

THE PROCESS OF WRITING A SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The previous chapter dealt with what to say in your spiritual autobiography. This chapter addresses how to say it.

Making Notes

As you ponder the question that underlies a spiritual autobiography—*Where are the footprints of God in my life?*—you will be struck with certain thoughts, impressions, or insights. Write these down before you lose them. Not only will you preserve these impressions, you will discover new insights in the act of writing.

It might be helpful to discuss these insights with a friend. Some people gain clarity through conversation. Or you might want to do some reading. The ideas and experiences of others can clarify your own situation. For example, you remember an especially poignant time in your life. You were sitting in church listening to “Ode to Joy”. You found yourself transported into a kind of ecstasy. Tears came. Then this “feeling” (though it was more than mere feeling) ended as quickly as it began, and you were left with only the longing to be back in that moment. What is the meaning of this experience? This is the sort of experience that C. S. Lewis identified as “the inconsolable longing.” Look for his books. Read *Surprised by Joy* and the sermon called, “The Inconsolable Longing.” You will understand better what came upon you and what it means. Do research. The more you know about the spiritual experiences of others, the better you will understand your own experience.

The Form of Your Spiritual Autobiography

Different people will create different kinds of manuscripts.

A complete, edited manuscript: You may decide to write down your entire story. This might involve the production of several drafts so that the end product could be published as an article. It takes a certain facility with words and a talent for writing to do this. When you present your story to your group (if you are meeting with a group) you may

decide to read it aloud, or you may use the written version as a guide in telling it.

Notes: This is the other extreme: a series of notes, in sequence, to guide the telling of your story. This is what a gifted storyteller will often do. For example, Garrison Keillor, who for years has told “Tales from Lake Wobegon” on his weekly radio program, simply makes notes. When he stands before the microphone he lets the tale tell itself. Using this form for your spiritual autobiography means that you are comfortable with the spoken word.

A combination of notes and text: Many people find it’s easier to write a fairly complete manuscript without paying much attention to grammar and spelling, and then use the manuscript to make full notes for telling the story to the group.

I would suggest that you start by trying to write a complete manuscript. If this proves too cumbersome or demanding, shift to a note format. But try your hand at writing. You may be surprised by the results. After all, what are you better qualified to write about than your own story?

Organizing Your Story

Most people tell their stories in chronological order; they skip over less important periods and focus more attention on critical events, people, and experiences. However, there are other ways to tell your tale.

Thematically: Perhaps you discover that there is a thread or theme that describes who you are and what you have experienced. Examples of themes include rescue (being lost and being found, not once but many times); grace (amazing experiences of God’s work and presence in a variety of situations); travel (in all of the places where you have lived something decisive has happened that shaped your knowledge of God); relationships (yours is a story of crucial relationships: good, bad, and indifferent); addiction (entering into addictive behavior; noting, naming, and beginning to

deal with it; or a life in which a single temptation has been key). Tell your story by sharing a series of vignettes that illustrate how this theme is woven through your life.

If a thematic organization appeals to you, remember that it is generally harder to communicate in this fashion than in a straightforward chronological sequence. We are used to thinking in terms of events that follow one after the other. It takes much more work to uncover a central theme and then illustrate it, but do not hesitate to try.

Metaphorically: Rather than a theme, there might be a metaphor that captures the essence of your story of interacting with God. The story of the prodigal son is one such account. You could use each of the sections in that powerful parable to describe a different phase of your story. Or perhaps the pilgrimage of Abraham describes your experience.

Through the eyes of another: It may be easier to write in the third person. Tell your story from your mother's eyes or from the point of view of your guardian angel.

As a fairy tale: "Once upon a time . . ." is the way fairy tales begin. Maybe your life is best told in this fashion.

Editing Your Story

The reason we edit our stories is not because they contain embarrassing incidents that need to be eliminated. We edit our stories because we have limited time in which to share them with others, and we cannot fit in all the stories we want to tell. It is just not possible to condense a life into thirty to forty-five minutes. (Of course, if you are writing a spiritual autobiography for your own use and not to share with a group, write as much as you like!) The challenge is to know which stories to omit and which to keep.

Once you complete your manuscript or set of notes, go back over it and read it aloud. Time yourself. If you have too much material, make some decisions on how to shorten the story even more.

Delete entire sections: This is difficult, but you may find you have two stories that deal with the same issue. If so, one can be omitted. Or you may have to select stories in order of importance, leaving out the less important ones so that the really good ones are told.

Shorten stories: Rather than cutting out whole stories, you may be able to reduce the length of several stories so that each can be told. Some of Jesus' parables demonstrate this point. Though brief, who can deny the profound meaning conveyed in the story of the good Samaritan or the prodigal son? However, be careful not to compress a story so much that you lose the heart of it. The power of a story also can be found in the details. In that case, a summary does not work as well as the full story.

Combine stories: You may be able to connect two stories into a single story, letting each illustrate the common point (rather than making the point through both stories).

In all of this, remember that sometimes "less is more." The truth of a story is, at times, more apparent when it has been cut to its bare essentials.

Creative Ways to Tell Your Story

There are other ways to tell your story than reading a manuscript or using notes. For example, if you are an artist, why not make a series of line drawings that illustrates key incidents in your spiritual autobiography? Then describe to the group what each drawing represents. Or you could raid your family photo albums and create a collage of your life from a spiritual point of view. Adding visual elements to your story will enhance it.

You might want to add an audio element—anything from segments of songs that were meaningful at different points in your life to the creation of "The Ballad of My Life," which you sing to the group.

You could redesign your spiritual autobiography as a parable, an epic poem, or a mystery tale. Don't be limited by the

genre of biography. On the other hand, don't be so obscure or fictional that the group has difficulty discovering the real you.

The important thing is to make sure that what you do is appropriate to who you are. Don't get fancy merely for the sake of being fancy. And don't be intimidated by the creativity of others. Do it your way, remembering that words always will be the central mode of communication.

The Use of Humor

Humor is a great tool in communication. To have a wry view of ourselves is a good thing. But some people are better with humor than others. Know your gifts! And don't use humor to hide. Sometimes a joke deflects attention away from a crucial issue. The challenge is to interject notes of lightness at appropriate points in your tale.

How Long Will It Take?

The actual time it takes to write a spiritual autobiography will vary from person to person. The scope of the job depends partly on your age. The older you are, the more you have to report. It also depends on how long you have been conscious of the spiritual side of life.

I have known people who put together a spiritual autobiography in a matter of hours. I have known people for whom it took weeks of hard work. Do what you need to do, given the time and circumstances you are working with.

And remember, your spiritual autobiography is meant to be told, not read. Therefore, the most important thing is to prepare in such a way that the tale will be told well.