Focus on Spiritual Formation: Journaling as a Spiritual Practice

“And the Lord answered me: ‘Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it.’” Habakkuk 2:2

“Now write what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this.” Revelation 1:19

The Practice

We often hear the term “faith journey.” And the words “journey” and “journal” have the same root. If an individual has a faith journey, then a spiritual journal can be a helpful way of keeping up with where we are along our spiritual journey. What sign posts do we see along the way? How can we better discern where we are on the path?

The practice of writing, or keeping a regular journal, can have many positive and therapeutic benefits. Of course, a spiritual journal is more focused than just a diary or even a regular journal. A spiritual journal can have these same positive benefits, but may also be a complement to regular prayer, a way of speaking to God and also of listening for the voice of God.

Journaling:

- clarifies our understandings of the nature and will of God
- organizes our thoughts
- gives us a chance to play with ideas
- brings out thoughts that might never have occurred to us otherwise
- records spiritual thoughts and realizations we have, so they’re not forgotten
- forces us to take time out on a regular basis to sit with God and make some sense of life (sometimes we’re so busy living life that we don’t take time to get perspective)
- makes a record of our spiritual growth, kind of like pencil marks on the kitchen doorway of one’s spiritual life
- helps us to keep a balance between head and heart
- can help us to know ourselves better. (How to Keep a Spiritual Journal, by Michael Haywood)

“I became aware, little by little, that God’s Holy Spirit was directing my thoughts and insights as I wrote. On paper, the Lord and I were carrying on a personal communion. He was helping me, in the words of David, to ‘search my heart’. He was prodding me to put words to my fears, shapes to my doubts. And when I was candid about it, then there would often come from Scripture or from the meditations of my own heart, the reassurances, the rebukes and admonitions that I so badly needed. But this began to happen only when journaling was employed.” Ordering Your Private World”, by Gordon McDonald.

Getting Started

There is no right or wrong way to journal. Loose leaf notebook or spiral bound. Leather bound or paper. Pen or pencil. Some may prefer a sturdy feel of importance or permanence to their journal. Others may choose to use a computer. Whatever pleases you and works best for you is okay.

But a spiritual journal as a faith practice does require engagement and prayer. Say a short prayer to open your heart and your mind to God’s presence. To constitute a “practice” means that journaling should become a habit, or at least a routine. Find a regular routine, perhaps at the beginning or end of each day. One idea is to “bookend” your day with your time for prayer at beginning or end, and journaling (with prayer) at the beginning or end of your day. And, by all means, banish the editor in you. Just let the thoughts and words flow.
At Trinity

With a slightly different perspective on writing generally, a continuing discussion and reflection group called Writing as Spiritual Practice meets regularly. In this class, participants engage in the process of “free-writing” for the purpose of deepening our spirits and cultivating an awareness to the Holy in our lives. Our meetings together include brief lectures, “writing prompts,” quiet time for writing, and group discussions. Whether you consider yourself a writer or not, you are welcome! Check the Trinity calendar for updates and dates.

Background

The Psalms might be regarded as the earliest prayer journal, with the psalmists reflecting on their life with God. The practice of journaling has been around for centuries. Examples include Augustine’s Confessions, from the 4th Century. The Puritans used diaries as a tool in the 17th Century. Scottish pastor Maurice Roberts had this insight: “The logic of this practice is inevitable once men have felt the urge to become molded in heart and life to the pattern of Christ.”

Further Resources

- “Journaling as Spiritual Practice” by Helen Cepero
- “Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within” by Natalie Goldberg
- “Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life” by Anne Lamott
- “If You Want to Write” by Brenda Ueland
- “An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith” by Brenda Brown Taylor
- “Journal Keeping: Writing for Spiritual Growth” by Luann Budd
- “Spiritual Journaling: Recording Your Journey Toward God” by Richard Peace
- “Life’s Companion: Journal Writing as a Spiritual Quest” by Christina Baldwin