

Removing the Inward Glaze

How Journaling Can Help Us See

by Ruth Ann Ridley



Life Perspectives from Fellowship Bible Church

We are all on a journey. And the longer we travel the more intricate the paths and formidable the obstacles. Here's a forest to maze through. There's a lake to cross, and up ahead there's a ravine. Sometimes we don't even know where we are or what it is that's happening.

The fast pace of our culture exacerbates the problem. "The rush and pressure of modern life," says Thomas Merton, "are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence."¹ It is easy to assume that to be a useful member of society, we must get in step with whatever pace is set, speed up when technology speeds up, and attempt to comply when corporations demand more production in less time. Such increasing and continuous speed generates a paralyzing fog. We don't have time to think. We don't have time to feel. We don't have space for God. We are doing violence to our own souls.

Keeping a journal forces us to slow down and reflect. It enables us to edge toward reality and true perception. It can give us spiritual, intellectual and emotional clarity.

I became serious about journaling when I was in college and trying to establish the habit of a daily quiet time. My journal included meaningful phrases from Bible reading, thoughts about application and a written prayer. Now I also record ideas from inspirational books and paraphrases of verses. I never cease to be amazed at how quickly I forget what God has said to me in these times. Often I'm pricked with joy as I review His word to me from the day before. I see that, yes, God answered that prayer I prayed. I'd even forgotten I prayed it. Journal-keeping is a map that clarifies where we've been and what God is doing in our lives.

Most Christians who are veteran journal keepers insist on the importance of recording the tangibles of our lives as well as the intangibles. The idea that matter is not important, that we can find all the

answers to life within ourselves, is an idea modern society has embraced to its own destruction. It is a form of gnosticism that produced literature like Edgar Allan Poe's.

God is the God of cirrus clouds, wild grapevines, the squirrel that runs the fence highways of my backyard, and the leaf design on the snowy mountain I view from my plane. I learn more about who God is when I am attentive to what He has made.

"Skated to Sudbury..." writes Thoreau in his journal, "The meadows were frozen just enough to bear...examined now the fleets of ice flakes close at hand... They were for the most part of a triangular form...they appear to have been elevated expressly

to reflect the sun like mirrors... Who will say that their principal end is not answered when they excite the admiration of the skater?"²

Recently I sat under a tree and wrote all the sounds I could hear: a wind echoing down the tree corridors, reaching me suddenly in a rush; the drawn-out trill of a squirrel, the soft chirp of a bird, a brook flowing strong. It came to me that God was with me, like the energetic rush of the brook continuous and ever-present. I go back to that image often and find it comforting.

A journal can remove the glaze of inwardness. It is a telescope that helps us focus on the blurred shapes of the outer world.

Henri Nouwen says, "Writing is for me a powerful way of concentrating and clarifying... many thoughts."³ In an image-oriented culture that is being "dumbed down" because of its lack of emphasis on words, God's people have a responsibility to cultivate their minds, think for themselves and learn to express their ideas. We can use our journals as "commonplace books" a depository for quotes and paragraphs that grip us, a place to write down our thoughts about debates we hear, movies we see, or articles we read. I recently

"Journal keeping is a record of your spiritual, emotional, intellectual or artistic traveling, your personal edging closer to God, reality, true perception and self-knowledge."

Luci Shaw

read an article on genetic engineering. As I tried to write about it without referring to the article, what I understood and what I didn't was quickly made clear. What does the term "eugenics" involve?" I wondered. What is "Real Ethik?" And why did the author say we are already playing God in many areas apart from genetic engineering?

The journal is a tool that can prod us toward deeper thinking. It can improve our ability to discuss cultural and political ideas with thinking non-Christians who ordinarily disdain the evangelical mind.

C.S. Lewis' *A Grief Observed* began as a journal. He was attempting to make a map of his grief over the loss of his wife. It helped him, he said, get a little outside of it. I find that if I am anxious about a relationship or an upcoming event, writing it out stream-of-consciousness-style diffuses some of the pain and clarifies the issues. The journal on my night stand is an invitation to peace.

Every journal keeper wonders at times how valuable it is to keep writing about his life. It encourages me to remember how we treasure the detailed chronicling of a Samuel Pepys or a wife of an American pioneer. Other ideas that can keep us going are trying new techniques like:

- 1) summarizing a season,
- 2) titling a day ("the day of the hummingbird," "the day I met someone who reminded me of my dad")
- 3) mapping memories of your grandmother's house
- 4) drawing
- 5) changing the proportions of your journal

(more everyday details and less emotion, or more notes from your quiet time and less chronicling)

- 6) using nicer journals or larger unlined ones
- 7) reviewing old journals.

Review is the most valuable part of journal keeping. I try to re-read an old journal during my quiet time every three or four

months, flagging important portions (Faith, Process, Mom's Illness), numbering the pages and creating an index in the back for future reference. I always uncover encouragement and challenge.

The Enemy is the author of confusion, and I suspect that he isn't too happy when God's chosen ones begin examining their lives in a journal. Satan comes to steal and destroy, and he certainly doesn't want us remembering the ways God has answered our prayers and smoothed the pathway before us. It would result in too much light, too much hope, and too much renewal of prayer.

"I must write it all out at all costs. Writing is thinking."

Anne Morrow
Lindbergh

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, Quoted in Lorretta Ross-Gotta's *The Sanctuary Newsletter*
2. Henry David Thoreau, quoted in Thomas Mallon's *A Book of Your Own*.
3. Henri Nouwen, *The Genesee Diary*.

"I think every writer - any writer worth his salt - keeps a journal, jotting down not so much what happened, but how things looked, felt, smelled, etc. It enhances living ability, ability to observe, appreciate, use the senses."

John M. Allen,
editor and executive for
Readers Digest



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HOW TO JOURNAL

*from Ordering Your Private World,
by Gordon MacDonald,
Oliver-Nelson Books, 1985*

When I have spoken in public on "journaling", I have found that many people are intensely interested and have many questions. Their initial curiosity tends to center on technique more than anything else. What does your journal look like? How often do you write in it? What sort of things do you include? Isn't it really just a diary? Do you let your wife read your journal? Although I am by no means an expert journal keeper, I endeavor to answer as best I can.

My own journals are spiral bound notebooks, which I purchase at an office supply store. They are rather unimpressive in appearance. I can complete one of these notebooks in about three months. The virtue of their smaller size lies not only in portability but in the fact that, should one ever be lost, I would not have misplaced a year or more of writing.

I write in my journal almost every day, but I am not overly disturbed if an occasional day passes without an entry. I have made it a habit to write in the earliest moments of my time of spiritual exercise, and for me that means the first thing in the morning.

And what is in there? An account of things that I accomplished in the preceding day, people I met, things I learned, feelings I experienced, and impressions I believe God wanted me to have.

As I said before, I include prayers if I feel like writing them down, insights that come from reading the Bible and other spiritual literature, and concerns I have about my own personal behavior. I love to record things I am seeing in the lives of members of my family. I anticipate that someday our children will read through some of these journals, and if I can posthumously affirm them for things I see in their growing lives today, it will be a treasure for them.

All of this is part of listening to God. As I write, I am aware that what I am writing may actually be what God wants to tell me. I dare to presume that His Spirit is often operative in the things I am choosing to think about and record. And it becomes important to search my heart to see what conclusions He may be engendering, what matters He wishes to remind me about, what themes He hopes to stamp upon my private world.

As I write on consecutive pages of the journal, I also write from the back page toward the front. The back pages hold my list of people and concerns that I have chosen to make a matter of intercessory prayer. At the top of those pages I've written the phrase "Does my prayer list reflect the people and programs to which I am most committed?"



Then, continuing to work from the back pages toward the center of the journal, I often put in excerpts from my current reading that particularly impress me. Often, I will take time to simply read through many of these brief paragraphs. They may be prayers, reflective comments from the writings of people like St. Thomas, A. W. Tozer; and Amy Carmichael, or portions of Scripture.

When the daily record beginning at the front of the journal meets the daily reflections coming from the rear; I simply close the volume out and begin a new one. It has become one more scrapbook portraying my spiritual journey, with its struggles and its learning experiences. And the pile of spiritual scrapbooks continues to grow. Should our house ever begin to burn, and assuming all the family is properly evacuated, I think these journals would be the first things I would try to grab and take out the door with me.

This discussion of journal keeping has led me to talk of its benefits as regards interpersonal relationships. These benefits are certainly great. But the main value of a journal is as a tool for listening to the quiet Voice that comes out of the garden *or* the private world. *Journal* keeping serves as a wonderful tool for withdrawing and communing with the Father. When I write, it is as if I am in direct conversation with Him. And there is that sense that in the words that you are led to write, God's Spirit is mysteriously active, and communion at the deepest level is happening. In the words of an old and very sentimental hymn:

*He speaks, and the sound of his voice
Is so sweet the birds hush their singing.
(C. Austin Miles, "In the Garden")*