

WRITING YOUR SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

A spiritual autobiography is the story of significant events, people and places that have influenced your relationship with God.

A. Steppingstones

A steppingstone is a word or brief phrase that describes a significant point or period along the road of life—for example, “early childhood,” “starting a profession,” “parenting,” “lost in the wilderness,” “retirement.” Steppingstones show a continuity of development despite the apparent shifting of direction along the way.

To use this technique for writing your spiritual autobiography, follow these steps:

1. Quietly sit and think about the course of your life. On a blank page, start with the first steppingstone: “I was born....” Describe key people and events of the early part of your life.
2. Continue writing about the remaining steppingstones until you reach the present day. Identify no more than a dozen steppingstones from the beginning of life until now.
3. Once you are done, read over what you have written, sensing the flow of your life with its ups and downs. Then write a brief paragraph describing your life as a whole.
4. To explore your life more fully, go back over each steppingstone, expanding what you have written to include the tone and atmosphere of that period, the significant persons in your life and your relationship with them at that time, your social attitudes, beliefs, and loyalties. Describe who and what inspired you: what books influenced you? who were the “God bearers” in your life? The more you add to each steppingstone, the deeper your reflection will be.
5. With family or friends, share as much of what you have written as you are comfortable with.

A.1 Between the Steppingstones—Times of Transition

This method asks us to look at endings and beginnings and the time between significant points of movement in our lives. The time between learning about pregnancy and the birth of the baby; the time between the loss of a spouse or another loved one and regaining your footing and moving on; the time between learning of an impending move of household and feeling comfortable in a new community; children “leaving the nest;” retirement—or other periods which you see as “in-betweens.” It is about change.

Call up several times of change in your life and spend some time reflecting on the transition periods that accompanied these changes. Use the definitions below to help sort out what was going on within you and in the world around you during these times. Record your actions and feelings.

Definitions:

Transition – Passage from one place, state, stage of development to another. A three-part psychological process.

The “Ending Phase” – letting go of the old situation or identity. Giving up the familiar and valued. May be accompanied by feelings of disillusionment and/or betrayal.

The “Neutral Zone Phase” – exploring the unknown territory between the past and the future—limbo; emptiness or wilderness. An interim period between one orientation that is no longer appropriate and another that does not yet exist. Creativity and new identity are born of this phase.

The “Beginning Phase” – creating, and moving toward a new vision and plan. A time of rebirth. An inner realignment. “Making lemonade from the lemons.” Grieving is near completion and the chaos of the unknown has been endured long enough for something new to appear. Hope and energy are renewed, new possibilities defined.

1. Identify: what was happening? Accidental, intentional? Your actions, others? What did you bring? What did you leave? What did you learn about yourself? Others? The world? God? Explore your feelings, fears, hopes.
2. Select and describe one or several periods of transition as your spiritual autobiography.

B. Time Lines

Another way to examine our personal story is to examine how it weaves itself with the personal stories of others and the larger history of our times.

You can use this method for your individual story, and also as a way of illustrating the joint story of a family or group.

Follow these steps.

1. Draw two parallel lines, one for historical events and one for personal events. (For a group, you will need newsprint or other large sheets of paper.)
 - **Historical events**
 - **Personal events**
2. On the far left, put the date of your birth (or of the oldest member of the family or group) and at the far right, today's date. You may find it helpful to divide the lines into decades.
3. On the historical line, mark major historical milestones like the beginning or end of a war, assassination of important figure, tragedy of 9/11/2011
4. On the personal line, identify significant events in your life. (If more than one person is involved, you might wish to use a different color pen for each person, or have a separate line for each person.)
5. Examine the time lines, individually or as a group. Consider questions like:
 - How did historical events impact personal events?
 - Where was God present in those events?
 - Where did you find grace and where was grace denied?

C. Your Life in Pictures

A pictorial autobiography helps you “see yourself” in the context of family, friends, and the larger society around you, as well as in relationship to the Church.

Here is one way to do this:

1. Begin by closing your eyes. Imagine you are holding a photo album which covers your whole life. The first picture shows the day of our birth, and the last one shows you entering this room.
2. In your mind, turn the pages and look at the pictures of your life: for example, see yourself as a child with your parents, in your home or your school, with a favorite teacher, at your high school or college graduation. Then see yourself as an adult, with friends, spouse and children, at your work place, in your church, at special moments of celebration.
3. Focus on the people who influenced your spiritual growth—grandparents, clergy, teachers, etc.—and the events that had a major impact on shaping who you are today. Silently give thanks for these memories.
4. Produce a pictorial record of your life on a piece of paper or a poster, or in a journal. You can do this by creating an artistic representation of your life (eg drawing, painting, computer graphics), or by using old photographs that are particularly meaningful to you.
5. Use this visual representation as the basis of sharing your spiritual journey with your family or friends. Consider answering these questions as you describe your journey:
 - Where did you find community and communion, solace and support?
 - What role has the Church played in your life?
 - How did you reach out to others and others reach out to you?
 - What form did prayer take, and what did it mean to you and those around you?

D. Your Personal Histories

You do not have one history, but many—no single expression exhausts everything you have experienced. Each telling of your history reveals something different.

So a way of approaching your history is from the standpoint of various themes in your life or by using different perspectives. Here are some examples:

1. **Your physical life:** Construct a time line or write a narrative about your physical development and patterns of health, from childhood to the present. Have there been events in your physical life—serious accident, major illness, etc.—that changed the trajectory of your life?
2. **Your life with others:** Write your history from the perspective of significant people in your life. For example, you might focus on the history of a particularly important friendship. Or the ups and downs of your relationship with a parent or sibling. How have these relationships changed over the years? What have they meant to you? How do they impact your life now?
3. **Your intellectual history:** When did you first realize that what you thought “mattered”? Is there a particular philosophy or set of values that has helped shape your life? What books or thinkers are particularly important to you? List thoughts and events that capture the main ideas of your intellectual history. What influence did these have on your spiritual growth?
4. **History of play:** How have you used your leisure? What kinds of games did you play when you were younger, and what do you play now? Is there a hobby or sport that has been particularly important to you? Has it played a role in your spiritual development, and if so, how? How have you maintained a healthy balance between work and play in your life?

After you have approached your personal history in these or other ways, step back and look at the overall picture they give you of your life. Record any insights, ideas, learnings and reactions.