
Bonnie Acker

New Scriptures

by Marcelle Martin

That all may know the dealings of the Lord with me, and the various exercises, trials, and troubles through which he led me in order to prepare and fit me for the work unto which he had appointed me, and may thereby be drawn to admire and glorify his infinite wisdom and goodness, I think fit (before I proceed to set forth my public travels in the service of Truth), briefly to mention how it was with me in my youth, and how the work of the Lord was begun and gradually carried on in me, even from my childhood.

Thus begins the autobiography of George Fox, called his journal, which he began dictating in 1674 or 1675, more than 20 years after he proclaimed the year of the Lord to a multitude from a rock on Firbank Fell. By the time Fox started composing his life story, it was evident what work God had prepared him to undertake. During the difficult years of his early seeking he suffered periods of tremendous unhappiness and temptation to despair and underwent a difficult purification process, during which he was shown that within him were the seeds of all evils in the world. In his early years of seeking God, he was "brought through the very ocean of darkness and death, and through the power and over the power of Satan," into what he testified was "the same power and Spirit that the prophets and apostles were in" and a sinless state. Divine Light, Truth, and transforming power were manifested through Fox's tireless ministry in subsequent decades. Thus, by the time he began his autobiography, it was evident that all his trials and troubles had served as preparation for his later work.

Those who write their spiritual autobiographies at an earlier stage in their lives, however, or whose life's work is not so striking, may write in order to understand for themselves the workings of God in their lives. I began keeping a journal as a young child, but since my early 30s have been feeling and responding to inner promptings to record the story of my life in a different way, focusing especially on the inner and spiritual dimensions of my experience. Some of the chief results of that work have been to see more clearly the shaping hand of God in my life, gradually to comprehend more of my life's purpose, and to have an ever clearer sense of where I am being led. I can therefore echo the words of Dorothy Day from the opening of her autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*: "I can write only of myself, what I know of myself, and I pray with St. Augustine, 'Lord, that I may know myself, in order to know Thee.' "

I am not motivated to write of my life merely to receive personal illumination, however. Like so many writers of spiritual autobiography, I, too, hope through written accounts of my life to testify to the reality and power of God, that others might be helped to know the divine Presence and be transformed. The opening lines of John Woolman's journal tell that it was love that motivated him to write an account of his spiritual experience: "I have often felt a motion of love to leave some hints in writing of my experience of the goodness of God." Dorothy Day speaks of the same loving impulse: "Writing a book is hard, because you are 'giving yourself away.' But if you love, you want to give yourself."

It was her experience of a fulfilling love with her common-law husband and the joy of their daughter's birth that moved Dorothy Day, until then a secularly oriented social radical, to turn to God with gratitude and praise, thereby reorienting her entire life. In contrast, many spiritual autobiographies, including George Fox's, reveal that the point when an individual turns away from worldly values to focus increasingly on the Divine often comes after a painful recognition of something very wrong in themselves or in the surrounding culture, or both. Dan Wakefield's recent spiritual autobiography, *Returning*, opens with a vivid description of a crisis when he was overwhelmed by the destructiveness of his worldly ways:

> One balmy spring morning in Hollywood, a month or so before my 48th birthday, I woke up screaming. I got out of bed, went into the next room, sat down on a couch, and screamed again.

The crisis in which he found himself gradually forced him to turn away from his former ways of living and return to the spirituality he had abandoned in childhood. Part of this process involved taking a course offered at his new church in "religious autobiography." Remembering, sharing, and writing about memories connected to his sense and experience of God gave him a new way to see his life. Writing this religious autobiography enabled him, he says, "to discern the spiritual direction of my own 'wandering path.' " *Returning* grew from this, and he began to teach the process to others. His subsequent book, *The Story of Your Life: Writing a Spiritual Autobiography*, is now a guide for many who wish to use writing to see the shape of their spiritual development and connect more consciously to the Divine. Wakefield insists that a clear concept or belief in God is not necessary:

> Anyone who feels the awareness of [the] universal force in their life can write a spiritual autobiography. A person who feels no such awareness but wants to discover it, or to find a meaning in the absence of it, could write about that search: this would also be spiritual autobiography.

Wakefield's recent books are not the only useful guides available to those wishing to write a spiritual autobiography. The Intensive Journal Process, developed

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in the 1960s and '70s by Ira Progoff, a proponent of depth psychology who studied with Jung, provides a systematic method of recalling all the important elements and experiences of one's life in a way that evokes wholeness and connects individuals with the spiritual nature and purpose of their lives.

After World War II, Progoff was haunted by the Nazi burning of sacred books. He often lay awake wondering what would happen if all the scriptures of the world were destroyed. One night he heard a voice, speaking in everyday tones, that answered his question: "We would, the voice said, simply draw new spiritual scriptures from the same great source out of which the old ones came." His opening is much like the one George Fox received that became a guiding principle for Friends, namely, the understanding that each can come into the same power and Spirit that the prophets and apostles were in when they wrote the Scriptures. The answer Progoff received to his question led to further inquiry and insight:

> If mankind has the power to draw additional spiritual scriptures out of the depth of itself, why do we have to wait for a tyrant to burn our Bibles before we let ourselves create further expressions of the spirit? . . . It may indeed be that the creation of multiple spiritual scriptures, and especially the extension of old scriptures, is an event that needs to happen in our time as part of the further qualitative evolution of our species.

Progoff developed the Intensive Journal method not only to help people contact their deep psychological and spiritual resources for individual integration, but also to encourage the process whereby holy scriptures of and for our time may be created by the collective testimony of numerous lives, as a valuable addition to the sacred scriptures of the past. Early Quakers, who kept spiritual journals and autobiographies in great numbers, may have been prompted, in part, by a similar motivation in corporately testifying to the work of God as manifested in their lives and times.

I have been helped in the ongoing process of writing my spiritual autobiography by workshops in the Intensive Journal Process and by Progoff's wonderful book, *At A Journal Workshop*; by *Life's Companion: Journal Writing as a Spiritual Quest* by Christina Baldwin; and by many other courses and books on using writing to tap into the deep springs of inner and spiritual experience.

I have learned that direct experience of the Divine cannot happen just through the thinking process; my mystical experiences have engaged not just my head but also my heart and my whole being. I am interested in Truth as it is revealed to, and experienced by, actual people in the context of their lives. I know God primarily through my own direct experience, and secondarily through the lived experiences of others, shared personally or in writing, including the Scriptures.

I have read dozens of moving and instructive spiritual autobiographies. In addition to George Fox's journal, those that have had the most profound impact on me include Carl Jung's *Memories, Dreams, Reflections; Grace and Grit* by Ken Wilber; *Peace Pilgrim: Her Life and Work in Her Own Words*; and *The Autobiography of a Yogi* by Paramahansa Yogananda. I look forward to reading many more, including classic autobiographies of Christian mystics.

The patterns of the spiritual life that are revealed by reading Scripture and spiritual autobiographies can help us understand the deep inner purpose of many of our experiences and help us to accept more fully the joys and challenges of the spiritual journey. Reading how the Divine has manifested intimately in the daily lives of numerous individuals gives me glimpses of how humanity is being collectively shaped by God in ways prophesied in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, scriptural promises that the first Quakers recognized as being fulfilled in their day through their direct experience of being taught and led by God and Christ:

> I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. None of them will have to teach his fellow countryman to know the Lord, because all will know me, from the least to the greatest. I will forgive their sins and I will no longer remember their wrongs. [Jer. 31:33–34]

Though I love to read the spiritual stories of others, both in scriptures and in biographies, I repeatedly feel called to turn away from books to read what God has written in my own heart. This process feels lonely and painful at times. It takes time and patience. Ultimately it requires facing everything I have been; even more frightening, it requires me to awaken to what I am called to become.

In the particulars, if not in the larger patterns, our lives are unique, and we are each uniquely called. Writing the story of our spiritual experience, in journal or autobiography, can help us to discern that call, step by step. Many of the most important experiences in our lives are like time-release capsules. When they happen, we learn from them in a certain way, but often their transforming energy is not released all at once but gradually, bit by bit, as we become ready to integrate the transformation they activated. When we stop to reflect on our experiences at intervals later in our lives, as we do when

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On Paying Attention

by Amy Runge Gaffney

The disciplines writers practice are mostly internal and self-imposed. Perhaps the most challenging is that of paying attention. Paying attention to what is truly going on around and within us takes effort.

The "bug under the rug" is that the discipline of paying attention will inevitably push us at times to realizations that are difficult or painful. Some will require us to take actions we'd rather not take; others will place us in quandaries from which there seems to be no escape. In this way, a writer's discipline can be personally challenging. The alternative to paying attention to life's realities—and ambiguities—is an endless number of small deaths: of experiences gone unrecognized and unappreciated; of missed opportunities to experience the world, to learn and grow. Lifeless writing is a result as well. Closing our eyes and our hearts to the truth of our experience reduces our observations to pap. ❑

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writing our autobiography, we learn from them in new ways.

Some may fear that writing a spiritual autobiography is not time well spent. Though we can indeed become self-indulgent when writing about ourselves, ultimately recounting and understanding the story of our inner development is not solipsistic work, for if we go deeply enough within, we discover our intimate connections with all creation and with creation's Source. Doing so leads us into more profound spiritual experience and understanding, and ultimately takes us out into the world to share our transformation. If Friends turn inward intensively enough to contact and clearly hear the Guide, we will all be led to play our given roles in blessing others. The act of changing the world must come as a consequence of our inner change and as a manifestation of God's intention; it must not merely be an acting out of our own agendas, however lofty.. As John Woolman explained, while discussing how he was taught to become a "channel of the true gospel ministry":

> From an inward purifying and steadfast abiding under [the pure Spirit], springs a lively operative desire for the good of others. All faithful people are not called to public ministry, but whoever are, are called to minister of that which they have tasted and handled spiritually.

If Friends are not having the transforming effect in the world that we once did, perhaps it is because we are not going inward deeply enough to be truly purified; maybe we are not reading the law that is written on our hearts; maybe we have not digested our own spiritual experiences well enough to make a transforming testimony; maybe we don't know the Divine as intimately as we are invited to do; and maybe we are not surrendering to the Light, individually and collectively, sufficiently to become channels of the true gospel ministry, as John Woolman was. To become the agents for the Spirit's transformation of human culture that we aspire to be, we must become highly sensitive to the operations of the Light within us, that it might flow through us without impediment. Keeping a journal of one's inner life and writing a spiritual autobiography can be powerful ways to open oneself to the movement of the Spirit. ❑

Buttoned

by Gillie Bolton

Opening the button box can be taking the lid off a Box of Delights. No one has button boxes these days, I'm told: worn clothes are thrown away. I have two. One contains practical all-sorts and lives near needles and cottons.

The other button tin is kept with my work equipment, alongside shells, skulls, birds' nests, and so on (if you can imagine what such a so on could be). Its use is to create magical journeys: whether out into fictions of who could possibly have worn such outrageous glittery things; or inwards, perhaps towards memories of the clothes mother made.

My work is with all kinds of different people. Some are groups of unemployed people at one of the residential colleges. Most of them, however, are health professionals who expend energy, time, and love caring for other people. They have little time and almost no encouragement to reflect productively on the sometimes painful, sometimes elating, aspects of their work.

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I run courses offering them space to explore aspects of their professional selves and whatever aspects of their private selves seem appropriate. The medium we use for these explorations is a powerful and sensitive therapeutic tool that, having practiced, they can use with their clients or patients.

We write together. We listen intently, laugh, and cry at each other's stories. Everyone comes thinking only writers or academics or very clever people can write. They go home clutching a new knowledge to themselves: they can write vivid accounts. These stories have not only created intense interest and response for the rest of the group, but have opened up fresh avenues of thinking and feeling, fresh experiences.

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Writing about things helps sort them out; it gently pushes understandings deeper; it creates fresh angles and insights; it is private—no one need read it, ever; it can be burnt along with the angry or fearful feeling; it can still be there the next day in the same form to be extended, drawn upon, reconsidered, perhaps opinions reversed.

And buttons? Many, many things can set one musing and exploring in writing. A pile of buttons, laid out on the floor and played with by group (an in-service training day school at Leeds University), made one woman remember her first pair of jeans—bought by herself aged 13. We had begun with group members each choosing a set of buttons for a partner. We were all strangers to each other, so this became a delicate and delightful sort of introduction.

Many of us wrote about childhood clothes. One man explored feelings of being buttoned in, buttoned up in his work. Another woman wrote about the way buttons connect two halves together temporarily, as in sex and love.

A button box could be a Pandora's Box, offering images to one of my group's patients for the exploration in writing of otherwise impossible memories or fears. Oddly enough, for a female-associated and feminine-shaped object, the word *button* derives from one meaning strike or thrust. I certainly find they have a surprising impact. ❑

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In the Silence

by Vic Kryston

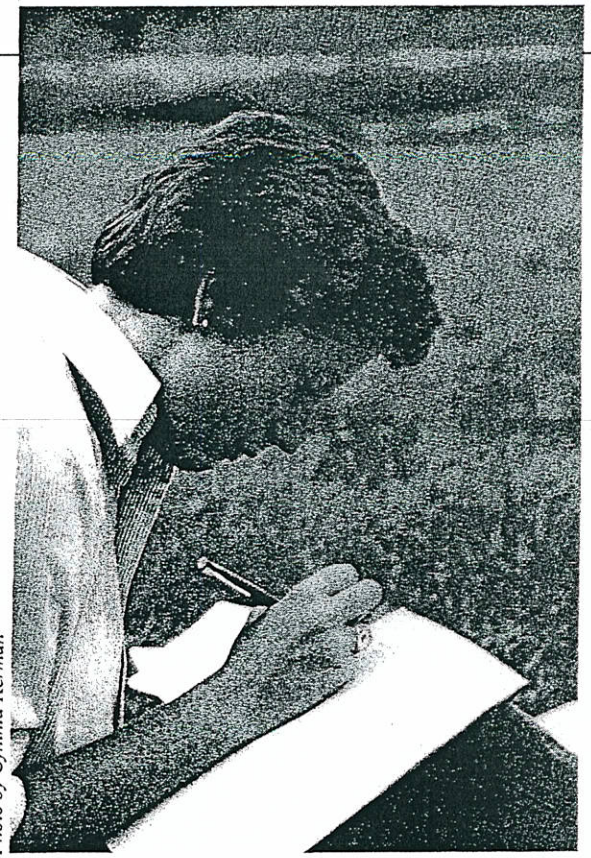

Photo by Cynthia Kerman

I speak out of the silence. About 20 of us have gathered at Goose Creek (Va.) Meetinghouse one fall morning, not for meeting for worship but for a workshop in Ira Progoff's Intensive Journal. I tell those gathered the general idea behind the structure of the Intensive Journal. Unlike traditional journaling, the Intensive Journal is a structure that presents exercises designed to have us look at our lives in fresh and affirming ways. I explain that we should work toward making our writing as free, open, honest, and spontaneous as possible, and not to be concerned with issues of grammar or rhetoric; we are here to witness our thoughts, not to judge them. We will write knowing that no one else will ever read our journals without our permission.

We look at the journal book itself. It is a three-ring, loose-leaf binder, an easy device to add future writings. The book comes equipped with 21 color-coded dividers that mark off particular kinds of writings. All of our work is dated, this so we may return in future years and read what we have written on any given day: an invaluable aid to discovering all of the movements in our lives. On the cover is a circle surrounding a center point from which—or is it to which?—radiate a full supply of lines. Or rays? Or directions?

In my training to become an Intensive Journal consultant, I learned to end each set of directions with the phrase, "in the silence." Everyone is delighted by how particularly fitting a phrase this is given our location. I'm sure George Fox would approve.

In the Period Log we describe our own particular present moment. What is happening in our lives now? Who are the people, the projects, the feelings, the activities that fill our lives at this time in our journey? I suggest as a way to begin the words, "Now is a time in my life when . . . ," and we write, the silence broken only by the soft whispers of pens marking our lives across journal paper. This writing will act as an anchor, a place to which all of the other work we do this weekend will connect.

Writing the Period Log is a fairly straightforward description, but a straightforward description is not the only way to account for what we experience. In doing this kind of journaling it is important to honor a deeper, more symbolic way of thinking. And so we sit in the silence, witnessing the random images that come to us all day long. Ephemeral glimpses of images that seem too meaningless, too irrelevant, to be of any use. When we are asleep, we call these images "dreams." When we are in an Intensive Journal Workshop, we call them "Twilight Images." Come to find out, the images that present themselves are another way of thinking about the concerns we describe in the Period Log. I notice more and more heads nod as people begin to see how their own connections play out.

Who we are today is formed by what we've experienced before. We list 12 or so "significant" events in our lives that come to us from the silence. "Significant" is meant to be a neutral term; it is neither good nor bad. Failures are equally important as successes. Nor do we mean significant in other people's terms; learning to blow bubbles with bubble gum was a significant moment to me, but perhaps not to anyone else at the workshop. All of our lives have both high and low points, and it is a good thing to look back over these highlights to catch the rhythm of life.

We list quickly, allowing only a phrase or two to sum up these moments. The somewhat arbitrary goal and limit of 12 Stepping-stones are enough to give us a sense of our life's movements, but few enough to cause us to make some forced choices.

The connections become more and more clear as we work to re-enter those times. Each Steppingstone event carries with it an embedded collection of memories, ideas, feelings, and the like. We write to remember as much of them as we can. And as we write we find we are flooded with details and observations of those distant moments, discovering, perhaps, that making those choices, or having choices made for us, resemble in no small way the process we experience making choices in our lives today.

After the workshop, having learned the process, people will write whatever exercises to which they feel drawn. But in the workshop there is a structure. During the closing exercises we look at the structure and what has happened to us individually: our histories, our relationships, our inner and outer lives.

We review what we have written, making notes to ourselves about what might be written next. And then, we look at ourselves standing on the edge of a present moment, making written testament about where we've been and where we are going. ❑

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