

A spiritual practice that seeks to discern the presence and movement of God in your life

Psalm 18:1-2

The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer;
my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge,
my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold

An introduction to journaling, by Romilly Mark Janes

There are many ways of strengthening your spiritual life; among these is the practice of journaling. As I begin to write about journaling, a curious thought has popped into my mind. I wonder if you know the difference between an alligator and a crocodile. Not many people do. I certainly don't. In a similar way many people don't know the difference between a journal and a diary.

Many of us will have kept diaries in the course of our lives. I have my diary from 1979 which appals and fascinates me in equal measure. Other people's diaries can be fascinating to read too. In recent years the diaries of Housewife 49, Nella Last, which she recorded for Mass Observation during and after WWII, have been published following a television dramatisation starring Victoria Wood. There was nothing extraordinary about Nella Last but she has a remarkable ability to describe the ordinary and everyday in ways which shine a light on a world that has disappeared. Diaries like this are fascinating but they are not journals; a journal is not a diary, any more than a crocodile is an alligator.

Like diaries, a journal may be concerned with the ordinary, everyday experiences of life but whereas a diary is seeking to record these events, a journal is seeking to ask questions about them.

I want to commend journaling to you as a spiritual practice that seeks to discern the presence and movement of God in your life; you might call it spiritual journaling. You don't need to be a great wordsmith; you're not writing for publication but you do need a willingness to express yourself in written words. For some people this will be easy and others will find it more challenging. The best advice I can give you is to just write. It doesn't need to be profound or earth shattering, it can be as simple as describing what put a smile on your face today and adding the words, thank you God.

Thanksgiving is a really good place to begin journaling - simply naming what you are grateful for and acknowledging if you see the presence of God in any of these things. Thanksgiving taps into your emotions, which is good because it's so important to keep it real and to be honest with yourself. You don't need to impress anyone else, so you can tell it like it is. As you name these things you may also be reminded of things that you

struggle to give thanks for and that may lead you to reflect on why these things are difficult or troublesome. Naming these and offering them to God may lead you into prayer. Journaling isn't an alternative to prayer but may lead you into prayer. Journaling may help resolve things in your mind, but it is more likely to lead you to a place where you can offer the questions and tensions in your life to God, with quiet confidence in his presence and grace.

Although your journal is personal and private you may choose to share extracts of it with someone else, such as a spiritual director, if you are exploring your spiritual life and growth with them. I have sometimes done this and valued the opportunity to listen to someone else reflect back to me their own quiet insights and perspective on what I have written, without confusing their thoughts with my own.

People journal in many ways and everyone needs to find a way that is good for them.

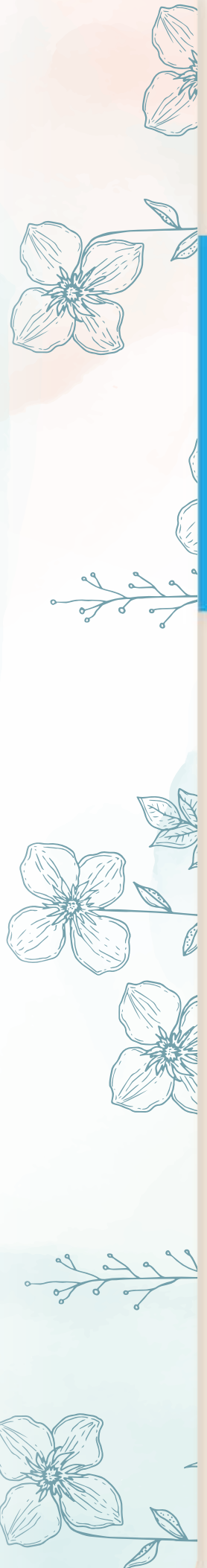
My own take two forms. I began journaling in small red notebooks, hardbacked so I could easily write in them and small enough that I could drop one in my pocket. I always write with a particular kind of pen which helps with the flow. If I want to write when I am walking, this kind of notebook is very helpful. My entries in these notebooks were often quite random reflections on what was happening and what I observed. Sometimes I would write a prayer or simply draw what I could see as a doodle in the margins. This kind of journaling was especially helpful when I was on sabbatical and my mind was still enough to think more deeply.

I also journal on my laptop. This is a more deliberate form of journaling in which I choose to sit at my desk and write an entry, usually on the same morning of each week. Sometimes, the words simply flow as I begin to name the things that concern me and sometimes it is more hesitant and uncertain. When I am stuck, I try to describe my feelings without analysing them and then begin to ask questions. Here are five questions that could open up journaling for you.

- What am I thankful for?
- What am I struggling to give thanks for?
- What is troubling or disturbing me?
- What do I need to confess?
- Can I discern the presence of God and the signs of God's grace in my life?

To be honest with you, my journaling ebbs and flows. There are times when I am constantly journaling and spells when I hardly journal at all, but I always return to it and am glad of the space it creates in my life.

When I open a journal from five or ten years I ago I am sometimes surprised by what I read; there are my responses to trials and troubles I hardly remember now, moments of recognition and even joy that stir me and moments when my life seemed to have passed from one chapter into another. Keeping your journals gives you the opportunity to see where you have come from, like a walker ascending a steep hill and suddenly glimpsing the valley they walked through to reach this point.



During the pandemic, journaling took on a new urgency as I struggled to make sense of what was happening to us all. I welcomed the additional time to write and reflect at home but found myself moody, uncertain and sometimes appalled. Journaling helped me to affirm that God is still God when other things are stripped away and to process my grief when people I loved and respected died. Reading that journal again has helped me recognise the trauma we have all shared and the unique experiences we have each had.

I commend the practice of journaling to you. Find your own way of doing it but do it intentionally and see what emerges, offering it prayerfully to God who knows us completely and has promised the day will come when we shall know fully, even as we are fully known.



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