

THE
DISCIPLESHIP
PLACE

Practicing Wesleyan-Holiness
Spiritual Formation



SESSION 13

Journaling as a Spiritual Discipline

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Journaling as a Spiritual Discipline

SESSION OVERVIEW

Why Keep a Spiritual Life Journal

What Goes into a Spiritual Journal

Application

Exam

Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

LEARNER OBJECTIVES

At the end of this session, you should:

- understand the historic and current values and techniques of spiritual journaling
- embrace the spiritual discipline of spiritual journaling as a means to deepen your relationship with God, enhance spiritual growth, increase self-knowledge, and integrate your life
- pledge to do spiritual journaling regularly, even beyond the duration of this course
- evaluate your journaling experiences so far and share your insights with class members

Journaling as a Spiritual Discipline

INTRODUCTION

The recovery of journaling as a spiritual discipline has brought back an important part of the Christian heritage. Some of the most important literature in the world is the journals of pilgrims whose recorded journey still lights our way to spiritual formation. At the top of the list is Augustine's *Confessions*. The journal is not about confessing dark, wicked sins (though some are included); it is more about confessions of faith, that is, affirmations of belief and devotion.

John Wesley's journal has been reprinted many times. Wesley almost required his preachers and lay leaders to keep daily journals. Because of that we probably know more about the Methodist revival in 18th-century England than any other Christian era.

Other notable journals are those of Teresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich, Hildegard of Bingen, Evelyn Underhill, and Henri Nouwen. The journal of John Woolman, the Quaker who led the fight against slavery in America, is included in the Harvard Classics. Blaise Pascal's journal, *Penses*, is a must-read. Dag Hammarskjöld's journal, *Markings*, has gone through 20 printings. The journal of Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard is ranked as world-class literature.

Through the centuries, believers have found good reasons to write a spiritual journal. In diaries and general journals, people record everything that goes on in their lives. Some keep work or professional journals recording key developments in the workplace. Teachers often keep professional journals about their work with individual students. Some persons keep journals of their dreams. Some people meticulously keep family journals with cute sayings the kids say at every birthday and Christmas and still cuter photos of it all.

The journal you have been asked to do for this module, focuses on your spiritual journey as you interact with class content, Scripture, your inner self, and with the Lord. Your work, family, and events of everyday life will be included in your responses when they bring spiritual joys, problems, and issues.

As we begin this exploration of journal writing, it is important to be open to the idea of journaling. You may be excited about the prospect or you may dread another writing exercise. This is an invitation to stretch and experiment with this discipline. Hopefully you will discover an aspect of journaling which will connect with your personality and practices.

“Journal writing should never become a grim chore. If you see it that way, you will not do it for long . . . Writing in your journal is not a task you must perform perfectly. Go at it in the spirit of creative play. . . Let your journal-writing time be a Sabbath time for you, an enjoyable, quiet time, even a gift you give yourself. Think of the solitude connected with your journal as part of the abundant life God wants you to have.” *Ronald Klug, How to Keep a Spiritual Journal (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1993), 58.*

WHY KEEP A SPIRITUAL LIFE JOURNAL

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THE LIST

Last night I browsed my journal from 1982. The grandkids were toddlers then, one was not even born yet. I noted the prayers I was bringing to God then (some long since answered, some still in the Lord's in-box), the events I celebrated, the quotations I had gleaned from books that are now gone out of my library, but thanks to the journal, not out of my life. A host of good reasons to keep a spiritual life journal came flooding back. Consider these reasons for journaling:

1. You will learn a lot about your inner being, what Loren Eiseley called that "ghost continent" within. Your journal will become a sort of mirror of self and soul. "And all of us . . . seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image" (2 Cor. 3:18, NRSV). We are, as Thomas Aquinas said, to "gaze with love on God and share what has been seen with others." The first one the mirror reveals is our self in all our need. A journal is a mirror that helps keep us honest with ourselves. As Huck Finn discovered, "You can't pray a lie. I found that out." *From Holiness Today, June 1999, 27.*
2. Life patterns will emerge, revealing your life has not been as haphazard as you thought. You will come to see the footprints of God marching through your life. C. S. Lewis notes: "We think we have chosen our friends. In reality, a different birth date . . . a different college, taking the 'other job'—any of these changes might have kept us apart from our current set of friends. . . As you look back, you discover that a Secret Master of Ceremonies has been at work. And . . . He is still on the job."
3. Your capacities and skills in Bible study, meditation, confession, and prayer will increase. Evil forces and even neutral ones make it hard for the Christian to stay close to God. We need to develop the skills of the devotional life. If some believers were given an hour to pray, they would not know what to do or how to proceed. Journaling sharpens your spiritual tools.

"Pausing . . . to jot down our thoughts has a way of quieting and uncluttering our overactive, decentered lives . . . to find [again] our lost center in Christ" *Susan A. Muto, Pathways to Spiritual Living (Petersham, MA: St. Bede's Publications, 1984), 96.*

"I know that a faith that does not hold my intellect will soon not hold my heart" (E. Stanley Jones). *Quoted by Klug, 25.*


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“Keeping God’s love and forgiveness uppermost . . . prevents . . . becoming merely self-analytical. Journal writers know that they must guard against excessive introspection . . . looking at themselves under a microscope, trying to analyze every fault and failing, every small success or consolation” *Susan A. Muto, Pathways, 99.*

4. A regular time to reflect and write can help bring integration to the flashing forces that fragment thought, befuddle hearts, clutter agendas, and reduce you and me to flustered ineffectiveness. The journaling time stops the frenzied flow of experience and helps you look at it again, make sense of it all, and set priorities.
5. Journaling helps to clarify your unexamined assumptions, presumptions, and opinions inherited or adopted from the culture by measuring them against Christian standards. We live too much of our lives untested and in sub-Christian traditions, what Susan Muto calls pre-focal vagueness. To realize this benefit you must pause occasionally after writing a statement of belief and ask yourself some questions. Why do I believe this? What in scripture, tradition, reason and experience supports this statement?
6. Journaling is one way you explore the uniqueness of your own spiritual journey. Don’t go through life imitating the religious experiences of others. God has a faith journey plotted to meet your unique needs, vulnerabilities, gifts, and strengths. Your journal helps you learn your own story. It is a book in which you carry out the greatest of life’s adventures—the discovery of yourself.
7. Your spiritual journal will help you discover and act upon the “aha” moments—those times when two or three ideas connect and a life-changing insight is born. Perhaps no greater insight comes than the one in which you discover that God is not a part of your life but that you are a little part of His life. These “aha” moments are underlined in our lives when we write them down. It is a gift to a future when we try to remember all that we are feeling at these pivotal times to be able to look back and see what we wrote down. Robert Louis Stevenson said, “To miss the joy is to miss all.” *From The Upward Call, Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1994), 115.*
8. Your journal will become a friend and coach as you face those crossroad or hinge moments when you must filter powerful emotions and weigh decisions, opportunities, and alternatives about family, vocation, and life.
9. Journaling helps develop a confident lifestyle marked by joy, playfulness, and hope. E. Dee Freeborn says journaling adds a “serendipitous dimension of hilarities, of cheerfulness into the holy life-style.” “Secure in Christ, these


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journalers don't take themselves too seriously. Your joys are great gifts from God. These moments deserve to be treasured, pondered, relived, and cherished," writes Ronald Klug. Journaling about them serves as "a good antidote to self-pity and depression." *From Peace, 44.*

10. Journaling can help break the power of painful memories of the past. Richard Peace writes about a man whose father repeatedly brutalized him. Journaling helped him escape the awful prison of those memories. "Often the act of making memories concrete [by putting them and our responses to them in writing] robs them of their power over us. We bring them from the darkness into the light . . . A journal helps you to see if you are still on the Way or sidetracked . . . in some pleasant spot that has you deceived" *Robert Wood, A Thirty Day Experiment in Prayer (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1978), 14.*
11. Your journal can sometimes serve as a safety valve for emotions that threaten to get out of control. Did you ever experience the therapy of writing a stern letter and then have the good sense not to mail it? Writing in your journal can be like that. Susan Muto says, "Writing releases pent-up, potentially volcanic emotions. I can let go of a lot that disturbs me when I . . . write. Immense mountains are revitalized into normal molehills, once I see them sketched on paper. If I don't write out these hurts and angers, they have a way of festering inside."
12. Journaling is about growth in grace, that is, Christlikeness. As we gaze upon the face of the Savior we come to reflect the Lord's image more and more (2 Cor. 3:18). Journaling helps keep our attention on things that matter most.

OBJECTIONS TO KEEPING A JOURNAL

"Listen, show me in the Bible where it says that I have to do that!" Journaling is not commanded like prayer or the sacraments. Jesus did not say, "Journal in remembrance of Me." And surely there will be nonjournalers in heaven. Some people can't seem to make journaling a useful discipline, but millions more do. It is a spiritual discipline one should not ignore—even if your first few tries at it seem futile.

Other people are afraid someone else will find and read their private writings. That can happen, but the privacy problem can be handled. Keep your journal in a private place. If you are recording sensitive matters such as personal relationships with troublesome folks, use coded initials. If you are praying over a temptation or sin with which you are struggling, use code words or enigmatic initials. Your journal is your private property.


NOTES

Journaling is one way in which we create space each day to hear, to connect and to speak with the Divine. “The call to holiness beckons us to return to . . . single-hearted, awe-filled, grateful abandonment to God’s will . . . There is no excuse . . . to remain an hour-a-Sunday Christian. We are called to so much more” *Susan Muto, Pathways, 31.*

“Look, I have three kids, three jobs, and I get about three hours of sleep a night—I don’t have time to keep a journal!” That’s the most frequent objection. That is what you will say if you want to avoid the upward call that devotional journaling offers. Most of us need to learn to manage our time instead of letting it manage us. One of my favorite games is “Make It Go Away.” When my schedule starts to frazzle me, I start making things go away. I resign from a couple of committees, cancel a few appointments, postpone a chore or two, and say “no” to the next writing assignment. I urge you to make time for journaling. If you do not find yourself alone, you will not find yourself at all, and you will not find God, either.

Bear in mind journaling is not a substitute for public worship, Christian fellowship, small-group accountability, the holy sacraments, or active Christian service. It is about your personal walk with the Lord. Journal writing should never become a grim chore. If it does become a chafing duty, you will give it up. Approach it in a spirit of discipleship, yet with a spirit of creative play. Your journaling time can soon become a Sabbath of restful presence. Keeping a spiritual journal is a gift to yourself, yet it is not selfish because it helps you give yourself to the Lord. It can help you toward the abundant spiritual life to which the Lord is calling you in the silences of your heart.

THE PLEDGE

Will you launch into a spiritual life journaling adventure? Will you pledge to take a few minutes a day for yourself and your journal? Find below an affirmation form. It isn’t a contract, but an affirmation of intention. If you mess up and miss a few days, no one expects you to don sackcloth and ashes. If you fail or forget, get back in step and pick up where you left off. Talk to your mentor about this commitment. This conversation should be an honest reflection of your hesitations, concerns, joys, commitments, or inabilities to sign.

AFFIRMATION

I do take growth in Christlikeness seriously. Therefore, I covenant with myself to start and finish this spiritual-life devotional journey. I promise to take some time each day for my Lord, my journal, and myself. My plan is to spend _____ minutes a day for _____ days each week with my journal for the duration of this module and for at least three additional months.

Signed _____

Date _____

WHAT GOES INTO A SPIRITUAL JOURNAL

**NOTES**

TYPES OF ENTRIES

Journalers often make entries in categories such as the following. One will not write in all of these categories daily. Usually two or three will dominate a day's entries.

1. Major events, significant happenings in your work or study.
2. Family matters.
3. Key relationships and conversations at home, school, and work.
4. Important ideas encountered from reading, thinking, writing, or discussion.
5. Achievement or failures that occurred this day.
6. Feelings: the strongest feelings of contentment, joy, happiness, hope. The emotional lows, depression, discouragement, fear, guilt, worry, etc.
7. Internal happenings: intuitions, new appreciations, inner convictions, and insights about your character or self.
8. Major news stories: floods, war, strikes, peace treaties, etc.
9. Notable physical experiences: exercise, work, illness, exhaustion, etc.
10. Spiritual events: prayer, Bible study, worship, etc.
11. Affirmations, conclusions, decisions, commitments made, or beliefs clarified or confirmed.
12. Spiritual failure, besetting sins, repentance, etc.
13. Acts of ministry or Christian service.

SAMPLING FAMOUS JOURNALS

As you read the following excerpts from John Wesley's and Augustine's journal, consider the positive outcomes. While most of us will not have our journals published we can recognize this is a gift for us today. We can also imagine the positive outcomes for these authors as they reviewed their journals in the years to come.


NOTES
John Wesley's Journal

I returned to London; and on Sunday 22 buried the remains of Elizabeth Duchesne; a person eminently upright of heart, yet for many years a child of labour and sorrow. For near forty years she was zealous of good works, and . . . shortened her days by labouring for the poor beyond her strength. But her end is peace. She now rests from her labours, and her works follow her.

Tues. 31—We concluded the year with solemn praise to God [the New Year's Eve watch night service] . . . It has never been intermitted one year . . . since the year 1738; in which my brother and I began to preach that strange doctrine of salvation by faith.

Wed. January 1—We met, as usual, to renew our covenant with God [The Wesley Covenant Service]. It was a solemn season, wherein many found his power present to heal.

Thurs. 2—I began expounding, in order, the book of Ecclesiastes. I never before had so clear a sight either of the meaning or the beauties of it. Neither did I imagine that the several parts of it were in so exquisite a manner connected together, all tending to prove the grand truth—that there is no happiness out of [outside of] God.

Wed. 8—I looked over the manuscripts of that great and good man, Charles Perronet. I did not think he had so deep communion with God. I know exceeding few that equal him; and had he had a University education; there would have been few finer writers in England. *From The Works of John Wesley, ed. Thomas Jackson, 3rd ed., 14 vols. (London: Methodist Book Room, 1872; reprint, Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1978), 4:91-92.*

Mon. 13—I took the opportunity of spending an hour every morning with the Preachers, as I did with my pupils at Oxford.

Wed. 15—I began visiting those of our society who lived in Bethnal-Green hamlet. Many of them I found in such poverty that few could conceive of . . . O why do not all the rich that fear God constantly visit the poor? Can they spend part of their spare time better? Certainly not. So they will find in that day when “every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labour.” Such another scene I saw the next day . . . I have not found any such distress, no, not in the prison of Newgate. One poor man was just creeping out of his sick-bed, to his ragged wife and three little children; who were more than half naked, and the very picture of famine; when one bringing in a loaf of bread, they all ran, seized upon it, and tore it to pieces in an instant.”


NOTES
St. Augustine's Confessions

At age 31 Augustine was trying to break away from a licentious life of wine, women, and song—particularly women. The very toy of toys, and vanities of vanities, my ancient mistresses, still held me; they plucked my fleshly garment, and whispered softly, “Dost thou cast us off?” . . . What defilements did they suggest! What shame! . . . Yet they did retard me, so that I hesitated . . . to shake myself free from them . . . a violent habit saying to me, “Thinkest thou, thou canst live without them?”

Contenance herself . . . a fruitful mother of children of joys . . . smiled on me . . . “Cast thyself fearlessly upon Him, He will receive, and will heal thee. . . Stop thine ears against those thy unclean members . . . that they may be mortified . . . This controversy in my heart was self against self . . . But when a deep consideration had from the secret bottom of my soul drawn together and heaped up all my misery in the sight of my heart, there arose a mighty storm, bringing a shower of tears.

I cast myself down . . . under a certain fig tree, giving full vent to my tears . . . “O Lord, how long? How long? . . . Remember not our former iniquities,” for I felt that I was held by them. . . So was I speaking, and weeping in the most bitter contrition . . . when . . . I heard . . . a voice . . . chanting . . . “Take up and read; Take up and read.” . . . I arose; interpreting it to be no other than the command from God . . . Eagerly . . . I seized, opened [the volume of the Apostle] and in silence read the section, on which my eyes first fell: “Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying: but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh,” in concupiscence . . . Instantly . . . a light as it were of serenity infused into my heart, all the darkness of doubt vanished away. *From The Confessions of St. Augustine, trs. Edward B. Pusey (New York: Washington Square Press, Inc., 1960), 145-48.*

APPLICATION



NOTES

1. You have been asked to keep a journal from the beginning of this class. Take some time now to reflect on what that experience has been like for you.
 - In what ways did the journaling experience deepen your relationship with God?
 - Did writing out your thoughts and experiences help you make any decisions?
 - What needed corrections in your service, discipline, attitudes, and relationships did the journaling experience pinpoint?
 - Did you divide your journal into several sections (spiritual diary, answered prayers, collected prayers and quotations, reflections on sermons, books, or life events)? How did you arrange or organize your journal?
 - What journaling occasions or experiences caused you to rejoice and praise God?
 - If a television show were based on your journal, what would the title of the program be?
 - Has the journaling experience helped you know yourself better? Has it produced any “I didn’t know I was like that” comments or feelings?
 - What Bible verses or quotations from books, poems, lectures or discussions from this class, or sermons have appeared in your journal?
 - What music made its way into your journal? What was its significance?
 - Does your journal record any answers to prayer?
 - Would you recommend journaling as a spiritual discipline for new converts?
 - Has this module given you any new ideas about how to make your future journaling more fruitful?
 - Journaling works better for some than others. How would you rate your recent journaling experience?
 - Journaling is something I will continue to do.
 - The experience was valuable and satisfying for me.
 - I did not get much out of it.


NOTES

- I did not work very hard at planning and organizing my journal.
 - Some things I liked about journaling; some I did not.
2. Identify as many of the “types of entries” as you can in the excerpt from John Wesley’s *Journal* and from the excerpt from Augustine’s *Confessions*.
 - What type of entry dominated Wesley’s writing? Augustine’s?
 - What did you learn about John Wesley from this brief journal excerpt?
 - What did you learn about Aurelius Augustine from his journal?
 - Are the concerns of Augustine and Wesley still relevant?
 - Would these same themes appear in journals of contemporary Christians?
 3. Research what the Bible says about fasting. Start your search with Matt. 6:16-18, Ps. 1:2, and Isa. 30:15-16. Record your findings.

JOURNALING

Journals enable us . . . to move from fog to clarity, to see, feel and live. It is much easier to live in the past (through memories) or in the future (through fantasies) than to live in the present. Journals make the present come alive. *Richard Peace, Spiritual Journaling (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1998), 22.*

After this module of intensive study on spiritual journaling, implement at least two upgrades in your journal. Be prepared to share the upgrades with your mentor.

SUGGESTED READING

- E. Dee Freeborn, et al., *The Upward Call* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1994), 115-22.
- Ronald Klug, *How to Keep a Spiritual Journal* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1993), 1-115.
- Susan A. Muto, *Pathways to Spiritual Living* (Petersham, MA: St. Bede’s Publications, 1984), 94-111.
- Richard Peace, *Spiritual Journaling* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1998), 1-111.

EXAM



NOTES

1. Journaling is about growth in grace, that is, Christlikeness.
 - A. True
 - B. False
2. There is a biblical mandate to journal.
 - A. True
 - B. False
3. Journaling is a great substitute for public worship.
 - A. True
 - B. False
4. Journaling is one way that you explore the uniqueness of your own spiritual journey.
 - A. True
 - B. False
5. A journal is a mirror that helps keep us honest with ourselves.
 - A. True
 - B. False
6. Journaling helps keep the disciple's attention on the things that matter most.
 - A. True
 - B. False
7. Journaling is about maintaining an active life.
 - A. True
 - B. False
8. Journaling helps us go through life imitating the religious experiences of others.
 - A. True
 - B. False
9. Journaling helps develop capacities and skills in, Bible Study, meditation, confession, and prayer.
 - A. True
 - B. False

**NOTES**

10. A regular time to reflect and write can reduce one to flustered ineffectiveness.
- A. True
 - B. False
11. A journal can sometimes serve as a safety valve for emotions that threaten to get out of control.
- A. True
 - B. False
12. Which of the following is NOT an example of a well known journalist_____?
- A. Martin Luther
 - B. John Wesley
 - C. John Woolman
 - D. Teresa of Avila

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT



NOTES

Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor.

1. Talk together about the following verse and claim: “As we gaze upon the face of the Savior we come to reflect the Lord’s image more and more” (2 Cor. 3:18).
2. Consider the following statement with your mentor: Journaling helps keep the disciple’s attention on the things that matter most. Discuss how that been true or false as you have practiced journaling since you began this module.
3. Talk to your mentor about the commitment pledge presented in this module. This conversation should be an honest reflection of your hesitations, concerns, joys, commitments, or inabilities to sign.