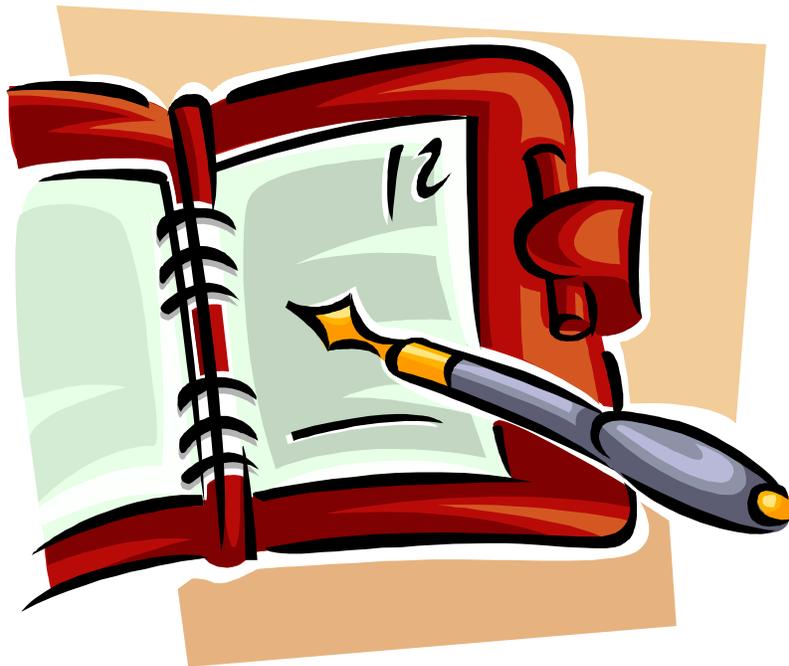


JOURNALLING
IN A
NUTSHELL



by

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Introduction

'Journalling is one of the best aids to deepening the spiritual journey that I know. It records what is going on, assists in seeing more deeply the meaning of the journey of life and faith. It highlights discoveries of God's love. It encourages deeper explorations of our experiences of God. It enables Scripture to speak clearly, be heard and remembered as fresh truths are recorded and explored.

It keeps the mind from wandering. It keeps us honest. It exposes self-deception. It records and interprets the story of God's work in us. It focuses heart and mind on Jesus and how it is between us. We can write about the Spirit's presence, guidance and giftings.

Journalling explores moments of weakness, vulnerability and failure. Grace, love, victories and growth are noted for future encouragement. Journalling provides clear evidence of movement, growth and discovery when, in the heat and pressures of life these may not be readily seen or accepted.

Journalling gifts us with insight and courage.' Andrew Dunn¹

If this is so, then why do I struggle so much with my own journalling? Why do my attempts at journalling sometimes seem to be spasmodic, boring, unhelpful, unsatisfactory and fooling no-one but myself.

It is because of my own struggles that I have considered that this may be a subject of interest for others. In order to answer some of my own questions, I compiled and sent out a questionnaire (see Appendix) to 55 people.

QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS:

Returns: 30/55 (54.5%)

Gender: 67% Female. 33 % Male.

Age: 36 – 77 years. (average = 47.7 years)

Ethnic Origins: 10% Maori. 90% Non Maori (includes Irish, British and South African)

12/30 (40%) of the returnees said they journal weekly.

11/30 (37%) of the returnees said they don't journal.

¹ Dunn A.G (1993) Oasis Brochure No 1.

The others journal spasmodically.

All of the returnees indicated that they had some spare time available.

All of the returnees agreed that journalling was beneficial for reflection and encouragement and that it provided a good record of their growth, walk of faith and development.

It appears from the questionnaire that personality type has little significance or no bearing on the journalling process. Of the returnees, 9/30 (30%) were able to indicate their personality type (all used Myers-Briggs) and all of these were unique, ie there were no two with similar MBTI types or preferences

Other journalling methods that were mentioned by the returnees were, song-writing, poetry, prayer, prophecy, drawings, letters, crayons, painting and writing psalms.

The results from this study reflect some of my own thoughts, frustrations and difficulties (and others as well, I suspect). In the following paper I have attempted to answer the issues and concerns that I believe have been identified.

‘ What sort of diary should I like mine to be? Something loose knit and yet not slovenly, so elastic that it will embrace any thing, solemn, slight or beautiful that comes into my mind. I should like it to resemble some deep old desk, or capacious hold-all in which one flings a mass of odds and ends without looking, I should like to come back, after a year or two and find that the collection had sorted itself... into a mould, transparent enough to reflect the light of our life.’ Virginia Woolf.²

“I have a problem journalling....getting started I mean”

May I offer some suggestions.

Consider your writing style, your preferences with paper and pen. Indulge yourself in a visit to the bookstore of your choice, and choose a journal that you think you would enjoy writing in. These come in various forms, shapes, sizes and colours. Your selection will depend on what is most comfortable or workable for you. (I prefer a loose leaf, ring binder type) Don't be hasty in making your selection, because this journal needs to be inviting, and an extension of yourself.

Next, spend as much time and effort considering your writing equipment. (I am a pen-aholic, addicted to nice pens, especially the gel ones. They come in such wonderful colours). The fit and feel of the pen, the way it writes etc is all conducive to putting hieroglyphics on paper. (An indifferent pen can be a real hindrance to the creative process.)

² Alexandra Johnson: ‘Leaving a Trace’

Having considered the necessary equipment, let us spend a little time thinking about the environment. If journalling is going to be a meaningful part of your life, then you need a suitable place and time that will allow you to be still, calm and reflective. That will be different for each one of us but it is a very important part of the process.

Finally, it is crucial that all other members of your household realise that your journal is personal, and must be treated as sacrosanct. Your journal is confidential and strictly out of bounds to others. The full benefit of journalling will be inhibited if privacy can not be established.

‘All serious daring starts withi’ -Eudora Welty.³

A useful exercise to get started is to make a **Timeline** of your life.

Take one page for each year of your life(The loose leaf book is useful here). You may wish to divide the page into columns or rows. Jot down in point form significant events. This will be a record of memorable moments.

Review and reflect on your lifeline. What thoughts come to mind, what response, reactions, emotions are evoked or stirred.

Writing these down in your journal now, can be helpful in connecting you with the blessing and benefits of journalling.

“I need some guidelines...”

May I offer the following suggestions.

Keep your journal where you can see it.(this may be more difficult for those who are not in privacy-friendly environments.) The sight of it will in itself be a prompt, an **invitation** and reminder to record meaningful moments.

Set aside regular time to pick up your pen. Like exercise, benefits come from regular and frequent practice. It is the start time that is most important, not what time you finish. Journalling time depends on our needs, moods, external factors etc. Try not to cause unnecessary angst, just sit down, pick up your pen and write...finishing will take care of itself.

Date your entries. This is not only useful if you drop your loose leaf journal, and it disgorges the contents all over the floor, but you will be encouraged to observe your progress over the years. Or, you may note a repetitive thought, idea or dream that deserves further investigation.

Don’t worry about spelling or grammar. No-one but yourself is going to read your journal, so these need not assume the importance that other written work requires. Attention to these can stifle or quench your creative flow and the process of revelation and investigation that is happening. Leave this part of yourself outside your journal.

³ Alexander Johnson: ‘Leaving a Trace’

“I need inspiration...”

‘In theory, there is no difference between theory and practice. But in practice, there is.’
Jan L. A. Van de Snepscheut.⁴

If we understand that there is a **difference** between a diary and a journal, objectivity and subjectivity, external and internal, observer and participant, then we are a little closer to understanding the possible benefits of journaling.

May I offer some suggestions which may be helpful in understanding ourselves. The first one is motivational, the others more inspirational.

Draw up two columns, label them ‘LIKES and DISLIKES’ (consider such topics as Colour, Food, Authors, Music etc) Now put some of your personal preferences in these columns. Reflection on these can prove to be fun and challenging.

We often neglect **those who have been instrumental** in our journey. Spend some time considering who has been there for you at times of need. What they have done for you, and why they did it. What has been the outcome etc.

‘Friendship consists in forgetting what one gives, and remembering what one receives.’
Alexandre Dumas.⁵

Use your journal as a correspondence to your dearest and closest friend. On the page share with them your life, that which is seen and unseen, events, thoughts, emotions etc, both positive and negative. This is your reality!

“I feel awkward about putting things on paper.”

‘Once I begin the act of writing, it all falls awaythe view from the window, the tools, the talisman, and I am unconscious of myself....one’s carping inner critics are silenced for a time...there is always a surprise, a revelation. During the act of writing, I have told myself something that I didn’t know I knew.’
Gail Godwin⁶

Your journal is your private and sacred space. Give yourself permission to let go, and express yourself as you want too. **Write freely, don’t edit** yourself. What you write will depend on your current circumstances, and you may be surprised at what responses, emotions and feelings emerge. If you are not used to journaling like this, you may feel uncomfortable about owning the less positive thoughts and emotions

⁴ www.saidwhat.co.uk/quotes

⁵ ‘Pocket Positives’ The Five Mile Press.

⁶ Alexander Johnson: ‘Leaving a Trace’

that may emerge, but this intensity and expression is to be embraced. This process will have some of the following benefits:

- It will stop the repression of real issues.
- It will help you identify the true nature of deep feelings and therefore assist in dealing with the more difficult issues. Something like hitting a punch-bag. Your journal takes all the beating and thumping, rather than some innocent bystander.

Journalling is like talking to someone who has all the time in the world. It will never answer you back, judge you, tell you to be quiet nor charge you some horrendous fee. By helping you process current issues or thoughts, it will provide the material that will be of further benefit, when you take it to spiritual direction, counselling etc.

“It makes me feel too deeply....I feel too uncomfortable”

True! If we are honest and open in our journalling, confrontation with ourselves is inevitable.... and sometimes it feels worse before it feels better. We can not ignore those life-faith issues that keep raising their ugly little heads and wearing different hats. They need attention! Moving these hidden, possibly repressed identities out into the open can be part of the process towards wholeness and Christ-likeness.

Liken it to cleaning out an attic. The first attack stirs up all the dust and cobwebs. Preliminary investigations into the old boxes etc, leave the place looking worse than ever. But perseverance pays off. The attic is transformed, clean, tidy and orderly. It is then time to move to another room.

Used in this manner a journal can be a **catalyst**. This process is helpful in allowing you to delve more deeply and bring to the surface those things that require transformation. Spiritual Direction may be part of this process, or there may be other sources that could be considered.

“I am too busy to journal ... I just don't have time..”

*‘Seeing is of course very much a matter of verbalization.
Unless I call attention to what passes before my eyes, I simply
won't see....It's all a matter of keeping my eyes open.’*

Annie Dillard⁷

Busy-ness and journalling seem to be as compatible as oil and water. The corporate-organisation mentality has infiltrated our world.

May I offer some suggestions to combat this silent invasion:

- **Make an appointment in your diary with your Journal.** (make it a manageable length of time) maybe over an expresso...

⁷ Annie Dillard: ‘The Horse Fly of Tinker Creek’

- Use your journal to **take control** of your life. Divide a page down the centre, write personal issues on the left.... and then some possible answers/solutions on the right.
- Use your journal to stay focussed and motivated. Keep this time (it doesn't matter how long or how short) for your own personal reflection. Stay connected to the inner-happenings and issues, not the external.
- Use your journal to record or capture your thankfulness, gratitude and praise. Be mindful of the good things that have been happening: good health, a job, nice clothes, holidays away from home, resources to eat out etc.

While we have attempted to find some space to attend to our inner life despite our busy-ness this may not be enough to sustain deep inner transformation. A **personal retreat** provides an opportunity to review our journal jottings, and reflect on them more purposefully.

“I would like to be a little more creative...”

There are many journalling techniques. Creativity and variety are needed to explore the hidden layers of our minds to identify what conduit may work well for us. Here are some possibilities:

- Try recalling snippets of recent significant conversations. Reflect on why they were so memorable.
- Snippets of poetry, quotes, postcards, letters, articles etc can be pasted into your diary. Reflect on why these in particular are significant.
 - What emotions were stirred when you first saw them?
 - What was your response then?
 - Has your response changed?
- Make collages out of anything that takes your fancy, and which will fit in your journal. Reflect and record your reactions. How is your inner journey enriched ?
- Include lots of colour and texture in your journal. This is where it is beneficial to have a ring-binder type journal. The selection of available paper is wonderful, and there is a limitless variety of writing equipment. (One of my indulgences is to wander slowly down the appropriate aisle in my favourite stationary shop, feasting on the selection of pens, pencils and drooling over the vast colour range. Sounds like a child in an old fashioned sweet shop)
- Use colour to reflect the significance of the entry; ie black paper with a white pen for deep moments of truth and self revelation, orange paper with purple pen for celebration.

- Draw. (even if you aren't Rembrandt!) Anyone who can hold a pen has the potential to capture their inner activity on paper. These are personal records for God's and our eyes, only. So go ahead and play.

“I made my journal too pretty ... I became burdened by this ... and stopped”

Unfortunately we can go to the other extreme, and this applies to all the above. Our journalling routines are meant to be aids to the awareness and deepening of our inner journey...our walk of Faith. They should be a work in progress, not yet perfect, like us.

Creativity is wonderful, and can be a very helpful tool to express the activity that is happening within. However it is only a part of the process, and needs to be complementary and not dominate. The value of the journal entry is what I have **realised**...not what I have made.

“I prefer data ...graphs etc”

This comment must not surprise us, as we live in a world that is ‘managed’ by people and organisations to whom data in any form has become their life blood. It could be a challenge for these folk to find a meaningful way of journalling.

These suggestions are based on the assumption that such people are more familiar with computers and software options than most.

Their life experiences are the best collection of raw data that they have. **What a rich resource !** It has a beginning (the end is still to come) but there is a daily temporary finish (something like backing up their hard drive.

A life line (as previously mentioned) can be traced onto any kind of graph or chart. There are software packages available that would make this exercise easy and fun.

It would also be simple enough to set up a directory specifically for one's personal journalling. The creation of personalised folders etc could facilitate good reflection on the inner walk of faith. (If privacy issues are present in this situation, password only access might be appropriate.)

“My journalling became repetitive ... I couldn’t see the point, so I stopped”

‘If at first you don’t succeed you’re running about average’

Margaret H Alderson⁸

Our journalling is for our benefit, and needs to be **our friend** not our dictator. There are no merit or demerit points associated with our success or failure to maintain our journalling practice.

We should be able to evaluate the reasons we are inconsistent with our journalling. Naturally there will be circumstances that influence us, but we need to discern the true motives behind these.

There will be times when we need to allow ourselves **‘Time-Out’** from the routine. There is no need to beat ourselves up if we don’t get to it.

However, we may need to be sensitive to prolonged evasion. These could be the very moments when we need to be in touch with what is really happening inside and be able to thrash stuff out in a safe environment. The sanctity of our journal allows us space to be as blunt and honest with ourselves and God as we like. Insights from such times can be good thoughts to take to Spiritual Direction.

“My journal is one of my favourite places of prayer.”

Our journals can be very useful to help us pray.

We can write our thoughts out, praying as we pen them. One benefit of this is the ability to review our prayers, and to be thankful for answers. We may need to be more focussed if we discern that we have had wrong motives. Over time this can be very helpful.

Sometimes we can write our thoughts and feelings better than we can verbalise them. We may feel uncomfortable praying audibly, but writing to someone helps us to stay focussed.

The prayers of others, those we have cut-out, had sent to us, or read in books etc, may be pasted in our journals to feed our creativity and enrich our view of God and the dynamic of prayer.

(I use an A5 ring-binder type as my journal which allows me to have sections. I will often include my own written prayers within the main context of my journal, but I have a separate part as well. (we can never have too much prayer!)

⁸ www.motivatingquotes.com

“I am able to reflect well on my journey ... but I can’t seem to get it down on paper.”

This may be true of many of us, and we need to ask ourselves what mechanisms we use during our reflections. Do we use poetry, music, song, books, art, craft or gardening? Any of these media can be used to record the thoughts and prayers of our journey. We are able to read our journals at a later stage and be reminded of the wonder and depth of our reflections and journey. All we may need is to be a little more courageous and adventurous in our attempts to nurture this process.

“I don’t like looking at my past ... but I do note significant moments”

If significant moments are all that is included in a journal then it will be a wonderful companion in life.

Significant moments come in all forms, pleasant and unpleasant. It is often the less pleasant experiences that are the most character building, and best reveal Grace at work. If we fail to include these, we will miss out on much wonder...

‘The journal is the ideal place of refuge for the inner self because it constitutes a counterworld: a world to balance the other.’

Joyce Carol Oates⁹

I have now finished answering the issues raised and comments made as a result of my questionnaire, but this has barely scratched the surface of the information that is available to help us journal. We have considered many possibilities that can help us establish good journalling routines.

If we are serious about developing the use of our journals I would recommend the following books which are referenced in full in the Bibliography.

“Leaving a Trace”	Alexandra Johnson.
“Journalling”	Anne Broyles.
“Gold in your Memories”	Macrina Wiederkehr

These books have whetted my appetite for developing my own personal journalling habits. It is my hope that these books will help you to realise the worth of the humble notebook-and-pen.

A very helpful and interactive journalling workshop is available at www.christiansurvivors.com

⁹ Alexander Johnson: ‘Leaving a Trace’

Conclusion:

I have become even more aware of the intrinsic value of recording my journey of faith as it happens (the valleys, the mountains, the deserts). It is one of the richest deposits of the activity of Grace in my life, and I derive much pleasure from digging deep into it to remind myself of such.

It behoves us then as Spiritual Directors, to encourage our directees to keep a journal. If necessary, to explore with them what might be the most ‘user-friendly ‘or ‘workable’ option/s for them. This will take time. Patience and perseverance will be rewarded. Direction sessions will be richer and more meaningful for our directees as they reflect on the work of Grace in their daily steps. Tracing their journey with someone who has the privilege of being their spiritual companion will only make the reality of their journey stronger, and bring wonder to all concerned.

“To write about one’s life is to live it twice, and the second living is both spiritual and historical, for a memoir reaches deep within the personality as it seeks its narrative form.”
Patricia Hamp¹⁰

¹⁰ Aleander Johnson: ‘Leaving a Trace’

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Number1, Jan 1996.

Journalling as a Spiritual Discipline Andrew Dunn "OASIS BROCHURE NO: 1".

INTERNET RESOURCES:

www.christianitytoday.com : Are you a Journalling Dropout?

www.wakimbo.com : Journalogy.

www.christiansurvivors.com : Journalling as a Spiritual Discipline.

www.christian-mommies.com : Five Ways to make the most of your Journal.

:Journaling: A tool for the Spirit.

www.sheilagabel.com : The Journalling pages.

APPENDIX:

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR JOURNALLING RESEARCH PROJECT.

Barb Harrison.

AGE:

GENDER:

ETHNIC ORIGIN:

PERSONALITY TYPE:(ie Myers-Briggs, Enneagram etc..
if known)

ON AVERAGE, HOW MUCH UNCOMMITTED TIME DO YOU
HAVE PER WEEK FOR PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT ?

IF YOU ARE CURRENTLY USING A JOURNAL PLEASE ANSWER THE
FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

HOW OFTEN DO YOU JOURNAL ? (on average)

IS THIS FREQUENCY ADEQUATE FOR YOU?
(answer this is as briefly or fully as you like)

WHAT CHANGES HAVE RESULTED IN YOUR LIFE FROM YOUR
JOURNALLING? (answer this as briefly or as fully as you like)

DO YOU USE ANYTHING OTHER THAN WRITING IN A JOURNAL TO RECORD YOUR SPIRITUAL GROWTH?
(ie song-writing, sculpturing, painting, computer software/programs etc)

DO YOU HAVE ANY OTHER COMMENTS IN REGARDS TO JOURNALLING THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO MAKE?
(ie lack of time, no obvious progress, need inspiration and some guidelines....etc)

IF YOU ARE NOT CURRENTLY USING A JOURNAL , DO YOU HAVE ANY COMMENTS THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO MAKE ?
(ie haven't thought about it, wouldn't know where to begin, would like some help to start, haven't any role models, don't see the need, have other preferences....etc)