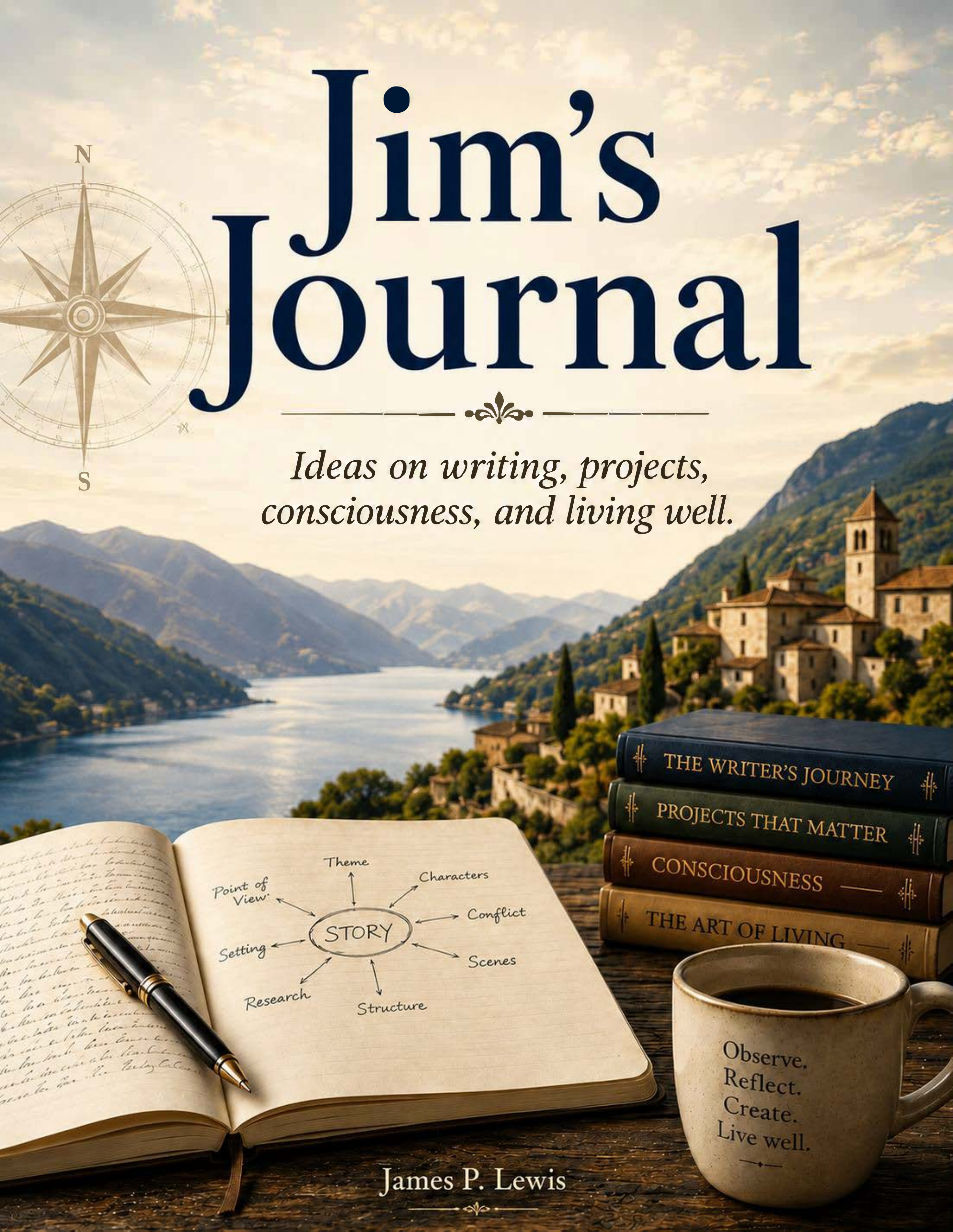
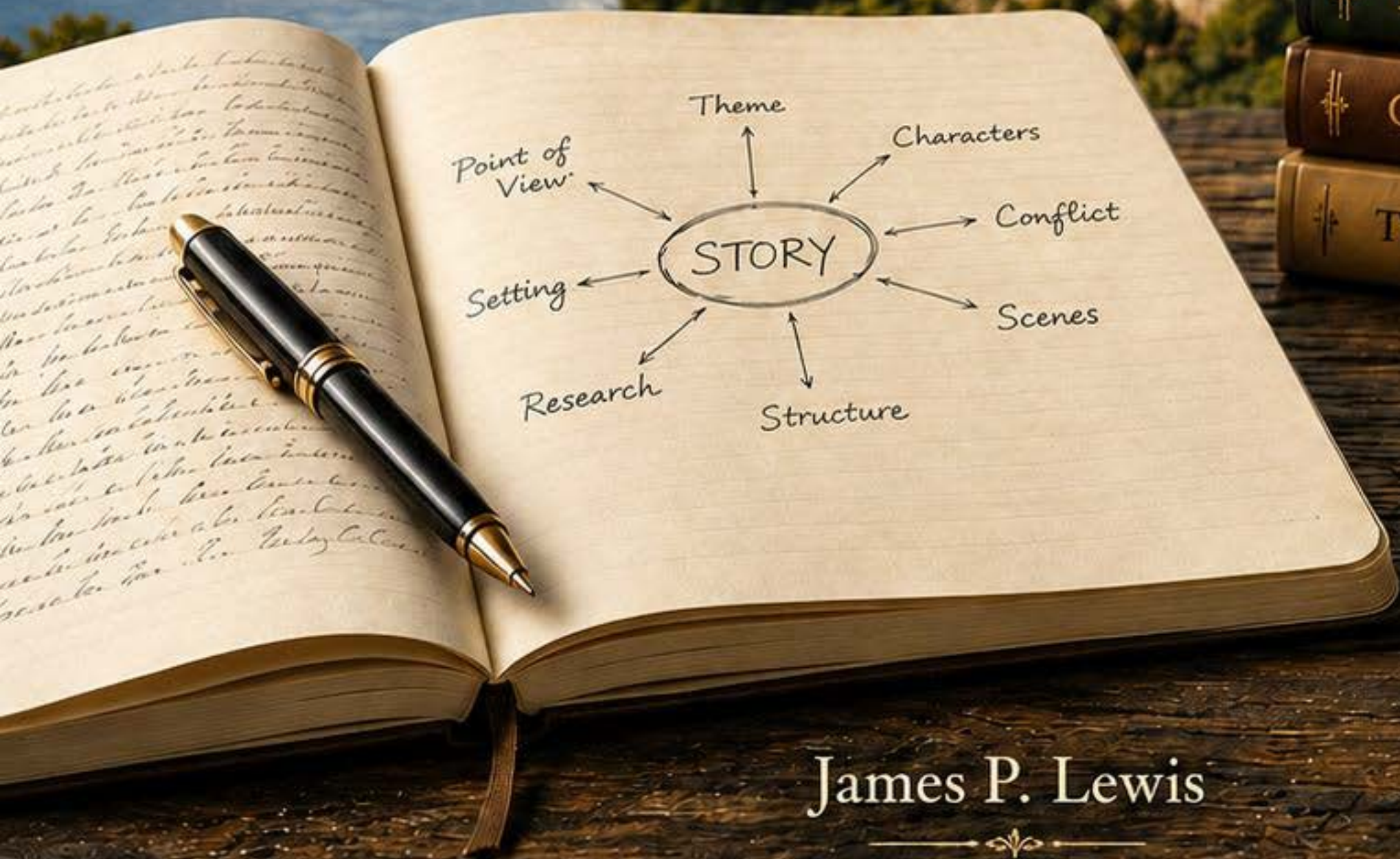




Jim's Journal

*Ideas on writing, projects,
consciousness, and living well.*



James P. Lewis

Welcome to Jim's Journal

I want this to be a sort of magazine containing ideas, how-to, and reflections from my 8 decades that may be of value to readers of all backgrounds. I intend to publish two issues monthly, on the first and third Friday of the month. However, I may deviate from this because I don't like being bound by rigid schedules now that I have been retired since 2017. I'm offering it at no-cost, and I hope you will consider it a gift. If you have questions, comments, or ideas to share, you can contact me at my website (URL below)

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Ideas That Germinate

Ideas are funny things. Some arrive with trumpets and fireworks, but most do not. Most begin quietly, almost casually, as an interest, a question, or a small tug of curiosity. At the time, you may not know that the idea is going anywhere. You simply follow it because it interests you.

When I was fourteen, I became interested in electronics. I did not sit down and make a life plan. I did not say, "This will become my career." I was simply fascinated by it. The more I learned, the more interested I became, and before long that interest led me into radio communication. That, in turn, led me to become a ham radio operator.

One thing led naturally to another. The boy interested in electronics became the young man interested in communication systems, and that eventually led to a career as an electrical engineer.

That is how many useful ideas work. They germinate. They begin as a seed, and if you keep giving them attention, they put down roots. Then one day you look back and realize that what seemed like a hobby, a curiosity, or a passing interest has become a direction.

But ideas do not always remain fixed in one form. After years in engineering, I became bored with it. That boredom was not a failure. It was information. Something in me was ready to move on. The same impulse that had once pulled me toward electronics now pulled me toward another profession: teaching seminars.

That became a new career, and a very different one. Engineering dealt with systems, circuits, and communication in the technical sense. Seminars dealt with people, ideas, behavior, leadership, and communication in the human sense. Looking back, the shift was not as strange as it might appear. It was still about communication. It was still about making things work. Only the medium had changed.

The same thing can happen in writing. A book, or even a series of books, may begin with one simple idea.

For my *Crucible* series, the seed idea was that an ancient document existed, and that it contained hidden knowledge. That knowledge was valuable enough to be desired by good people and dangerous enough to be pursued by bad people. That was the seed. From that one idea came conflict, mystery, characters, danger, discovery, and eventually a three-volume series.

That is one of the pleasures of writing fiction. You do not always need the whole story at the beginning. Sometimes you only need the right central idea. If the idea has life in it, it begins attracting other pieces to itself. Characters appear. Questions arise. Settings suggest themselves. Trouble walks in the door, usually without knocking. Before long, what began as a single thought has become a world.

Travel can begin the same way.

A year or two ago, I decided that because I probably would not be traveling too much anymore, I wanted to spend a month in Europe. That was the first idea. Then came the question: where will I go?

I had long been interested in the island of Iona, so I decided to go there. I also wanted to stay at a monastery, which led me to San Giuseppe in Assisi. And because I had written about Lanjarón in another series of my books, I wanted to see it firsthand. So I did.

That journey began as an idea, then became a question, then became an itinerary, and finally became lived experience. Iona was no longer only a place I had thought about. Assisi was no longer only a name. Lanjarón was no longer only a setting in fiction. I had been there.

So these are three different ways ideas have worked in my life. One became a career. One became a series of novels. One became a month of travel through places that mattered to me.

This is why I pay attention to ideas. A real idea is not merely something to think about. It may be a doorway. It may be the beginning of a career, a book, a journey, or a complete change of direction.

The trick is not to force every idea into importance. Most ideas are not life-changing, and thank God for that. We would all collapse under the weight of our own brilliance. But some ideas have energy in them. They return. They keep whispering. They invite exploration.

When that happens, it is worth following the trail.

Writing as Discovery

My fiction does not usually begin with a detailed outline. It begins with an idea.

That may sound careless to people who believe a novel should be engineered before it is written, but that is not how fiction works for me. I am closer to the way Diana Gabaldon has described her process. I begin with something that interests me — a character, a situation, a place, a mystery, a conflict — and then I start writing to find out what it means.

I may have a crude outline. I may know that certain things probably need to happen. I may even have a general sense of where the story is going. But I do not chain myself to the original plan. If the story begins moving in a better direction, I follow it. If a character refuses to behave the way I expected, I pay attention. If a scene opens a door I did not know was there, I walk through it.

That is one of the great pleasures of writing fiction. You are not merely reporting a story that already exists in finished form. You are discovering it.

This does not mean anything goes. A novel still needs structure, movement, tension, conflict, and resolution. Readers deserve a story that carries them somewhere. But the discovery often happens during the writing, not before it. The first version of the idea is only the spark. The real story emerges as the work develops.

Sometimes a character who was supposed to be minor becomes important. Sometimes a setting becomes more than a backdrop. Sometimes the emotional center of the book turns out to be different from what I first thought. That is not a mistake. That is the book coming alive.

A rigid outline can be useful, but it can also become a jail cell. If I insist too early that the story must follow the plan, I may miss the better story trying to appear. So I prefer to keep the process flexible. I want enough direction to keep moving, but not so much structure that the story cannot surprise me.

Nonfiction is different, especially technical nonfiction. My project management books require more discipline. A book on project planning, scheduling, and control cannot simply wander around admiring the scenery. The reader expects organization, clarity, and practical usefulness. The chapters have to build logically. The concepts have to be explained in the right order. Definitions matter. Sequence matters. Accuracy matters.

So yes, nonfiction of that kind needs a tighter outline.

But even there, I have never believed that nonfiction has to be dull. In fact, one of the mistakes many nonfiction writers make is thinking that information alone is enough. It is not. Information matters, but the way it is presented matters too. A reader is still a human being. He or she still responds to story, example, surprise, humor, conflict, and recognition.

That is why I like to use fiction techniques in nonfiction.

In the first five editions of my book *Project Planning, Scheduling, and Control*, I began with a little story about the pharaoh. He had just had his 109th child, and the unfortunate fellow out in the desert building tombs for the pharaoh's children received the news. His reaction was essentially, "Oh my God, another tomb has to be prepared."

That, of course, is scope creep.

The example worked because it made the concept memorable. Instead of beginning with a dry definition, I gave readers a situation. They could see the poor man in the desert. They could feel his exasperation. They understood immediately that the work had expanded beyond what had originally been expected. Nobody needed a committee meeting to explain it.

That is what story does. It gives an idea a body.

A technical concept can remain abstract until it is placed in a human situation. Then it becomes visible. Scope creep is not just a term. It is the moment when someone says, “We need one more feature,” “Add one more report,” “Include one more department,” or, in the pharaoh’s case, “Build one more tomb.” The setting may be ancient Egypt, but the problem is still sitting in conference rooms today, wearing a better suit.

Readers enjoyed that kind of opening because it gave them a reason to keep reading. It also signaled that the book would not be just another dry technical manual. Yes, the subject was serious. Yes, the methods mattered. But serious does not have to mean lifeless.

The same principle applies to fiction from the other direction. Fiction may be invented, but it is rarely detached from the writer’s life. A great deal of fiction is autobiographical, even when the plot never happened. Most writers know this. They may create imaginary characters, imaginary towns, imaginary crimes, imaginary love affairs, imaginary journeys, and imaginary dangers, but somewhere inside all of that is the writer’s own experience.

Not necessarily the literal facts. The emotional truth.

A writer may invent a warrior, a scholar, a detective, a widow, a wanderer, or a man searching for a lost document, but the feelings often come from the writer’s own life. Loss, longing, ambition, fear, regret, hope, humor, stubbornness, tenderness — these do not come from nowhere. They come from having lived.

That is why writing becomes discovery in more than one sense. You discover the story, but you also discover yourself. You find out what themes keep returning. You find out what kinds of people fascinate you. You find out what wounds, questions, memories, and convictions keep sneaking onto the page wearing false mustaches.

The page is a sly old devil that way.

So whether I am writing fiction or nonfiction, I am usually following something. In fiction, I follow the story as it reveals itself. In nonfiction, I follow the clearest and most useful way to make an idea come alive. In both cases, the writing teaches me something.

That is why I think of writing as discovery. You begin with an idea. You give it attention. You write a sentence, then another. Before long, the idea begins answering back.

The Practical Side of Consciousness

When people hear the word *consciousness*, they sometimes think it belongs only in a meditation room, a philosophy book, or a spiritual discussion. I do not see it that way. Consciousness is practical. It affects what we notice, how we interpret events, what choices we make, and what possibilities seem available to us.

A person who believes he is trapped will not see the same options as a person who believes he is free to choose. The facts in front of them may be identical, but the experience will not be. One sees walls. The other sees doors.

That is the practical side of consciousness.

I have seen this many times in my own life. When I was young and interested in electronics, I saw radios, circuits, and communication systems as fascinating. Another person might have looked at the same things and seen nothing but wires, knobs, tubes, and technical manuals. My interest made those things visible to me in a special way. Consciousness selected the world I was living in.

Later, when I became bored with engineering, I could have interpreted that boredom as failure or restlessness. Instead, it became a signal that I was ready for another direction. That change in interpretation mattered. If I had seen boredom only as a problem, I might have stayed stuck in work that no longer fit me. By seeing it as information, I was able to move into teaching seminars, which became a major part of my life.

The outer fact was simple: I was bored.

The inner meaning made all the difference.

This is also true in writing. A blank page can look like an enemy or an invitation. If I sit down thinking, "I have nothing to say," the page becomes a wall. If I sit down thinking, "Let's see what shows up," the page becomes a doorway. Same page. Same keyboard. Same chair. Completely different experience.

That does not mean every sentence will be brilliant. Usually it will not be. First drafts are often clumsy little beasts, wandering around with one shoe missing. But if the state of consciousness is open, playful, and attentive, the work can begin. The writer does not have to know everything in advance. He only has to begin.

Project management offers another example. Two project managers may face the same change request. One reacts with panic: "This ruins everything." The other asks, "What exactly changes, and what do we need to adjust?" The second response does not deny the problem. It simply begins from a different state. Panic narrows the field. Clarity widens it.

This is not mystical in some vague, floating-in-the-clouds sense. It is immediate and observable. Consciousness determines the frame. The frame determines what we see. What we see influences what we do. What we do affects what happens next.

A conversation works the same way. If I enter a conversation expecting hostility, I will hear hostility quickly, even where none may have been intended. If I enter expecting intelligence and goodwill, I am more likely to hear the person accurately. Again, this does not mean being naïve. It means noticing that my state affects my perception.

Travel provides another example. On a trip, one person sees inconvenience everywhere: delayed trains, unfamiliar food, odd hotel rooms, confusing streets. Another person sees

adventure, texture, humor, and discovery. Same trip. Different world. The world being experienced is shaped by the consciousness through which it is viewed.

That is why inner position matters before outer action. If I begin from fear, resentment, or defeat, my actions will carry that quality. If I begin from curiosity, confidence, and openness, my actions will carry that instead.

The practical question is not, “How do I control everything outside me?” That is exhausting and mostly impossible. The better question is, “What am I assuming as I meet this?”

Because the assumption is already shaping the experience.

Consciousness is not an ornament added to practical life. It is the ground from which practical life is lived. It is present in careers, books, projects, conversations, travel, relationships, and decisions. Change the state, and the same situation may reveal an entirely different set of possibilities.

Closing Note

I hope you have enjoyed this first issue of *Jim’s Journal*, and I hope you found an idea or two worth carrying with you.

That is really the purpose of this little publication: not to hand down final answers from the mountaintop, but to offer useful ideas, examples, reflections, and the occasional hard-earned observation from a long and varied life. If something here caused you to think, remember, question, smile, or look at your own experience a little differently, then this issue has done its job.

If you would like to comment on anything you have read here, ask a question, or share an idea of your own, you can contact me through the contact page on my website: DrJimLewis.com. The full URL is listed on the copyright page.

Thank you for reading.

Until next time,

Jim