



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

#77 - May 2017

A Best Practice: Inviting People to Spiritual Autobiography

During our last two issues, we explored the importance of and ways of ministering to mature adults. One of the “spiritual practices” that is often helpful for people in their maturing years is the writing of a spiritual autobiography.

In this issue we will look at one person’s journey in her writing of an autobiography as well as her generosity in helping others along this path of writing (how she offered an adult faith formation opportunity for others). We will look at this process of walking with others because it exemplifies some key principles of adult faith formation:

- It is an example of a parishioner with a gift, a parishioner who felt a call to share her experience which had a tremendous impact upon her life.
- It is the witness of an adult faith formation coordinator who recognized the gift, empowered and supported her in sharing it. Thus, many parishioners benefited and were much richer.

What is a Spiritual Autobiography?

A google search will reveal various descriptions of a spiritual autobiography:

- “What is spiritual autobiography? Simply put, it's telling the story of what God has done in your life. It's an invitation to share your God story. Spiritual autobiography is also an invitation to receive the God stories of others. As we share our testimonies of God's faithfulness amidst our struggles we are reminded that God has always been present on our journey. As we hear someone's spiritual autobiography we remember that God is with all of us as we journey. This act of giving and receiving each other's God stories is the gift of spiritual autobiography.” (<http://www.journeyoncanvas.com/>)
- “Regular autobiographies tend to focus on career, accomplishments, degrees, and awards. In many respects they become journals of our ego trips. Spiritual autobiographies, on the other hand, really aren’t about us at all. They’re about how God has worked in our lives by

using dozens and perhaps hundreds of men and women, young and old, who have walked with us on our spiritual journey.” (<http://www.thebanner.org/departments/2011/01/your-spiritual-autobiography>)

- “Writing one’s spiritual autobiography is itself a tool for spiritual formation. A spiritual autobiography is not done in the sense of writing a “term paper” or just writing biographical details about your life. This is process that is done prayerfully, with the author paying attention to what God has to say as he or she reflects back over his or her life. Many individuals find the process of writing to be a time of encountering God and coming to a greater understanding of how God has been at work in his or her life. A spiritual autobiography is not meant to be a comprehensive chronicle of your spiritual journey, but rather a selective reflection on events, periods, influences, people and experiences that God leads you to write about.” (<http://lci.typepad.com/files/aa1-spiritual-autobiography-guidelines.pdf>)

The Beginnings

In 1995 Mary C. Ternes, a parishioner at St. Lucy Parish, St. Clair Shores, MI, had no idea why, but she felt led to begin writing her life story. It was a few months after her husband died, a very difficult time in her life. No one suggested journaling, jotting down her thoughts and feelings, or writing the story of her life, but, all of a sudden Mary felt a yearning to write her story. An outline formed in her mind, flowing from “the houses she lived in” and thus her spiritual autobiography began.

After its completion two years later, Mary gave copies to her children, brothers and a few friends. With its conclusion, Mary realized many things, among them:

- The writing of her story brought much healing during a time of grief.
- Mary wanted her children to know their history; what was because of specific decisions; what might have been if there had been other decisions.

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- Mary realized in even deeper ways what she said in her introduction: “I want to give an account of how God has blessed me, protected me and guided me all these years. I am sure God blesses everyone, but in the distractions and rush of everyday life, we do not realize the Lord’s presence at every crossroad. I hope when I finish my story you will look into your own lives and see this wonderful miracle of Emmanuel – God with us.”

In November 2008 Mary participated in an adult faith formation conference, *Becoming Well, Wise and Whole in our Maturing Years: Parish Ministry, Vital Principles, Bold Proposals* with Richard P. Johnson. As Johnson spoke of some topics that are helpful to maturing adults, he mentioned his workshop on writing a spiritual autobiography. Mary said, “All the bells went off. I knew all the good it had done for me; I was very sure of the beneficial things it could do for others.”

Thus, Mary, with the support and encouragement of Mary Ann Przybysz, the Adult Faith Formation Coordinator at St. Lucy Parish at the time, created a workshop on “The Whys and Hows of Writing a Spiritual Autobiography.”

“Telling our own stories is a way to impose form upon our often chaotic experiences and, in the process, listening to our own stories is a way for us to nourish, encourage, and sustain ourselves, to enter into a caring relationship to develop our own voice. with all the parts of our self.”
- Joanne E. Cooper

Who? How? What?

An explanation and invitation was placed in the parish bulletin. Some personal invitations were extended to people whom Mary and Mary Ann thought would be attracted to this practice at this point in their journey.

At the first gathering, sixteen people enthusiastically responded. The purpose of these gatherings was to share with the participants a method, some tips and helpful do’s and don’ts for writing a spiritual autobiography. The original plan was to meet for three times. At the third gathering, the participants asked for more sessions because the new learnings and their sharing with each other was a great encouragement. The group met for six sessions.

During the initial discussion, the participants shared why they had responded to this opportunity:

- I’ve always wanted to do this, but never got around to it.
- I want to do this for my family.
- I have a sense that this will help me, put things in perspective for me, help me on my faith journey.

One wondering that they asked was: “How do you remember everything about your life?” Mary’s response – from her experience – was “Things start coming back to you in the writing.”

The only fear that was expressed was: “*I don’t like what happened to me when I was very young. I don’t want to bring that back.*” Mary assured her that a spiritual autobiography is your story. It does not have to be of your whole life. You choose when you want to start; you choose the particular span of your life you would like to write about.

The Format of the Gatherings

The design of the sessions was simple. Mary shared guidelines, tips, things to do and not to do. There are many resources available today for writing your spiritual autobiography, but much of Mary’s guidance came from her own experience.

As the participants began writing, they talked about what they had written, about their experience of writing, about what was happening to them in the process of beginning to write. In this sharing, people experienced being with a community gathered on holy ground.

At times, if a group member had to miss a session, Mary met with them individually to help them “catch up” on what the group had done.

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Some Guidelines and Tips

There is, of course, no possible way to share here all that was given in those four weeks (and all that is available in the numerous resources). A few simple highlights follow:

- There is no pressure, **no deadline**. Take your time. Whenever thoughts come, sit and write.
- You are telling **your** story. You are not a reporter.
- It is extremely helpful to **have a plan** in mind.
 - Pick a theme.
 - Chose a time span.
 - Who are the intended readers?
- In your opening paragraph, include **your intentions** for writing your story. Let your readers know:
 - for whom the story is written
 - the time span of your life you are writing about
 - your underlying theme
- As you write, be aware how the **events of your life affected you**.
- **Details are key** to make your story real.
 - Develop your descriptions of people. Tell what is unique about them; what you shared with them.
 - Be specific; paint pictures with words.
 - Include world activities: political, social, church. These enliven your story.
 - Do some research.
- Are you conscious of God's presence as a running theme? How/when did you sense God was active in your life? As you look back on what you have written, **do you recognize God's presence** where you never realized before?

- Suggestions to make your autobiography more interesting:
 - Include any surprised times you experienced.
 - Did you visit any unusual places where you were exposed to something new?
 - What little gifts did God give you in daily living?
 - Describe the decisions you pondered over and how the results affected your future life.

(For outlines of each of the four gatherings, go to www.janetschaeffler.com. Click on "AFF Helps.")

A Few Resources

- *All My Days: A Personal Life Review* by Richard P. Johnson, Ph.D. (Liguori Publications, 2004).
- *The Art of Teaching Adults* by Peter Renner (Vancouver, Training Associates, 2005), pages 102, 125-128.
- <http://www.journeyoncanvas.com/>
- <http://www.lifeworktransitions.com/exercises/your-spiritual-autobiography/>
- <http://otherdutiesassigned.blogspot.com/2009/01/common-lesson-1-spiritual-autobiography.html>
- <http://www.thebanner.org/departments/2011/01/your-spiritual-autobiography>
- <http://lci.typepad.com/files/aa1-spiritual-autobiography-guidelines.pdf>
- <http://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/youth/wholeness/workshop2/167604.shtml>
- <http://networlding.com/write-spiritual-autobiography/>
- <http://tcpc.blogs.com/musings/2008/01/spiritual-autob.html>
- http://www.holycomforter.com/Content/holycomfortervienna/CMS/files/Adult_Formation/Writing_Your_Spiritual_Autobiography.pdf

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Spiritual autobiography groups constitute a form of ministry that can potentially enrich the lives of older adults, their families, and their congregations. Such groups...provide participants with an environment in which they can make meaning out of their lives, grieve their losses, and give and receive support.

The actions and interactions involved in composing, telling, and hearing life stories are salutary exercises that can increase participants' experiences of clarity, coherence, and connection to God and to each other.

The spiritual wisdom that emerges from such life stories, when shared within congregations, can enhance intergenerational relationships and lead to spiritual growth for members of diverse ages.



Adding New Luster to an Older Gem

In **GEMS** issues #3-9, #15-18, #46-48 and # 56-58 we explored hospitality within our parishes and within adult faith formation.

A recent issue of an e-newsletter from the Friars of the Capuchin Franciscan Province of St. Joseph contains a reflection on how central hospitality is in the Judeo-Christian tradition and what it might mean for us today. You can read it here:

<http://www.sipcommunications.org/images/uploads/documents/Issue1084.pdf>

Some Wondering GEMS

- Are there ways that interested people, of all ages, in your parish could gather to learn and support one another in the writing of their spiritual autobiography?
- Aware of Multiple Intelligences, are there ways to create “spiritual autobiographies” in various formats?
- During a book club study, the participants might choose to explore the spiritual autobiographies of others throughout the centuries: http://www.goodreads.com/list/show/4110.The_Best_Spiritual_Autobiographies)



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Past issues of **GEMS** are archived at
www.janetschaeffler.com

Additional ideas for Adult Faith Formation Planning and Best Practices can be found in:

- *Deepening Faith: Adult Faith Formation in the Parish*
<https://www.litpress.org/Products/4652/Deepening-Faith>
- *The Seasons of Adult Faith Formation*
http://www.lifelongfaith.com/store/p25/The_Seasons_of_Adult_Faith_Formation.html
- *The Seasons of Adult Faith Formation website*
<http://www.lifelongfaith.com/2015-adult-faith-formation-symposium.html>