

Journaling as Spiritual Discipline

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It is interesting to note that the words '**journal**' and '**journey**' are both derived from the Old French **jerne**, and before that from Latin **diurnus** meaning daily; a day's work or travel. Thus when we consider journaling as spiritual discipline it seems appropriate that it is essentially a record of our spiritual journey. Of course it might not end up being a daily account, although journaling regularly is a very helpful pattern. Even if your attempts to journal are at best spasmodic they can be beneficial.

There is no right or wrong way or formula for journaling. Just as each of us is individual and our life's experiences unique, so too will be our style and approach to journaling. For some, even sitting with pen in hand to write will feel somewhat uncomfortable compared to keyboard skills. While it is possible to journal at the computer, hand-written journals do allow for more creativity. Intentionally setting aside the time and space, and persevering with what might be for some an alien form of spiritual practice, might also be a challenge.

Why journal?

Our world seems obsessed with electronic devices, busy, driven outer lifestyles and precious little quiet reflective space. Journaling offers us the opportunity to withdraw from the rush and bustle for a time, to move 'inside' and discover our true selves, to search for meaning in our lives and to connect with God or whatever we call the Sacred Presence.

It is likely that as we develop the discipline of regular journaling we will become more in tune with our feelings, more observant of everyday events and more thoughtful in our relationships. We will start to think more deeply, and the act of journaling might well help to clarify some of the challenges and questions in our lives. Over time it might lead to the resolution and healing of past hurts and resentments, allowing us to leave them behind once they have been committed to paper.

How to start journaling

There are probably as many ways of beginning as there are writers. Again it is an individual matter. You might like to choose a special book and pen with which to start journaling or any old exercise book might do. Finding a quiet, private space will also help. Where and how you begin writing is up to you. Here are some possible starting points:

Your life's journey to this point; this could take some time to write up but might be quite revealing as you put pen to paper. You might find yourself recalling incidents for a long time to come and including them as you feel moved.

Your life at present; this could include your joys, struggles, doubts, fears, hopes, relationships...

Meditate on and write about a Bible passage, prayer, poem... meaningful to you.

Something beautiful which made your spirit rise.

An encounter which encouraged, affirmed you; -

or made you frustrated, upset, bewildered, angry; -

or feel misunderstood, devalued, demeaned...

A piece of wisdom e.g. a saying from another source which has resonated with you.

A dream which has left you wondering and trying to interpret

It is important to recognise that journaling is not a return to the English assignments you did at school. No corrections, grades, editing or critiquing required, in fact it is probable you will be the only one to read your writing, unless you choose to share it. As you write it is more important to try to express your mood, thoughts, doubts, questions etc. than be fussed over your spelling or correct grammar. More important is that your writing is authentic and expresses your personal integrity i.e. that you are true to yourself and not just writing to please others or to gain another's approval.

Different forms of journaling

While keeping a journal and writing a diary might seem the same, a journal written as a spiritual exercise is likely to have more depth and be more reflective than a diary or mere recording of daily events. Over time, even though those daily events will no doubt feature regularly, the journal offers a medium in which to delve more deeply and reflectively into those events. In time your journaling might evolve quite naturally from *diary* to *dialogue*. As you become accustomed to journaling you might find different patterns emerging, depending on your mood, emotions, needs, stage or season in life... Your journal might well include:

Conversation - with yourself, with others, with God

Prayer, thoughtfully composed or rough and raw

New awareness, discoveries, insights

Reflection and meditation

Clarification and problem solving

Questions and search for, but not necessarily finding, satisfactory answers

Those 'Aha!' moments of discovery and transformation

Although we tend to think of journaling as words, sentences and paragraphs, don't be limited to them. You might find one day that to sketch or paint a picture, draw a mandala, glue in a memento such as a pressed flower, leaf or a scrap of material... will better express how you are feeling or what you want to say. Maybe, instead of sentences, single words will suffice, or a poem or haiku. At times some humour, a joke for instance, will find its way onto the page. Even the colour ink you use might help to portray and express your mood at a particular time.

Free Wheeling Journaling

While you might sit down to journal with a definite idea of what you want to write, don't be surprised if you find yourself taking a detour, moving in an unexpected direction, making an unanticipated discovery. As

you become more comfortable and relaxed with the journaling process, you might sense a freedom to let your pen, mind and heart move spontaneously. It can be a bit like a mystery tour, where you are not sure where you are going to end up. But as with any worthwhile journey, the travelling is at least as important as the destination. The unpredictability of 'free' journaling can be inspiring and exciting.

Revisiting your journal

While you will likely not reread your journaling regularly, it can be quite insightful to revisit on occasion. Maybe you find yourself going through an experience with a sense of *déjà vu*, sparking a memory from an earlier time. When you revisit your journaling of that period it might assist you to better deal with the present. To go back and reread, asking such questions as: "What have I learned through this?" or "How can I deal with this more constructively?" might well enable you to manage your current situation more confidently and hopefully. Hindsight can offer a sharper perspective and clarity to help inform the present.

May Your Journaling Journey Bring Blessings

Further Reading: Stephanie Dowrick, *Creative Journal Writing*, Published London, 2007