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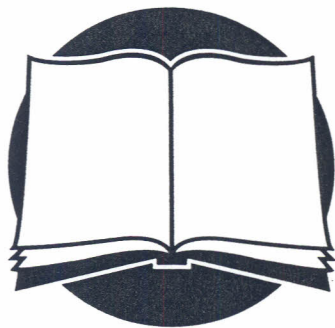


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Journaling As a Spiritual Discipline

Jim Martin

In her book *Gift from the Sea*, Anne Morrow Lindbergh writes, I begin these pages for myself, in order to think out my own particular pattern of living, my own individual balance of life, work, and human relationships. And since I think best with a pencil in my hand, I started to write . . .”¹ She describes well the spiritual discipline of journaling. Many Christians have found journaling to be extremely important to spiritual growth and development. For a number of years I have kept a daily journal. This practice has become one of the most significant disciplines in my ongoing spiritual development. Before discussing the benefits of journaling, it might be helpful to clarify the discipline.

I. What is journaling?

Journaling is not the mere recording of facts about the day’s events. It is more than keeping a log or diary. Rather, journaling involves reflection and contemplation. In some quarters journaling has become popular because of the human potential movement which spawned such efforts as Ira Progoff’s Intensive Journaling Workshops. Progoff was a New York psychotherapist who had studied under Freud’s former colleague, C.G. Jung. He concluded that old methods of individual psychotherapy were not adequate and began working with groups. He asked each participant to keep a journal and discovered that the participants were far more honest in their journals than in what they articulated in therapy. Consequently he began to experiment, using the journal as a way to probe the inner life.²

Journaling as a spiritual discipline involves the contemplation of life in light of the spiritual center.

For Christians, that spiritual center is probably best expressed in that ancient and profound creedal statement, “Jesus is Lord.” Perhaps someone has just returned from the hospital, having visited her father after a heart attack. Later, that same person might reflect through journaling upon her own mortality, fear of death, and hope of a life beyond death. For another, the day at work might have once again been stressful. That person might reflect in a journal upon the place of Jesus Christ in a tension-filled work environment in which the values being expressed are so unlike those of the Teacher. To live with Christ as the spiritual center suggests not that life is fragmented but that all of life is ruled by the teaching and values of the one at the center.

Morton Kelsey has observed that if one were invited to the White House or Buckingham Palace, it would seem very natural to write out a record of the visit. Perhaps few of us will ever have such an experience. We have, however, been invited into the presence of the holy, majestic God who seeks relationship with us. Kelsey suggests that not to record some of our experiences with God is to devalue those experiences.³ Perhaps one might argue that such a conclusion is an overstatement. Nevertheless, his observation that journaling is extremely important to the growth and development of a Christ-follower is valid.

The discipline of journaling is certainly not a new insight or development. The Puritans argued that just as the captain of a ship keeps a log, or the doctors record their case studies, or a business person audits the business, so a believer should keep daily short accounts with God.⁴ One inspirational journal in

Christian literature is *The Journal of John Wesley*. One of Wesley's most memorable entries is dated Tuesday, January 24, 1738. He was aboard a small ship returning to England in the midst of a terrible storm. Afraid that he would die, he wrote the following:

I went to America, to convert the Indians; but oh! who shall convert me? Who, what is he that will deliver me from this evil heart of unbelief? I have a fair summer religion. I can talk well; nay and believe myself, while no danger is near: but let death look me in the face, and my spirit is troubled.⁵

Other notable published journals include John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, the *Diary of Anne Frank*, *The Journal of John Woolman*, and Dag Hammarskjöld's *Murkings*. Hammarskjöld was born in Sweden in 1905, served two terms as Secretary-General of the United Nations. Upon his sudden death in a plane crash, an undated note was found, along with his journal. In the note he refers to the journal entries "as a sort of white book concerning my negotiations with myself — and with God."

These journals record the successes and failures, the prayers, the depression, and the lives of human beings who were serious about living under the will of God.

II. How Can Keeping a Journal Help Me Practically?

In addition to the value of recording one's life lived under the will of God, several practical aids for living that life are realized through keeping a journal. First, journaling can enable one both to remember and to clarify thoughts, feelings, and ideas. Kierkegaard spoke of the value of memory in dealing with his own evasions when he said:

And so when in a quiet hour, memory visits him (and already at this point how different it is from that visit when memory threateningly knocks at the door of the double minded man!), then it says to him, "Do you remember that time, that time when the good resolution conquered within you?" And he answers, "Yes, dear one! but then memory continues (and between lovers memory is so dear that they almost prefer to the sight of each other the whisper of memory when they say, "Can you remember that time?" and "Can you remember that time?"), memory continues . . .⁶

How many times have you had a keen insight or a significant thought and then it occurred to you, "I really need to write that down"? However, the idea,

Keeping a journal helps one to see patterns of behavior of which one may not be aware.

the feeling, the thought was never written and has since been long forgotten. Such ideas and impressions may forever be lost. On numerous occasions, I have been keenly aware of some of my deepest concerns and longings only after first recording them in my journal. On other occasions, I have had a seed idea which later developed and matured as a result of having first written the idea in a journal.

Second, keeping a journal helps one to see patterns of behavior of which one may not be aware. Gordon MacDonald wrote concerning his practice of journaling:

At first it was difficult. I felt self-conscious. I was worried that I would lose the journal or that someone might peek inside to see what I'd said. But slowly the self-consciousness began to fade, and I found myself sharing in the journal more and more of the thoughts that flooded my inner spirit. Into the journal went words describing my feelings, my fear and sense of weakness, my hopes, and my discoveries about where Christ was leading me. When I felt empty or defeated, I talked about that too in the journal. Slowly I began to realize that the journal was helping me come to grips with an enormous part of my inner person that I had never been fully honest about. No longer could fears and struggles remain inside without definition. They were surfaced and confronted . . .⁷

As Jesus observed, people sometimes seem quite competent as speck inspectors but neglect the logs in their own eyes (Matthew 7:3-5). Keeping a journal and then reading it journal can enable one to see the "logs" of behavior which need attention. Are there recurring themes of anger, rationalization, and

negative, destructive thought patterns? The purpose of discovering such a pattern is not simply self-exploration but the intersection of our lives with God's redemptive work in our world. Perhaps there are entries which reflect that you are offended and angry very regularly. As you read through the entries ask yourself how a total stranger might perceive you upon reading the same entries. Would you be perceived as a negative, critical person? Why? Is the language used violent and caustic? Asking such questions can help you to discover your tendencies and disposition. On Tuesday, August 2, 1988, while on a plane flying back from preaching in Grenada, I wrote:

Pride keeps me from receiving the ministry of others. Pride often keeps me from listening to others. Pride keeps me from loving people. Pride keeps me from being human and it keeps me from being honest. Finally, pride keeps me from flowing to people.

Some months later (October 23, 1988), I addressed again the issue of pride:

Dear Father,

As the weekend approaches, I find myself becoming anxious . . . yet, I do not want to panic and throw the whole week into a tailspin as I am so prone to do. Create in me a clean and pure heart. Help me to be a faithful father, husband, and child of yours . . . keep me from trying to impress people with my importance or busyness. Help me to build and nurture those around me. May I always stay near to you my Father and my Lord Jesus.

The Puritans developed a form of self-examination by keeping spiritual journals. Their discipline was rigorous as they wrote about the events in both their interior and exterior worlds. They also recorded those moments when God's presence and power seemed more vivid and real.⁸ This is especially important when encouragement is desperately needed. There are days when the dark clouds of depression and despair threaten to rain hopelessness all over our lives. On those days when God seems to be removed from life, remembering those days when he worked mightily in our lives can be very reassuring.

Third, journaling gives the opportunity to reflect upon the day and week in light of our faith. Unfortunately, too many days and weeks are lived without reflection and thought. Consequently, there may not

be a real awareness of how faith is or is not being integrated into daily life. Too often there is no sense of rhythm to life. So often weeks and months pass and there is no serious contemplation as to where we are in our spiritual journeys. How can we have any sense of where we are if there is no inventory of our lives? Keeping a journal allows a built-in time to review and examine the days and weeks in light of one's faith in Jesus. Adults need to build rhythm regarding time into their lives. There is tremendous value in reflecting upon the meaning or significance of the previous week or month. At the end of the calendar year, a person can reflect upon the significance of that year.

Fourth, keeping a journal may give important insight about the state of one's spiritual journey. Reading journal entries from several years back can give insight into the past, the present, and the future. Twenty-one years ago (December 24, 1973) at age nineteen, during an agonizing "dark night of the soul," I wrote four pages of reflections on my early years. To this day these four pages continue to be significant to my self-awareness. Perhaps it is much like taking a trip on an unfamiliar highway in the middle of the night and then retracing the journey during the day. One can see the previously traveled route and become aware of what could not be seen before.

Kelsey records the words of one journalist who is described as a gifted psychologist, author, and counselor:

My journal is a friend. Through it I have made discoveries which have enriched me and have enriched my relationships. It is important to see the journal in context, however, for the journal is one part of a larger life. Just as my journal has affected my life so too have life experiences confirmed and enhanced my inner discoveries and pointed to new areas for exploration and consideration. My journal "works" best when it is part of my whole life, when it is "in synch" with my outer relationships, work and spiritual life. Sometimes I have used it to escape these outer facts or painful inner realities and have been rewarded in kind. But the fact of using it for an escape is then recorded and even in those times I can more adequately work through my fears and problems. Keeping a journal has helped me become more conscious of who I am and of God's relationship with me. I have found that when I ignore it for a day or two that I begin to

feel sick. I understand this to mean that by not writing I am cutting myself off from one of my primary connections with God and myself. My journal is a record and an ongoing part of my journey.⁹

III. How Does One Keep a Journal?

Having a definite time each day for writing in the journal is helpful because for many people, journaling requires discipline. For me, that time is early in the morning before anyone else in my family awakens. With a cup of coffee, an open Bible or a thought-provoking book, and my journal, I am ready to begin the day.

I use a college-ruled, spiral-bound notebook. At the beginning of each notebook, I write my personal mission statement. I began doing this several years ago because it caused me to do serious reflection on what I was about as a human being. This mission statement was first hammered out after reflecting on Scripture, the affirmation received by others, and my perceived strengths and gifts. Rewriting this statement at the beginning of each notebook causes me to reflect upon my commitment to the stated purpose. Having the statement at the beginning of the book suggests that the entries in some way reflect a commitment to an understanding of my personal mission. After the personal mission statement, I list some of my personal values. These operating values by which I attempt to live include the following:

(A) I will be a happy person and choose to be enthusiastic about life.

(B) I will be an encourager . . . even to those toward whom I would not naturally flow.

(C) I will show a genuine interest in the people around me.

(D) I will maintain a rich, regular devotional time with God. This will include prayer, reflection, and journaling.

On one occasion someone said to me, "I am keeping a journal but I don't know what to write." The entries might be varied; after all, the journal is for the writer and not the writer for the journal. One should feel free to use the journal in ways that are particularly taken to oneself. There are a number of approaches that could be taken which are particularly helpful on any given day. One entry might be the reflection of the events of the day and their meaning in light of one's faith commitment. Written prayers can help one to express to the Father some of the deepest longings of the heart. A written prayer list can bring to one's awareness the kinds of themes which are important in one's life. The journal can be a place where sins are confessed and repentance occurs before God. There are times when one may

just wish to write freely, reflecting on the past and God's intervention in life. From books, the daily newspaper, and other periodicals certain poignant quotes may jump out at you. The quote can be copied as well as some reflection of how this quote interacts with the journalist's own thinking.

In the journal one might describe a conversation with someone else or something that happened earlier in the day. Feelings that were experienced during and after the conversation can be described. These feelings may range from the affirmation received in a conversation to a feeling of intimidation and shame.

Absolute honesty is very important. We write to reveal ourselves to the Lord. Henri Nouwen kept a spiritual journal during his first year at L'Arche, a community for mentally handicapped adults in Toronto. The journal reflects his move from serving as a professor at Harvard University to working with these mentally retarded adults. Nouwen displays his disarming honesty when he writes on Saturday March 15:

I love Jesus but want to hold on to my own friends even when they do not lead me closer to Jesus. I love Jesus but want to hold on to my own independence even when that independence brings me no real freedom. I love Jesus but do not want to lose the respect of my professional colleagues, even though I know that their respect does not make me grow spiritually. I love Jesus but do not want to give up my writing plans, travel plans, and speaking plans, even when these plans are more to my glory than to the glory of God.¹⁰

Journaling is probably stifled most when it is written as if someone is looking over the writer's shoulder. A journal will probably be most useful if it is written not as something which will one day be published but with the abandon of one who knows that one day it will go up in smoke. The journal becomes kind of a mirror for us. Many secular psychiatrists and psychologists have seen the value of leading a person to the inner self. We are seeking, however, more than self-discovery or self-knowledge. We need to know what to do with that self-awareness. This is why journaling is so closely connected to the devotional life. We seek self-knowledge but in the context of repentance and the redemption of God. The activity of God in our lives is the thread that binds the days and weeks of our journals and lives together.