — “I’ve been standing in line and I resent you cutting in. Please move to the back of the line”—or, I decided it wasn’t a matter of life and death and I could let it go.).

You can write out an examen: for what moment today do I feel the most gratitude? For what moment do I feel the least gratitude?

Some people list sins and virtues in their inventory. I feel guilty enough without listing sins. Instead, I list old patterns of behavior learned in childhood, like blaming and shaming, or feeling like I’m no good because I am not perfect, and after each one, I list the new actions I took today instead of living out the old pattern. This keeps me focused on my own recovery.

AA also suggests a spot inventory of what is going on with you when you feel upset or see that you are rehashing some old pattern. Stop for a moment and ask yourself “What is going on?”

The Solution has a delightful spot inventory process called the nurturing and limits cycles. The nurturing cycle consists of three questions, “What do I feel?” “What do I need?” and “Can I ask for help?” This is followed by three questions in the limits cycle, “What are my expectations?” If they are unrealistic, you can then reframe them to be more realistic. “What am I thinking (telling myself)?” If you are lashing yourself or catastrophizing, you can create positive powerful thoughts that will help you. The final question is “What is the essential pain of the situation?” When you find the essential pain of the situation, you sit with the pain (is it sadness, frustration, anger, guilt, shame?) and let it fill you. In the natural course of emotions, it will peak and then fade. You know you are healing when you can tolerate pain and let it fade away instead of suppressing or numbing it.

I know when I first read about the Inventory, I had no intention of doing it. Today, it is one of my most useful tools, keeping me focused on myself and my recovery, helping me to see the progress I’m making towards my goals.

Healing Trauma

Guided Imagery for PTSD, Belleruth Naparstek,

Healing Trauma, which is available as a tape or CD, presents a meditative approach, called guided imagery, which is designed to help survivors overcome the effects of trauma.

At the start of the tape, the narrator, Belleruth Naparstek, repeatedly emphasizes that the survivor is in control. Her words show respect for her listeners and the healing process. She explains that guided imagery is intended to heal the mind, body and spirit and to increase motivation, self-esteem and concentration. She believes that in a meditative state, the unconscious mind can “reach places the conscious mind can’t.” She also suggests ignoring the parts that don’t suit you and incorporating only the parts that will help you in your healing. Getting connected to feelings is an important part of healing, but if it is uncomfortable, you can stop the tape at any time.

The listener is then asked to find a comfortable meditative position and guided to focus and relax each part of the body. This process is found in most meditation techniques. Her imagery becomes unique as she encourages you to focus on parts of your body that feel hardened, exposed or tight.

Naparstek suggests creating a “guide” to travel with you on your journey through your emotions. The guide is present to provide love, protection and support. The guide invites you to “explore the weary landscape of your own heart”.

Naparstek uses the analogy of a landscape resembling the moon to visualize your heart. The guide gently points out areas of your heart which hold self-blame, guilt, anger and shame and helps you to move through these emotions. She says that even in this ravaged, lonely place, there is great power; that there is buried treasure in the debris. Naparstek says “you can’t make this place go away, but your courage in exploring it will change it in time. And there are gifts for you here, where you’d least expect to find them.”

After moving through your heart, the guide leads you toward a peaceful land of light. This is a familiar place, the exquisite core of who you really are. This land offers healing energy to give you comfort and peace. Naparstek uses the analogy of a type of paradise in this portion of her imagery exercise. Sweet spirits, animal friends and gardens reveal themselves holding sparkling shards of pieces of your heart. They offer the pieces back to you, pulsing with life and power. The pieces are to give you more wisdom, awareness of support and more compassion for yourself and others.

In the final part of the guided imagery, Naparstek encourages you to accept sorrow, dismiss shame, reclaim yourself and express your power. Your guide continues to accompany you as you reach the first layer of pain again. However, this time the pain is not as heavy or overpowering. As she leads you back into your body, part by part, the guide leaves with assurance that assistance is available whenever you wish for it.

The second side of the tape is filled with affirmations, positive statements designed for repeated listening. They are used to reprogram your unconscious mind to combat negative thinking. She believes that over time, affirmations can help you make profound changes.

Naparstek says that some trauma survivors prefer affirmations to the guided imagery.

An example of one of the affirmations is “I declare my intention to heal myself in body, mind and spirit.” She also uses imagery in her affirmations such as a “wave of blue-green healing” and a “warm blanket of magical comfort, peace and safety.”

I recommend “Healing Trauma” for any survivors who are open to meditative and alternative methods of healing. The imagery and affirmations were relaxing and uplifting. I believe that the exercises could be quite empowering and effective if listened to one or two times a day for at least two weeks. I appreciated the gentle and respectful manner in which she spoke to her listeners, as well as her consistent encouragement.

—Reviewed by Karen Mason

Sleeping With Bread

Dennis, Sheila and Matthew Linn

Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life looks like a children's book, slender with colorful illustrations (by the same person who illustrated their previous book, *Good Goats: Healing our Image of God*, another great book). I bought it because *Good Goats* had been so helpful to me and many of my friends, and *Sleeping with Bread* did not fail my expectations.

The book is a discussion of a process called the examen, asking yourself at the end of the day

For what moment today am I most grateful?

For what moment today am I least grateful?

The Linns describe how and why they began to do this and how it has helped them find healing and joy in life. The book is full of wonderful examples and interesting ways to rephrase the two questions, When did I feel the most alive/ least alive? When did I have the greatest sense of belonging/least sense of belonging?

In the section "Everyday Experience is Divine Revelation," the authors mention that, "The gratitude questions we use are simply one way of discovering the day's consolation and desolation, the interior movements through which divine revelation unfolds." As a child of God, if you pay attention to everyday events, you will find your path and your work, instead of someone else's. Healing trauma also means finding your own path to healing, because what helps one person (say, me with my 12-step focus), may not help you. The examen gives you the opportunity to identify what is healing to you and follow that.

The last half of the book discusses how people use the examen in real life, with kids, etc. Then there are answers to frequently asked questions.

If you have never read anything by the Linns, I highly recommend all of their books which include *Healing Sprirtual Abuse and Religious Addiction* (1994), *Belonging: Bonds of Healing & Recovery* (1993), *Healing the Eight Stages of Life* (1988) and *Healing the Greatest Hurt* (1985), all Paulist Press. Dennis and Matthew also wrote two wonderful books, *Healing Life's Hurts* (1974) and *Healing of Memories* (1978) which I read when I was writing *Recovering From the War*.

The Magic Daughter

Jane Phillips,

I've read this absolutely wonderful memoir of living with and recovering from Dissociative Identity Disorder (once called Multiple Personality Disorder) twice and couldn't put it down either time. "Jane Phillips," whoever she is, is a wonderful writer.

This book touches on the types of trauma Jane survived, but its main focus is on the process of recovery and healing. I really admire the attitude of her therapist, simply because I know that the word "abuse" is not always comforting to survivors of abuse. Sometimes it hurts.

"...my therapist tended to ignore labels such as 'physical,' 'sexual,' or 'emotional' abuse. In fact, he hardly ever used the word 'abuse.' We ... examined the salient episodes of my life in terms of meaning and developmental effects. When I underwent my appendectomy at the age of three, what would that experience have meant to me at that age? How would I have seen, felt, and thought when I was three? What conclusions did I draw about the world, the people around me, or myself? What developmental tasks were distorted, derailed, or delayed? What did I need to learn in the present to make up for what I had missed learning all those years ago? What did the wounded three-year-old self need so that she might heal and resume her suspended growth?"

These are questions that point the way toward recovery for anyone who has been traumatized. Even if growth has been suspended by dealing with some- one else's PTSD, the words are still pertinent. I have printed those questions out and am using them to help me think about my own recovery. The gradual process of recovery seems to be happening in your own heart as you read *The Magic Daughter*. It is so immediate and so deeply felt. Along with the pain and confusion, there is hope and even humor. The image of her "assessing the likelihood of getting shot at academic meetings," (faculty meetings at a college) stays with me.

For people who have an interest in this creative solution to traumatic events (DID/MPD) or for those who like good writing, this book is a treat.

Writing and PTSD

1. Letters: My friend Pete, a Korean War combat vet, sent me some letters his counselor had him write. He wrote to people he had killed and to comrades he saw killed or wounded. He also wrote a letter to himself from his PTSD.

He wrote, “These exercises were good for me. They allowed me to ventilate some anger and try to identify some feelings.”

“I particularly like the idea of trying to put trauma into words, and trying to talk to people who were involved in it, dead or alive. And I was intrigued by the idea of my PTSD writing me a letter.”

Here’s a quote from the letter from Pete’s PTSD:

“Dear Pete:

I like you because you almost always listen to me. For that I am grateful. I like the way you continue to see everything in black and white. I like the way you make everything a matter of life and death. I REALLY like the way you refuse to trust people and the way you expect perfection from them. Of course, nobody is perfect, including you, and, so, your expectations are never met. That makes you mad. It frustrates you. It makes you so critical that you can’t stand most people—including yourself—and they can’t stand you... But all these things satisfy me very nicely...

Your PTSD.”

Notice how this kind of writing can illuminate some of the areas you might want to work on—like the shades of grey between your black and white thoughts, or learning to develop more realistic and compassionate expectations about yourself and other people.

I have used writing letters that I do not intend to send to help me release painful feelings, especially resentment. I also used a technique developed by Sidney and Susanne Simon (*The Art of Forgiveness*). I wrote a

letter of apology from someone who had hurt me saying all the things I wish he had said to me. This was incredibly healing!

2. Free writing: Another kind of writing is free writing, writing down whatever comes into your head either for a period of time (timed writings are usually for five or ten minutes) or for a number of pages. Don't pause or worry about content, spelling or grammar. In *The Artist's Way*, Julia Cameron suggests clearing out worries, troubles, fears, etc. by writing three pages the first thing in the morning. Many people find this extremely helpful, but for some trauma survivors it is too much because traumatic material can come up and spoil the day. One suggestion is to do it later in the day. Another is to try other kinds of writing. *Writing Down the Bones* and *Wild Mind*, both by Natalie Goldberg, give useful rules for timed free writing and suggestions on how to develop your writing skills.

3. Journaling: Journaling is a way of following your interior life which many people find helpful. Some people free write, but most of us think and analyze in our journals. Two books by Kathleen Adams detail a number of writing exercises for journaling: *The Way of the Journal* is written for trauma survivors. *Mightier than the Sword* is written for men. Of the number of books about journaling, my favorite is *The New Diary* by Tristine Ranier which I bought many years ago. One of her suggestions, to end a depressing diary entry by listing the good moments from the day like a person's smile or the flight of a bird, helped me more than I can say in the days before I knew I had problems related to PTSD or had found a solution.

4. Workbooks: Workbooks can also be helpful if you use them in conjunction with therapy and support groups. I've used *The Twelve Steps: A Way Out* by Friends in Recovery a number of times. Unfortunately, in my opinion, each revision has made it less and less useful, so I would suggest looking for an old copy. I prefer the oldest version with the grey cover. *Life After Trauma* by Rosenbloom and Williams, *Growing Beyond Survival* by Elizabeth Vermileya, and *The PTSD Workbook* by Williams and Poijula are three good ones. dealing with PTSD

Other workbooks abound. Check out your bookstore.

Whatever form of writing you choose, be sure you have a support system in place. If you are over-whelmed by something you are writing, stop and call someone in your support system. Don't try to go it alone!

PTSD and Parenting

I interviewed my good friend W., a survivor of childhood sexual abuse because I admired the way she was getting help as a new parent. Here is what she told me:

Going to my parenting class taught me things I wouldn't have thought of. Four helpful ideas I've learned are:

1. Women have three roles in a family: housewife, mother, and lover/companion to one's partner. I thought my mother was a good parent because we always had clean sheets on our beds. My therapist had to explain to me that the clean sheets meant my mother was a good housewife. Paying attention and interacting with your kid is being a good mother. I really didn't know how to interact with my son. I couldn't do baby talk or sound affectionate. My thinking was, he doesn't talk back so why would I talk to him? I hadn't had it modeled for me, so she [the therapist] would model it for me. "Hel-lo, bay-bee!" she'd say to my son when we walked in, her voice rising and falling. I felt silly talking like that, but I could see how it engaged him, so I am learning it. Playing is difficult for me, too, but I'm learning.

2. Having an expressive face nurtures the baby emotionally. My therapist taught me that if you have an emotionless face and just stare blankly at the kid—I remember my mom doing that when I was little and feeling very upset—it is upsetting to them. I associate my expressionless face with the emotional numbing from PTSD from my sexual abuse, but also from my mother not responding to me. Facial expressions are very important to a baby. Looking him in the eye when he nurses and bonding with him is important. It is emotional as well as physical feeding. I've learned babies need that.

3. Being responsive empowers your child. My therapist also taught me not to leave him crying, which my mother did to us. When he cries and gets picked up, he's empowered. He learns he can get his needs met. If you cry and cry and don't get picked up, yes, you eventually stop crying, but you

also can become hopeless about getting what you need. I think that happened to me.

4. A baby is not crying on purpose. When he cries, he's not doing it on purpose. It is the way babies communicate. He's not pulling my hair or biting me on purpose, either. He doesn't speak or understand English yet [at nine months]. It's all a big experiment for him. He can't talk.

After this conversation, it struck me that there is confusion about fatherhood, too. Bringing home the bacon is good providing. It is not good parenting. Paying attention and interacting positively with your kid is good parenting. Criticizing is not.

People may have been provided for and their mothers may have been good housewives, yet they may not have received any good parenting at all!

Nam Vet: Making Peace With Your Past

Revised and expanded.

Chuck Dean

I expected to hate this book and wound up really liking it. I expected to have religion shoved down my throat and to be given a bunch of Bible thumping, simplistic answers to difficult problems, and that didn't happen either. Nor does Mr. Dean sanitize Vietnam the way other born-again Christians sometimes do, implying that the war was fought without any problems except those made up by left-wing media types. I like his attitude. Under "stresses typical for all wars" he lists 12 including "command incompetence" which made me laugh. He lists 14 more stresses particular to Vietnam.

Chapters 4 through 10 cover PTSD in detail starting with "The Price Still Being Paid" and covering numbness, nightmares, survival guilt, rage, PTSD and the family, and self-medication. Each chapter has good suggestions for steps a vet can take to get better.

There's a chapter on his own story, and then a chapter on Point Man Ministries and a final chapter called "Triggers, Tripwires, and Booby Traps" in which he describes becoming a casualty of the Gulf War, as so many did. Warning signs and further steps toward recovery that a veteran can take are included.

If you are having problems, he recommends keeping a Trigger Chart for a month. It should have six columns: date, event, trigger, response, recall and mind. Here are the directions, quoted from the book, (p. 161-2):

1. Date—record the date the trigger was activated.
2. Event—Record the event in which the trigger was pulled, such as “I was alone in the dark; I was in Chinatown; it was a rainy night,” etc.
3. Trigger—Record the actual trigger such as “A helicopter flew over; fireworks suddenly went off nearby,” etc.
4. Response—Record your immediate response to the trigger, such as “Fast action into combat mode to survive the threat, fear, anger, surging blood pressure, crying, urge to run away,” etc.
5. Memory Recall—Try to recall the original traumatic event with as many details as possible. These events can be feelings, emotions and decisions that occurred during the high stress of an impacting incident. An example could be remembering what you did under enemy fire.
6. Self-Triggered—Record a check mark in the “mind” column if you triggered yourself with imagined or assumed threats to survival of self and others, as opposed to having your environment trigger you. Throughout the process, be sure to pay close attention to repeated triggers. It’s the repeated triggers that you need to deal with first.

I think the trigger chart would be a valuable tool for the survivor of any kind of trauma. The epilogue is particularly helpful and healing.

Living Well with a Hidden Disability

Stacy Taylor, MSW and Robert Epstein, Ph. D.

I read this book with growing appreciation, even though it was mostly written for people with hidden physical disabilities. The authors disagree with the idea that physical illness is based in childhood trauma. So do I, but I also know people for whom the first indication they had suffered childhood trauma was physical pain or illness. The authors’ thinking is based on the experience of having physical problems dismissed as psychological.

The book is a good resource for people with PTSD (which qualifies as a hidden disability). Most of the self-tests and other suggested activities would be helpful to someone who is struggling with PTSD.

Part I, *The Experience of Living with a Hidden Disability*, has chapters on grief and other difficult emotions. Are you sad, angry or guilty that you have PTSD? This book will help.

There are chapters on Love and Sex which contains an excellent analysis of what makes or breaks a relationship when a disability arises, as PTSD has for many (the “post” in PTSD: it comes up later when you least expect it and usually when you are under a lot of other stress). There is a useful self test. The authors suggest that your answers give you guidelines for improving the relationship. That kind of positive attitude pervades the book. Other chapters on parenting, dealing with others, and work and finances, are full of good exercises and gentle suggestions to help you deal with these parts of life.

Part II, *Surviving and Thriving: Tools for Healthy Living*, starts with *Rebuilding Self-Esteem* which is worth the price of the book to anyone with PTSD. So is chapter nine on *Strengthening Your Body and Spirit*. These cover issues that are very important to people with PTSD. There are chapters on pain, on *Navigating the Health Care System*, and on finding helpful psychotherapy. They repeat that childhood trauma does not cause all illness, which I agree with. I wish they had more thoroughly explored the possibility that trauma and illness are sometimes connected, but that is a small flaw compared to the number of useful suggestions in this book.

I think what I like about it most is that it is focused on finding out what you are like and what you need to live a good life, despite the problems in your life. It encourages you to be yourself and to accept yourself and to believe in the possibility of growth and change. All of those are important to trauma survivors who sometimes have a hard time with self-acceptance.

Four appendices, *Advice for Loved Ones*, *Advice for Psychotherapists*, *Recommended Reading*, and *Organizations and Catalogues*, add more helpful information.