

Journaling as a Spiritual Discipline

Ann Broyles, in her book, *Journaling*, in reflecting on what she was led to take with her in the face of a threatening wildfire says: "... at the top of our list are the boxes of journals that my husband, daughter, son, and I have each kept for most of our conscious lives. My own box contains books with outdated covers ... spiral class assignment notebooks, and the wide variety of hardcover journals that I have filled over the years with my thoughts, feelings, and details of my everyday life. As I load these journals into our van, I think, 'This is my life in a box.' Those journals tell more about me than any written history or autobiography could possibly include. From my earliest childish scrawls ... through my teenage soul-seeking to my adult searching in-depth as I became woman, wife, mother, writer, this odd collection of books show how, through my keeping a journal, I have discovered myself in all my various ages and stages. Journaling is about discovery... There is a difference between a diary and a journal. A diary is a record of daily events in one's own life. The journal may take as its starting point the same events as a diary, but in journaling, one looks inward to see how one is affected by the events [and God's loving redeeming hand at work]" (pgs. 9-10).

All of us carry on inner conversations as we sort through our feelings and convictions concerning daily living, our relationships, and world events. We talk to God about our experience of life all the time. This conversation may, at times be unconscious. At times it may bubble up to the surface in very surprising ways. But, whether we are conscious of it or not, the Scriptures and witness of the saints confirm the existence of this divine-human interchange. "Journaling" is the incorporation of writing as part of that conversation so we may gain perspective on not only the events of our lives but the nature of our inner convictions regarding them. Journaling, therefore, provides us with a means of reflection. But reflection is, in and of itself, not enough. It must spur us on to something deeper. It is this deeper experience of the love of God that prompted many of the great figures of Christian history to be dedicated journalers.

Christians through the centuries have written spiritual autobiographies, personal diaries and journals. Some are available to us while the contents of others are known to God alone. Some were written to be read. Others were so personal and confidential that they were ordered burned at the author's death. Some classic autobiographies are: Augustine's *Confessions*; Teresa of Avila's *Life*; George Fox's *Journal*; Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Dag Hammarskjöld's *Markings*; and Henri Nouwen's *Genesee Diary* and *The Road to Daybreak*. The personal reflections of some of the great missionaries can also be accessed and read. It is worthwhile to mention here that we are not in competition with others. Our journal is ours. We may draw diagrams, jot down words or phrases and connect them with arrows. It does not need or should it be subjected to the standard of grammar, spelling, margins, paragraphs structure, etc. This will only serve to discourage most of us and prevent us from experiencing the blessing of it.

In the time devoted to journaling we have the time and space to open ourselves to God's love drawing on a wonderful aspect of our human make up – writing. In journaling we have the opportunity to share our true selves without reservation. As we do so, we

experience the freedom of being accepted and loved “right where we are” with the promise of transformation or discernment or strength to meet the challenge we have articulated. Broyles says, “Journal writing is a sharing between our true selves and the God of Truth. In journaling, we come to know ourselves as we really are and feel the acceptance of the One who lives us no matter what. Journaling becomes spiritual discipline when we use pen and paper to strengthen our faith in God... Journaling can be a significant tool in deepening our spiritual lives because by its nature it leads us to further revelation of who we are and who God is in our lives” (pg. 11). We need not consider our words carefully or wonder what other people might think of our thoughts. What is written is between God and us. Even if you are totally inexperienced in this discipline, you may find it becoming second nature in short order. Your thoughts may start to pour out more naturally as you “give voice” to the deep things within your heart through writing.

One of the most helpful characteristics of the journal is the record it provides of our spiritual questions and realizations over time. Reviewing them, we may start to recognize larger patterns – the landscape of our pilgrimage of faith. We will begin to gain insight on how and where we have grown and still struggle. We will also begin to see how we most deeply experience God’s love in our life and draw on that insight to experience His love more and more.

There are many different approaches to journaling. You may want to experiment with a variety of methods to see which offers the depth and understanding of yourself; your relationship with God; and experience of His love you desire. The journaling may take the form of paraphrasing portions of Scripture such as the Psalms; a prayer notebook to record the insights, questions, and convictions arising from times of prayer; space to record and reflect on dreams; and/or a way to struggle through certain life issues of vocation, sexuality, relationship, illness, death, birth, and the life. All you need is a blank book or notebook paper, a pen or pencil, a desire to open yourself to God in writing; and an openness to being overtaken by Divine Love.

Most people find a regular discipline of journaling easiest if they choose a specific portion of the day to spend with the journal. Perhaps you will journal in the quiet of early morning. You may find that journaling just before bedtime in conjunction with a spiritual examen is most helpful. If you wake in the middle of the night and find it hard to go back to sleep, journaling might be most fruitful at that time. It is amazing how different dimensions of our spiritual, emotional, and intellectual makeup can be accessed at different times of the day. Some find that the commute on the bus or “tube” is the best time to enter into the depths of loving understanding because they are in the midst of the rawness of humanity when taking public transit.

Instructions for Journaling

Prepare yourself

- Find a time and a place to journal.

- Take a few moments to relax and prepare yourself for the Holy Spirit of comfort and wisdom to work within you.
- Close your eyes and use your spiritual eyes to look inward.
- Breathe deeply.
- Pray that the time may be fruitful and that you may know God more fully.
- Use the suggestions found in the Lectio Divina exercise for information on how to deal with distractions.

Topics to use as the focus of your journaling

- Write your own Psalm:
 - The Psalms are a great resource for dealing with feelings and convictions connected with important events in our lives. If you have held on to negative feelings of grief, anger, betrayal, a desire for revenge believing it would be dangerous to express them to God, try writing your own prayer to God in the form of a Psalm.
 - Macrina Wiederkehr, in her beautifully helpful book, *Behold Your Life: A Pilgrimage through Your Memories*, points out something that I believe is very important as we journal regarding our most intense feelings using the Psalms as our vehicle:
 - “The ambiguities of life often come in the shape of a cross... I have always been tempted to turn away from the cross, for it speaks of contradictions and paradoxes in my life. It speaks of things I do not understand while I long for clarity; yet the way of the pilgrim is never crystal clear. The cross is the banner carried by many pilgrims. The other side of the cross points toward resurrection. With that in mind, embracing the cross can lead to life... In order to experience healing it is imperative that we find the courage to look upon our wounds and integrate them into our lives. Sometimes we suffer from the decision to remain a victim. It is so easy, and at times feels so right, to spend our lives blaming. We can wallow in self-pity and choose to live embittered lives because of the wrongs done to us. That is certainly a choice we are free to make. But there is another way. In this other way we compassionately befriend our wounds. Only then can we embrace our lives and look at our wounds without judgment... Perhaps, then, as you ponder the areas in your life where healing is needed, you, too, can bring the ointment of faith to your wounds. You are a co-healer with Jesus... Not matter what the trauma of your past might be, you have the choice to pick up your life and continue. The challenge is to find the joy and strength that live amid the scars of life. You have been given the grace to assist God in bringing about the spiritual and emotional health needed to live a rich and joyful life.” (pgs. 12-13)

- This is the spirit in which I suggest you enter into journaling the Psalms using negative feelings and convictions associated with a traumatic event.
 - Select a Psalm from the thematic list found in your folder. Of especial attention might be Psalms 13, 22, 42, 77, 88, 94, and 139.
 - Ask God to help you accept the reality of your feelings and convictions and His love for you even though you possess them.
 - Get acquainted with the Psalm. Read it through several times. Focus especially on the verses that best express your attitudes. Lay aside the Psalm and begin to write your own. Let it emerge from your concrete experience, your feelings, AND your faith in God. Be as honest as you can in terms of your own feelings as well as what you know intuitively about God and His love.
 - Give space to what you want to have happen in your concrete circumstances and to your feelings in the context of your faith. If you want your feelings and attitudes to change, express it with at least as much intensity as you expressed your negative feelings. Include the change of heart as well.
 - Some Psalms are long and some are short. Some are complex and have a repeating form that progresses through a series of feelings and some focus on one feeling or conviction over and over using different words. Let the Psalm take the form it needs to take. It will begin to “take on a life of its own”.
 - The goal is to allow the Holy Spirit to use the time of journaling to bring together in a redemptive and revelatory way His love and your need articulated from the depths of your heart.
- Paraphrase a Psalm:
 - A related exercise similar to writing your own Psalm.
 - The approach to a paraphrase is to allow the Holy Spirit to use the Psalm to express and heal the brokenness with which you identify in the Psalm. As a result, you have the opportunity to experience the depths of the love of God.
 - Use the Psalm structure and primary feelings and convictions of brokenness and faith it uses. Put the Psalm in your own words and your own experience.
 - Let the Holy Spirit use the Psalm and the process of paraphrasing to lead you and bless you.
- Journaling an Event from Your Daily Life:
 - Think through the most pressing or puzzling or joyful circumstances in your life at this time. If you have trouble identifying an event or circumstance try completing one or more of the following sentences:
 - My life is ...
 - I am ...
 - To me, God is ...

- My need for God is most apparent to me when ...
 - I sense God's presence most when ...
 - I have never forgiven myself for ...
 - If I could change one thing from my past that still has a negative influence on me it would be ...
 - After you have identified a circumstance, ask yourself the following questions:
 - What are the facts of this circumstance as I understand them?
 - How do I feel about those facts and the direction they point: the dilemma they present or the newness of life or challenge to trust God in new ways they represent?
 - If I were to step outside myself and look at myself – my behaviors and convictions – what would I see and tell myself?
 - Where in this circumstance do I sense or see the hand of God at work?
 - What do I believe God is trying to say?
 - Even though this circumstance seems to center on me, does it really? Am I REALLY the most important character in the circumstance?
 - Is God using my circumstance to pour out His love to another?
 - If I cannot sense God's hand work or His voice or His love, what are the hindrances to it? What stands in the way?
- Journaling in Response to a Scriptural Passage
 - Use the Biblical reflection by N.T. Wright based on 2 Corinthians 2.14-17, contained in your retreat folder.
 - Use the reflection "Day 11", from *Behold Your Life: A Pilgrimage through Your Memories*, by Macrina Wiederkehr in your retreat folder.
 - Use one of the six Scriptural reflection exercises in Ann Broyles' book, *Journaling*, pgs. 40-45.
- Journaling Using a Guided Meditation
 - Use the guided meditation entitled "The Center", by Anthony de Mello contained in your retreat folder.
 - Use one of the seven Guided Meditation exercises in Ann Broyles' book, *Journaling*, pgs. 61-75

Sources quoted and adapted in the composition of this material:

Journal: A Companion for Your Quiet Time, Upper Room Books

Journaling: A Spiritual Journey, by Anne Broyles, Upper Room Books

Soul Feast, by Marjorie Thompson

Reflecting the Glory, by, N.T. Wright

Behold Your Life: A Pilgrimage through Your Life, by Macrina Wiederkehr

Wellsprings: A Book of Spiritual Exercises, by Anthony de Mello