The Role of a Spiritual Autobiography

A spiritual autobiography is the story of God's interaction in our lives. It is a chronicle of our pilgrimage as we seek to follow after God.

The first spiritual autobiography to be printed was written by Saint Augustine at the end of the fourth century A.D. *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* is a classic of spiritual writing that has influenced countless individuals down through the ages. The title, Confessions, has the double meaning of confession as praise to God and confession of one’s faults to others. In the Confessions Augustine describes how God rescued him from his wayward life and false beliefs. He chronicles both the high points in his interaction with God (e.g., his conversion; the mystical experience he shared with this mother Monica) and the low points in his life (his taking of a mistress and later sending her away; his hedonistic lifestyle). But in all of the ups and downs of his life, the reader detects a note of astonishment on the part of Augustine. He is amazed that God in his grace rescued him from his errant ideas and self-destructive behavior.

Many other spiritual autobiographies have been written since Augustine's groundbreaking effort. In the seventeenth century, the Puritans wrote spiritual autobiographies, stimulated by their need to give a personal testimony in order to become members of the church. Recently, spiritual autobiography has become a major genre in Christian literature. For example, hundreds of thousands of people on both sides of the Atlantic have read about C. S. Lewis' journey to faith in *Surprised by Joy*. They have read about his ongoing pilgrimage in the scores of letters Lewis wrote to correspondents around the world (e.g., Letters to an American Lady). Then there is Thomas Merton's *Seven Storey Mountain* in which he tells of his pilgrimage from being a cynical intellectual to becoming a Trappist monk. Merton has helped many to understand the monastic life. Dan Wakefield, screenwriter and author, tells the story of his spiritual journey in *Returning*. He subsequently wrote *The Story of Your Life: Writing a Spiritual Autobiography* in which he helps others in this process. Spiritual autobiography has become a significant form of spiritual exploration.

Spiritual autobiography is not limited to great saints and their extraordinary deeds nor to literary giants who can write with clarity and force. We all have the ability to write a spiritual autobiography. In fact, each person has a story to tell. Every one of us could write a spiritual autobiography because God is active in each of our lives. Now to be sure, persistent refusal to hear and heed that Voice reduces it to a mere whisper and relegates it to the background of many lives. And more than a few people would be surprised to hear that they have anything to write about God. And yet when considered, there are hints of the divine in all lives: long-forgotten childhood experiences of God's presence; answers to prayer that were quickly shrugged off as "coincidence"; grace in the midst of pain; moments of joy that rush in unexpectedly; responses to nature that draw us outward; deep suspicion that maybe our mechanistic "explanations" to the way the universe operates are not quite as sound as we would like them to be; encounters with powers that are quite beyond us; worship that we did not initiate and could not contain; a sense of blessing that gives us hope and direction; a knowledge that somehow we are significant in this world. God is alive and active in his universe and when we start to notice, it is hard to stop the process.

This is one reason why it is so useful to write a spiritual autobiography. It puts us in touch with the way things really are in life and draws us toward the true meaning of life; it reveals unnoticed but foundational aspects of our lives; it draws the strands of our lives together in a creative way that points us to the purpose and meaning of our lives; it reminds us of where true reality lies over against the illusions of modern life. In a sentence, a spiritual autobiography encourages us to notice God and, in noticing, our lives are changed.
Writing a spiritual autobiography is best done in the company of others who are engaged in the same task. We motivate each other to continue with the exploration; we encourage each other when the writing slows down; and most importantly, we are there to hear the finished work because the telling of our tale is very important.

**Spiritual Autobiography and Ordinary Autobiography**

One issue you will face is how to sort out the "spiritual" dimensions of your life from all of the other dimensions. In the absolute sense, of course, this is not possible. Life does not fit into neat categories, nor does God operate only in a carefully prescribed realm. In fact, God is present in all aspects of life: in the ordinary acts of eating ("Give us this day our daily bread"), sleeping (the people in the Bible knew that God could and did speak through "night visions"), and making love (God is the one who gave us our sexual natures). God is found in events, in our choices, and, especially, in our relationships. It is often through the "ordinary" that we encounter the "extraordinary". It is out of the mundane, everyday stuff of life that we forge our understanding of the spiritual. God's presence is written in nature, in our musings, and in the routine activities that take up so much of our time. God is everywhere. So a spiritual autobiography is not easily disentangled from the rest of our story, nor is it intended to be.

But after having said this, I also need to say that there is a spiritual dimension to life and that it is possible to identify this. What distinguishes a spiritual autobiography from an ordinary autobiography is the lens through which we look at our lives. In this case, we view our lives through the lens of the spiritual and search for God's footprints in our unfolding lives. We focus on the aspects that reveal to us the activity of God. What distinguishes a spiritual autobiography from ordinary autobiography is the, search for the presence of God.

A spiritual autobiography, on the other hand, is told in order to see the activity of God.

But here is the rub. Most of the time we don't notice the spiritual. God is like the air we breathe. We merely assume God, just as we assume air. So this is the challenge in a spiritual autobiography: to notice God. This defines the nature of the hunt: to know God in as many ways as we can. We dare not simply say: "God is everywhere" (which is true) and then claim, "So what more can I say?" (which is a cop-out). We must start by identifying those seminal points when we have been aware of God. These may be major events (the birth of a child, a wedding, a funeral, a conversion) or hints of transcendence (the joy of a sunset, being moved by music or poetry, being struck by a passage of Scripture that helps make sense out of a problem).

To write a spiritual autobiography is to learn a new way of seeing. It is to bridge the gap between the natural and the spiritual. It is to become newly sensitive to the hidden work of God. It is to live simultaneously in the two worlds we were created to inhabit—the spiritual and the physical—and in the process to become a whole person. This is why spiritual autobiography can be called a spiritual discipline: it is teaching us a new way of seeing; it is bringing the sense of God into the immediacy of life; it is noticing God.