

**THE VALUE OF WALKING AND WRITING
ON THE PATH TO INTIMACY WITH GOD**

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The Value of Walking and Writing on the Path to Intimacy with God

Growing up in the Southern Baptist denomination, I learned by practice that the path to growing closer to God is through a series of emotional highs attending church camps, revivals, mission trips, and discipleship groups. As an adult the opportunities for such mountain-top experiences diminished. I floundered in my Christian walk. I did all of the right things: attending church regularly, working in ministries of the church, praying, reading the Bible, and attending numerous Bible studies. I even worked at my church, but still I felt an emptiness I could not fill. This emptiness became so great I felt like a zombie, simply going through the motions of daily life. There was no joy in my life. I felt numb most of the time, so much that I was not consciously aware of the pain and anguish deep inside. A part of me wanted to curl up and die, but my innermost desire was to have a real life again. That voice buried deep within welled up and cried out to God: *Please fix me! I don't know what is wrong with me, but I can't go on like this! I will do whatever you ask me to do. Just please fix me!* I was walking a park circle in my neighborhood at the time in May of 2004. It was the beginning of a journey that changed my life.

I had no knowledge of mystical theology when I began this journey, but the Lord took me down a very similar path of cleansing, darkness, illumination and union with Him, as I later found described by Evelyn Underhill in *Mysticism*.¹ I remember being elated when I first heard about the “dark night of the soul,” as St. John of the Cross expressed in his writings,² because it meant I was not alone in my experience of darkness, seeming separation from God, and a level of temptation I had never before experienced. More importantly, it also meant that I was not

1 Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (New York: Meridian 1974).

2 St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, trans. E. Allison Peers (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc. 2003).

mentally ill as I had begun to fear. Two things were absolutely essential in the spiritual awakening I experienced: walking and writing. These seemingly different activities have much in common and yield surprisingly similar results. Walking and writing can be powerful tools on the spiritual journey and help us not only to know ourselves in the depths of our being, but also to experience a much more intimate relationship with our Trinitarian God. This paper will focus on writing and walking as spiritual disciplines.

Writing

Soon after my plea to be fixed I discovered the power of writing out what I was thinking and feeling. My church, where I was employed as the financial manager, suffered a period of intense turmoil. During that time, I set an appointment with a fellow church member in order to resolve issues that had, as a consequence of this turmoil, arisen between us. Not knowing what to say, I decided to organize my thoughts on paper, writing while sitting in the waiting room of a doctor's office. To my surprise, the words came pouring out, and I wrote as furiously as my hand would allow. Page after page filled with writing as though the words flowed through my fingers without passing through my consciousness. They were flowing from the deep recesses within me, where feelings and emotions were buried alive. The jumble I had written traversed the pages in all different directions and I decided to re-write in a more orderly manner. Despite much effort, I could not bring order to my work. I eventually gave up. Later, in my church's prayer room, I decided to read my writing out loud to make some sense of it before my meeting the next week. As I tried to read aloud, I found that I could barely speak. The feelings I had buried alive came bursting forth: fear, anger, confusion, pain in overwhelming waves. I was surprised by the sources of pain and fear I had not recognized before. Four hours I remained in the prayer room,

so overcome with emotion I could not stop shaking. I thought I was “fixed.” It was only the first step on the journey: the journey to follow Christ.

In her *The Celtic Way of Prayer*, Evelyn De Waal tells us that

If we say yes to Christ’s call to follow him, our Christian discipleship asks us to follow a man who had nowhere to lay his head. Christ himself is the Way and his followers are the people of the Way. Just as he entered the wilderness, like Moses and the children of Israel, and made his own journey through life to death and resurrection and new life, so that pattern is inescapable for us all. And if in this model we see Christ encountering temptation and hardship, we, his followers, should not expect anything less.”³

To follow my entire journey is well beyond the scope of this discussion, but after the park circle experience, I did begin to actively seek answers and solutions to the issues in my life. I was to learn that those issues were the temptations and hardships to which Evelyn De Waal referred, designed to shape my life in Christ. It was somewhat like a scavenger hunt with the Lord leaving me clues along the way. I found Julia Cameron’s *The Vein of Gold: A Journey to Your Creative Heart*.⁴ In the first chapter “Setting Out,” she assigns her readers to write in long hand at the start of every morning: three free-flowing pages of whatever enters the mind. Cameron says that “Morning Pages” will “center you, steady you, empower you, enlighten you. They will comfort you, console you, stimulate you, intrigue you, challenge, irritate, and *activate* you.”⁵ Depicting this exercise of writing “Morning Pages” as a spiritual tool, she asserts that “through them you will encounter the workings of your spirituality, the great Creator within,

3 Esther De Waal, *The Celtic Way of Prayer* (New York: Doubleday 1997).

4 Julia Cameron, *The Vein of Gold: A Journal to your Creative Heart* (New York: G. P. Putman’s Sons 1996).

5 Cameron, 13.

with all its grace, wisdom, and power.”⁶ Cameron interrelates walking with writing by describing writing as a journey, asserting that “writing by hand will show us ‘True North’ as well as the shortcuts we have taken which ‘took us nowhere.’”⁷ She maintains that we “are on a pilgrimage, and writing by hand allows us to examine more closely the journey we are taking. We write our views, and the term is quite literal. We *see* how we feel. We see our life by the way we finger it.”⁸ Her final admonition about “Morning Pages” is to not crimp one’s thoughts by using a tiny notebook.⁹ I was often surprised by the free flowing ideas of “Morning Pages” as they revealed my inner thoughts and feelings to my conscious self.

I was directed to another resource on the power of writing, again as coincidence. A friend suggested that I write three letters: one to God, one to my husband, and one to myself. I decided to try. It was fairly simple to write the letters to God and to my spouse. But when I began writing the letter to myself, I had another prayer-room-type experience. The pain and tears flowed again. I had no idea I had so much emotion locked away. There was a great need for self-forgiveness. Continuing to seek, I discovered Richard Peace’s study guides on spiritual formation.¹⁰ His study on spiritual journaling addressed many of the same topics as Cameron’s work, but from a Christian perspective. I learned that both the spontaneous writing I had begun practicing and the letter-writing my friend had suggested are forms of journaling and could be effectively utilized in more structured formats as well.

6 Cameron, 13.

7 Cameron, 15.

8 Cameron, 15.

9 Cameron, 17.

Peace offers several reasons why journals are such a powerful force for spiritual change.

He says:

First, when we work in a journal, we put our thoughts, feelings, issues and concerns into words on a page. The process of writing something down clarifies issues and keeps us honest. Second, journaling forces us to face ourselves and our unfolding lives. By working in a journal we are giving time to growth. We are actively working at it. Third, journals give us an ongoing record so that we know where we have come from, where we are, and where we are going. In knowing our past, we understand the present better and have a clearer reading of how to prepare for our future. Finally, journals enable us to know our stories. As we work in our journals we piece together the various elements of our particular story. In understanding the nature of our pilgrimage, we come home to know who God wants us to be and what we are called to do. We understand what ‘talents’ we have been given and how to invest them. We see the choice we are called upon to make. In knowing our stories, we come to know God more personally. That is a great gift.¹¹

Peace says that journaling is a spiritual discipline that also aids in the practice of other spiritual disciplines, including Bible study, prayer, meditation, and confession, by such things as taking notes on passage, identifying questions and requests, reflecting on our lives and actions, and telling God what we have done and not done.¹² He reminds us that St. Augustine’s *Confessions* are “regarded as one of the greatest journals in print and as a masterpiece of Western Literature.”¹³

In her article entitled “CPE, Journaling, and Spiritual Poetry,” Chaplain Alexandra Honigsberg reports that writing is an important part of her life.¹⁴ She concludes that it helps her

10 Richard Peace, *Spiritual Journaling: Recording Your Journey Toward God*, (Colorado Springs: NavPress 1998).

11 Peace, 76.

12 Peace, 75-76.

13 Peace, 51.

14 Alexandra E. Honigsberg, “Odd Couplets: CPE, Journaling, and Spiritual Poetry,” *Journal of Religions and Health* 40 (Fall 2001): 365.

“to make sense of things, to keep some grip on sanity and perspective and...that to wrestle with words is to wrestle with The Word, to engage in a Holy Act.”¹⁵ She contends that “you can’t hide from your own words, once written, though you might try. They stare back at you and size you up.”¹⁶ From these examples we see that there is much more to writing than just words on a page. It becomes a source of release, encouragement, guidance, and inspiration to move us further down the path of our own personal journey ever closer to the heart of our Lord. Writing is a spiritual discipline that clarifies and reinforces our understanding of self and God.

Walking

Surprisingly, walking yields many of the same fruits as writing. Walking is also part of Cameron’s first assignment in *The Vein of Gold*. She suggests a daily twenty minute walk, with an hour long walk once a week: alone and at a leisurely pace. She says that walking may be one of the most powerful spiritual practices and creative tools known to humankind. As she explains it, “Walking opens us up. It feeds us. Image by image, it spoons up for us a broth or soup of soul food, which sustains us as we do the work necessary to shape and re-shape our lives. In other words, we can walk our way out of ‘problem’ and into ‘solution.’”¹⁷ Again connecting walking with writing as spiritual tools, she further asserts that

it is no coincidence that many poets are both mystics and walkers. It is no coincidence that poetry is divided into feet, and we speak of feet as comprising

15 Honigsberg, 365.

16 Honigsberg, 365.

17 Cameron, 25-26.

poetic meter. Meter is the gait of a poem. The gait of a poem is often the ‘gate’ we use to enter spiritual realms.¹⁸

The labyrinth is a sacred walking tradition that believers are rediscovering as a spiritual tool. In the early 1990s, Canon Lauren Artress provided a canvas labyrinth at Grace Episcopal Cathedral in San Francisco, and then oversaw the addition of two permanent labyrinths to the facility. This was the beginning of the use of labyrinths that spread across the nation.¹⁹ In 1998, the Institute for Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry at Boston College presented a weeklong conference “Liturgy and the Body” under the direction of Rev. Bruce Morrill. Leo Keegan, the liturgical director for the summer session of the institute, provided a canvas labyrinth for participants of the conference and offered a workshop about the labyrinth’s history and practices.²⁰

In an interview by Morrill, Keegan reports that Artress has created a network that is rapidly spreading labyrinths across the United States.²¹ He also notes her widely read *Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Tool*.^{22 23} He explains that “a labyrinth is a long, meandering path that continuously turns back into and around itself in a circular pattern until it reaches a center, from which the path can be followed back out again.”²⁴ The labyrinth

18 Cameron, 27.

19 Bruce T. Morrill with Leo Keegan, “Walking the Labyrinth: Recovering Sacred Tradition,” *Liturgical Ministry* 8 (Fall 1999): 201.

20 Morrill, 201.

21 See examples at www.labyrinthsociety.com, www.labyrinthenterprises.com, and www.wvl.veriditas.labyrinthsociety.org.

22 Morrill, 201.

23 Lauren Artress, *Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Tool*. (New York: Riverhead 1996).

24 Morrill, 202.

differs from a maze in that it has only one continuous path from the entry to the center and back, whereas a maze has numerous junctures and paths at which decisions and choices must be made.²⁵ According to Keegan, labyrinths are found in cultures and traditions all around the world.²⁶ In the medieval world during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, labyrinths became popular as an alternative to pilgrimages to the Holy Land which had become too dangerous.²⁷

Keegan describes the process of the labyrinth as follows:

What makes the labyrinth a singular mystical plan-one that powerfully integrates body, mind, and spirit-is the three-staged meditative process inherent in its fundamental design. As one completes the entire route from the mouth into the center and back out to the mouth again, one passes through the three phases of purgation, illumination, and union. The first stage, walking toward the center, fosters a period of purgation, a process of release and letting go, shedding whatever thoughts or emotions might impede communication with the Holy Mystery. Arrival at the labyrinth's center, which often comes as a surprise due to the path's illogical meandering, begins the stage called illumination. The person rests in the rosette, assuming whatever posture proves comfortable, for as long as the Spirit moves. This is a time for meditation and prayer, for receiving divine wisdom in whatever way it is offered. As one makes the journey back over the same path returning to the mouth, one goes through a phase of union, a process of integrating what has occurred along the way, returning transformed by the experience.²⁸

Keegan reports that he has been able to recognize how people experience changes in their self-awareness, and in their thoughts and feelings as they walk the labyrinth, and that some type of spiritual experience seems to happen for almost everyone who walks it.²⁹ It is recommended, says Keegan, that walkers enter the labyrinth without shoes, enhancing the connection to the

25 Morrill, 202.

26 Morrill, 203.

27 Morrill, 203.

28 Morrill, 207.

29 Morrill, 207.

earth and enabling a “groundedness.”³⁰ He also discusses the effects of the slow meandering pace of the labyrinth which allows creative thoughts, intuitions, and imaginations to flow. He asserts that it is “a move out of the busy and linear time of *chronos* and into the generative or recreative moment of *kairos*.”³¹ Morrill notes that hospitals and medical centers are beginning to install labyrinths for their patients and family members.³² According to Artress the labyrinth is a tool that guides healing, deepens self-knowledge, and empowers creativity.³³ Walking, whether in a labyrinth, a mall, or a neighborhood, provides another avenue to develop self-awareness and grow closer to the Creator.

The Journey

Through my walking and writing experiences, I began to understand that the walk with Christ is a life-long journey of change and growth. De Waal describes the Celtic ideal of peregrination or pilgrimage. She tells the ninth century story of three Irishmen who drifted over the sea from Ireland for seven days without oars and came to rest ashore in Cornwall where they were brought into the court of King Alfred. When asked where they came from and where they were going, they answered that “we stole away because we wanted for the love of God to be on a pilgrimage, we cared not where.”³⁴

30 Morrill, 206-207.

31 Morrill, 207.

32 Morrill, 208.

33 Morrill, 207.

34 De Waal, 2.

De Waal goes on to say that “peregrination presents us with the ideal of the interior, inward journey that is undertaken for the love of God, or for the love of Christ”³⁵ and that “if the journey is undertaken for the love of Christ, then it argues that Christ must already hold a place in our lives.”³⁶

When I circled the park and cried out to God, I did not know that he would take me on an inward journey. I wanted my problems fixed, but at that moment I did not understand that the root of the problem was inside me, and that he would work on me from the inside out. My labyrinth became the local shopping mall. I might not have had the depth of experience as those walking the labyrinth report, but at times I lost track of where I was in the mall, because I had entered into the inner-world of my spirit. I agree there is a definite relationship between writing and walking. Their effect was synergistic in my life.

Both take us on an emotional and spiritual journey with many of the same features. The first feature is the quieting of the daily din of our lives and minds. This is followed by release and catharsis. I have often experienced spiritual and emotional emptying, release, and cleansing through writing and walking. I had much stuffed away inside me. After each catharsis, I found a new level of mental clarity. I gained a much greater sense of who I am in Christ and who he created me to be. Finally, both walking and writing allow for an experience of greater oneness with God, a reward for our pilgrimage. This experience is simply indescribable. It must be experienced to be understood. It is not a singular event, but ongoing, as we continue journeying

35 De Waal, 2-3.

36 De Waal, 3.

through our lives on the way to be with our Maker for eternity. The apostle Paul who knew a great deal about both walking and writing reminds why we stay on the journey with his words “I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Jesus Christ.” Philippians 3:14.

Conclusion

As God told Abraham in Genesis 13:17 “Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you”, so we must also walk the path God puts before us to receive what he has given us. Now I understand that the path to growing closer to God and becoming the person he created me to be is not a matter of hopping from mountain top to mountain top, but rather in journeying daily with him in simple acts like walking and writing. Both walking and writing are potent devices for those who desire a greater self-awareness, a clear sense of purpose, and a deeper union with God.

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