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CHAPTER I

The Joy of Journaling

I've been journaling my prayers on and off since 1997. Currently, I'm in one of my "on" times and wonder why I ever put the pen down. Although I don't put pen to paper every day, I'm consistent enough at it that I'm really happy with what I do.

But it hasn't always been that way. My wife bought me my first journal for Christmas in 1997. She also gave me a devotional book to go along with it, so for my 1998 New Year's resolution, I decided to keep a daily journal. It was a short-lived resolution. I quickly ran out of steam, or discipline, as the case may be. I made only three consecutive daily entries before I started missing a day here, a day there. I set my pen down and quit by January 21. The last line of my 1998 journaling experience reads: "I hope/pray I'll find a better prayer life than I currently have."

Failure is in the eye of the beholder, I always say. Although I wanted a better prayer and journaling life, I never looked at what I'd done as a failure, just a false start. In 1999 I started journaling again, only this time I resolved that if I quit, that would be okay. So I started writing. And then I stopped. But

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because I hadn't beaten myself up for it, a couple of months later I started again. By 2000 I'd become consistent enough in my journaling that I could go back and read with great joy the things that had touched me during the previous year. I was a journaler!

Journaling isn't new. Cave walls around the world have paintings and etchings recording ancient everyday life events. Much later, in the fourth century, Augustine of Hippo wrote the book *Confessions*, widely considered the first autobiography, and a forerunner of the modern-day journal. Later, in tenth-century Japan, women began keeping pillow-books that chronicled these women's hopes, their dreams, snippets of gossip, and daily events. Beginning in the Victorian age of England, both men and women began recording their thoughts and reflections in journals that resemble our modern-day journals and diaries. These journals recorded some of the most innocuous and mundane details about their lives, but also contained deep and powerful reflections on their thoughts. It is this kind of reflection that provides a gateway to journaling as kinesthetic prayer.

Journaling as Kinesthetic Prayer

People who can't sit still need to be doing something in order to accomplish something else. In my case, it's like my body and my mind cannot work independently; instead they have to be doing something together. So when the pastor says, "Let's bow our heads and pray" my mind gets ready to tune out, anticipating the moments of stillness during the prayer. For many of us, when it comes to praying, movement is as important as the words we offer.

Journaling is one way I can stay tuned in to prayer. Although some prefer using a computer for their journaling, I particularly enjoy using pen and paper. I like the feel and the look of ink marrying itself to a page. In either case, the act of kinesthetically creating words to express yourself can move you into a place of quiet reflection and even contemplation.

On the other hand, some may need more stimulation than just a pen and tablet. Younger children and some of us with a high level of hyperactivity may find journaling to be just a bit too sedate. If you think this describes you, there are plenty of more active prayers in later chapters; however, I would invite you to try journaling for a week to see if it works for you. I was surprised. Once I learned how to effectively use my journal as a prayer tool, I discovered just how meaningful my writing can be and how close I found myself to God.

The ABCs of Journaling as Prayer

Journaling is a rather simple task that may need little introduction for some. On the other hand, journaling as a prayer exercise has a slightly different nuance than writing in your diary so that you can remind yourself of what you did today when you read about it four years from now.

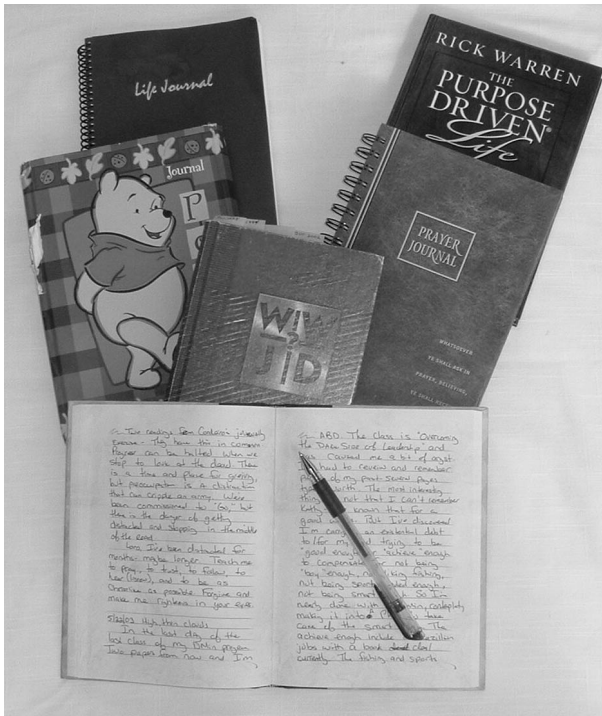
There are only two parts to journaling as prayer: the tools you use and the text you write.

The Tools of Journaling

Whenever you journal, consider that you're participating in the world of creativity. Writing is an art form, and there can be something intrinsically satisfying about crafting words that reflect deep and sometimes profound meaning. When it comes to journaling as prayer, you will want to be doubly aware that what you are doing has significance. The words you write are addressed from your heart to the Divine Spirit, and though God is pleased whenever you're in conversation, you will want to put your best foot forward. So no matter what form of prayer journaling you use, consider choosing tools of quality, if for no other reason than to remind yourself of the importance of what you're doing.

Depending on what works best for you, there are two basic sets of tools for prayer journaling: pen and paper, or a computer. We'll deal with the tool sets separately, since there are advantages and disadvantages to both.

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A few of the author's journals

I have tried pen and paper, as well as using a computer, for journaling. For me, there's nothing like gripping a pen and pouring out my thoughts on paper. Although there are any number of tablets, diaries, and journals available at any office supply, stationary, or book store, once you get started journaling, you may find yourself gifted with an almost endless supply of journals from friends and relatives. Personally, I prefer journals that lay flat when I write on them, rather than those that bow from the middle as many bound journaling books do.

Most journals are not prohibitively expensive—you can pick one up in almost any bookstore or office supply store. However, there are some really nice alternatives for those with more discretionary income. Handmade journals have gained popularity over the past few years. These journals not only have

artistic covers, but many are bound with handmade paper that has a unique texture. These handmade journals are often available at local art shows and online. However, no matter what kind of journal you use, whether store-bought or handmade, I recommend getting one with acid-free paper so that you leave a legacy that will last.

When it comes to writing instruments, the sky's the limit and the choices are almost endless. Today you can buy pens and pencils not only in a variety of colors, but with a variety of scents, textures, and even metallic glitter. These are not only pleasing to use, but are pleasing to the eye. Fountain pens are also a luxury item that can make your writing literally flow. However, on a personal note, I've tried to use fountain pens only to discover that I make more of a mess than not. Regardless of what you use, some care in the writing, as well as the medium, can elevate your writing to something beyond simply your thoughts, but truly a work of art on multiple levels.

Then there is computer journaling. The use of computers in journaling has become relatively common over the past few years. A majority of people in the U.S. have access to a computer, and computer literacy is rising rapidly. Journaling on a computer is every bit as kinesthetic as using pen and ink. There is something instinctively satisfying when fingers fly across the keyboard and words appear on the screen.

There are dozens of word processing programs that are useful journaling tools. Many programs have a password protect feature that allows you to maintain your privacy. There are also special journaling software programs such as *Life Journal* and VistaWrite's *Journal*. You can find both of these at latebloomerpublishing.com. Cosmi makes a journaling program called *Portable Journal* that works on both computer and PDA platforms for those of us married to mobility. The advantage of software journaling programs is that they can be helpful in stimulating the writing process. However, the disadvantage is that they may force your writings into artificial directions rather than pointing your mind toward prayer.

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Recently, the phenomenon of “blogging” has come to the forefront of computer journaling. The word *blog* is a contraction of the term “Web Log.” A blog is a journal that is generally posted online for the world to see. I used a blog for a while, but in the end decided I wasn't quite as open, honest, and transparent using it as I was when I knew God and I were the only ones who were likely to read my entries. On the other hand, blogging can be quite cathartic, since the whole world is invited to share in your joys, anxieties, hopes, and fears. There are a number of blogging Web sites available online, but you can find the most used site at www.blogger.com.

The Art of Journaling

Different prayer journaling styles fit a variety of needs. Some of these will catch your fancy, and others may not. I would invite you to try each one a couple of times. You will find that you use one or two styles regularly, but the others are helpful when you are looking for specific results.

Devotional Prayer Journaling

For those of us who can't sit still, the thought of “having” to do devotions can be agonizing. For most of us, “doing devotions” means we have to find a quiet place with few distractions so that we can read a sacred text—whether that be the Bible or some other writing that moves our soul—then read some sort of devotional book to help our first reading “assignment” make sense, and finally we have to try to sit still and pray silently for some unspecified, but lengthy, period of time. Some have even tried to add journaling to the to-do list of daily devotionals.

Devotional prayer journaling, however, can actually be a kinesthete's joy. I like to do my devotional prayer journaling in my local coffee shop, where the distractions are plentiful. Armed with a copy of a sacred text, my journal, and a pen, I take over a table with a muffin and latte in hand. This takes a lot of the regimen out of my devotions and I find I can relax and spend quality time with the Divine.

To practice devotional prayer journaling, begin with a quiet prayer asking God to speak to you through your reading and writing. Then take a few minutes to find your center by closing your eyes, breathing deeply, and listening to your heart. I tend to take a sip of my sugar-free, hazelnut, fat-free, single ristretto, no-foam latte and then close my eyes as I savor the flavor. In those moments, I take a few deep breaths and focus my thoughts on God. When I open my eyes, I am ready to read reflectively, as you will be too. As you do, “listen” to your spirit to see which words or passages catch your interest or imagination. Underline or highlight these lines. You may even want to jot a few notes in the margins to remind you of whatever caught your eye.

When you finish reading (and in a coffee shop that could take awhile), go back and reflect on what you’ve underlined. Then you are ready to begin your journaling exercise. One of the most effective tools I’ve discovered is a simple three-part journaling exercise I call R³ (“R Cubed”) that can help you focus on what God may be saying to you through the sacred writings.

The three Rs are *Recall*, *Reflect*, and *Respond*. (See page 17 for an example of an R³ journal entry.)

RECALL

As you look back over those passages that jumped out at you, choose the one that seems to be making the most urgent claim on your spirit. Copy this passage and its reference in your journal. You will want to do this so that when you reread your writings in the future, you won’t have to try to ferret out whatever sacred writing you used in order for the journal entry to make sense.

REFLECT

When you’ve finished copying the passage, let your pen take over as you begin to reflect on why this passage was calling your name. What caught your attention? Was it disturbing? confusing? Did it evoke an emotional response? Is something going on in your life that this passage may relate to? As you reflect on the

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passage, begin to steer your writing toward what this passage is saying to you. What is God trying to teach you? How does this passage relate to your life? What are you feeling called to do? How will you respond? This last question is the one that leads to the final part of the journaling exercise.

RESPOND

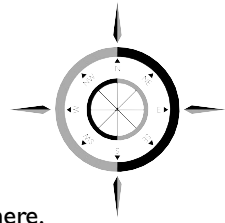
Begin to wind down your writing by offering a written prayer—a commitment—to the Divine. This can be as brief as a single sentence, while at other times you may let it go on for a page or more, depending on how you were touched during your writing. The goal of this section is to respond honestly to what you've felt and heard during your reading and writing. If you're feeling contrite, let your writing reflect that. If you're angry, let God know. I've learned that whenever my response is not absolutely honest, my writing rings hollow and my journal entry leaves me unsatisfied, as if my prayer time was empty. However, if you're willing to be completely honest, even if your honesty seems not-so-nice, God will honor your time and you will find that you go away thoughtful and fulfilled. Don't forget, you can always go back later to write more as you process your feelings.

Event Journaling

A second journaling exercise to try is event journaling. It's been said that life is 10 percent what happens to you, and 90 percent how you respond to the 10 percent. Many of us don't take the time to reflect on what's happening in our lives, so we regularly miss the opportunity to benefit from life's lessons.

To experience this form of prayer, use the R³ format described above to get started. Although you can journal about any event in your life, I've discovered the ones that make the most impact are those where I've made a mess of things. For those of us who can't sit still, this often means doing or saying something that was less than appropriate, often without even knowing it. When we find out what we've done, event journaling is one of the best tools to reflect and learn from the incident.

R³ Journaling



Recall

What scripture touched or intrigued you? Write it here.

(Gal. 4:6–7) Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.

Reflect

What is it that touched or intrigued you? Reflect on that here.

Abba is Greek for daddy, like what a little kid calls their father. When I read this passage I had to wonder what it would be like to have a relationship with God like that. I tend to see God as so much bigger and royal and awesome to think that God can be like a daddy. But it isn't me who calls God daddy, but the Spirit. It may be beyond me to be able to fathom God's "daddy-ship," but the Holy Spirit gets it, and as Paul wrote in Romans 8:26, when we don't know how to pray, the Spirit takes over on our behalf. I think I'd like to have God as a daddy. He's already my Lord, Savior, and God, but I want that intimate relationship Paul speaks of here where I'm not just a son, but a child in God's arms.

Respond

Write your prayer response to these insights here.

God, the notion of being your child young, innocent, and just childlike is beyond my "gone-to-college and more" intellect. Help me to let go of my intellect enough to allow you to be my Abba—my daddy. Amen

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Begin by finding your center and then prayerfully recalling the event. Record the event in as much detail as you can remember. It's easy to retell the event without being totally honest, so make it a habit to be painfully truthful about your words and actions. When you've finished this, pause for a few moments to ask the Divine to help you learn from your experience, and then begin writing your reflection.

As you reflect, ask yourself a couple of questions. What was your part in the event? What did you do right and what could you have handled better? Reflect on how you'd have preferred the event to unfold and find its resolution. Then take some time to ponder what you could have done to bring about that preferred resolution. Be open to the still, small voice or nudging of God as you write. Your reflections should include your innermost thoughts and insights as you wrestle with God about the situation.

As you begin to wind up your reflections, try to synthesize what you've discovered into a single sentence. This should be your "Aha!" of what you've learned from reflecting on the event. Over the years you may find yourself repeating these same "aha!" lessons, to your own chagrin. When I've looked back over my own journal and realized I've written the same "aha's!" over and over again, I discover I am more firmly resolved to not repeat the same mistake another time. Miraculously, it seems, when I write these reflections in my journal I find that I begin to make the same mistake a little less frequently.

Finally, take the time to respond. What is it you need to do to follow-up with this event? Do you need to make amends, make a personal change in your habits, or make a connection with someone you've avoided? Write these thoughts in the form of a prayer, committing your actions, words, and what you've learned before God.

Other R³ Journaling Exercises

There are a number of other R³ journaling exercises that you can put to good use. All of these use the R³ format of *Recall*,

Reflect, and *Respond* in order to help focus your heart and mind on prayer.

Dream journaling has long been a part of the journaling genre. I keep a separate dream journal next to the bed, with a lighted pen by it, to jot down any midnight dreams that awaken me. You will discover that by jotting down the details in a bedside dream journal and then applying the R³ journaling tools the next day in your regular journal, you will be better able to process your dreams. Sometimes you may discover meanings or deep-seated concerns in your dreams, while at other times you may hear God speaking about some task before you. In any event, the practice of R³ journaling can help you to understand your deepest thoughts and emotions and help commit them to God.

Another journaling technique I practice comes from my reading habits. Many of us read a near overdose prescription of self-help books on leadership, spirituality, and the like. At the end of many of the chapters in these books are study guides with questions that most of us seldom take the time to reflect on while reading the book. I invite you to jot the questions down on sticky-notes and stick them on the inside cover of your journal for later. Make a habit of glancing over the questions (for example, Who is the most effective leader whom you followed?) regularly to see if one of them catches your spirit. When it does, prayerfully apply the R³ pattern to the question as you journal.

Over the years, this has given me an incredible wealth of insights into my own spiritual and emotional life. This exercise can help all of us become better persons as we reflect on who we are in relationship to our world and with God.

Journaling Letters to God

Another style of journaling is writing a letter to God. For many people, prayer is more like a letter than a conversation, so journaling a letter to God can be a natural extension of that experience.

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Journaling a letter to God is not unlike writing a letter to a friend, except that it doesn't take a stamp or an e-mail address. To journal a letter to God, begin as if you were writing any other letter: "Dear God." Most of the time when we write a letter, we spend an inordinate amount of space on small talk. However, if you're going to write a letter to the Divine, consider getting right to the point. Whether you're going to ask God for a favor, a blessing, or some other request, don't spend a lot of time mincing words.

As you write, consider spending some extra time trying to convince God of whatever it is you're asking for. This isn't so much to convince God to relent, but to clarify that you really understand what you're praying. Sometimes as you write these letters, you may begin to understand that you really don't need or want what you're asking for. On the other hand, there are times when you will discover just how badly you depend on God and you may be moved to break into a paragraph of gratitude. Whatever the emotions you feel as you write, get them down on paper. The Divine already knows your heart; you're just illuminating your feelings.

Again, as you're writing, try to keep attuned to your spirit in order to hear God speaking as you write and reflect. That way, if you sense God giving you an answer, you can adjust the letter writing to suit your heart.

Journaling a Conversation with God

Of all the journaling styles I engage in, this is the one that takes the most time, fills up the most pages in my journal, and often yields the best results. Journaling a conversation means to literally write down the words you would be saying aloud if you and God were having a one-on-one conversation.

Typically, I journal conversations with God in the midst of when I'm using some other style. In the middle of a paragraph I'll realize that I'm engaged in a two-way conversation. It generally begins when I've written a line or two as a prayer and I hear that still, small inner voice within me responding. So I'll

write what I've heard and then respond to that. As I do, I realize that I'm writing a full conversation with God.

These conversations often happen when I'm in a place to "discuss my life" with God, meaning that I have something I need to talk over with God. It may be about a decision I need to make, it may be a personal issue I'm dealing with, or it may be a mood I'm in. But invariably they just begin.

Below is an example of a conversation I recently journaled. Notice that the conversation began in the midst of a reflection.

I get caught up in the nonessentials—except that everything I'm doing right now is essential. So here I am. Haven't cracked my Bible yet...waiting for God to lead. But God asks if I'm going to follow if He leads? I say, "Yes." He says, "then why are you worrying and fretting?"

"Because if I can't trust *me* to do what needs to get done, how can I trust you?"

"So, you've created me in *your* image?"

"I guess so," I respond. And I think, *how absurd*. Then I wonder, *just how real is the Lord? a figment?* No, I've seen the Lord work and I've felt His presence.

"Clearly that's more than you could manage on your own."

"Yes, but you're asking me to walk blindly," I add limply.

"Who's driving?"

"I am."

"How's that working for you?"

The conversation goes on for three handwritten pages, but in the end I respond by making a commitment to surrender the steering wheel of my life, at least regarding the issue I was dealing with at the time.

To engage in this kind of exercise, you have to be willing to allow the voice in your mind to speak through your writing. Begin by finding a good centering place and then turn your

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attention to God. This is critical in this exercise, since you'll want to be fully attuned to the voice of the Divine rather than to your own thoughts. When you feel fully secure in God's presence, begin by writing a prayer thought. Then pause and listen to your heart to see if there is some response. If there is, write this down in the words you hear. Then respond to this thought, and so on.

Probably the most important thing to do happens when you've finished the conversation. When you are done, go back and read what you've written. Reflect on the words and whether they are from God or from your own center of the universe. This can be tricky, but a good rule of thumb is that God is the author and sustainer of love and anything not of love is not of God.

Conversational journaling isn't for everyone, but it can be both exciting and rewarding. The key is to listen to the three voices in your head and be sure you can identify which one is yours, which one is God's, and which one is evil, Satan, the dark side, or whatever you call those forces that would deceive your spirit and soul. When you pay attention to the source of your thoughts. It can make all the difference in the world.

Two Words of Caution

There are a couple of cautions about journaling we all need to be aware of. The first is a legal issue. Journals have been subpoenaed in a number of court cases in the past, so be aware that what you write could end up in the public eye if you should end up being accused of some heinous crime (not likely, I hope, if you're journaling prayer on a consistent basis).

The second caution has to do with your inevitable end. We are all going to die, and that's something we all have to face up to. If you journal regularly, and if you're not using a computer with password protection, then one day your journal entries may fall into the hands of your spouse, your children, or your grandchildren unless you've taken steps to insure otherwise.

If your journal entries need to go to the grave with you, it will be helpful to let a trusted friend or family member know that well in advance of your demise. There are a number of ways to let folks know about your final wishes, including a will. But unless you tell someone what to do with your journals, they may well find their way into some grieving family member's hands.

As for myself, I know that some of what I've written is both personal and a bit embarrassing, but I realize that my words might bring a measure of hope to some family member one day. I've learned that whatever may befall me, I can trust in God to help me along, and this gets written into my journal regularly. So through all the ups and downs of my journal, anyone who reads it will know that I was fallible; but they will also know that I trusted the God to whom I devoted not only my life, but also many pages of my writing.