

## Mapping Your Private World/ Gordon MacDonald

Journaling: a tool to bring your soul into focus.

On December 17, 1968, I wrote the following words on page one of a spiral-bound, college-ruled notebook:

"With some hesitation I begin the lifelong task of keeping a personal journal. This effort starts in the final third of my twenty-ninth year. For a long time I carried on an argumentative dialog with myself as to the significance of such an undertaking. It seems presumptuous to think that my life's notes will have any value once I am gone.

"With some hesitation I begin the lifelong task of keeping a personal journal. This effort starts in the final third of my twenty-ninth year..."

"Yet perhaps the greatest contribution one might leave for his posterity would be a personal chronicle of real living—unbridled life, unglossed and real to the core."

With the benefit of age, I now see youthful pomposity in those words. Later in that entry I wrote:

"If just one person could look into the window of my soul and see me for what I really am before God ... they would catch a glimpse of several frustrated forces—some good, some bad—fighting for the dominance of my heart. Were it not for the promise of God in Philippians 1:6, I should have doubts regarding the outcome. No one could chart my desperate desire to love Christ. Few would appreciate my hunger to see him break forth in power in my life. Perhaps it is the fate of the Christian never to be satisfied with the status quo."

Bottom line: don't journal if you want to evade the truth.

Now, 36 years later, there are two Home Depot safes, fireproof, that protect the journals I have filled attempting to make sense of my journey through 65 years of life.

Keeping a log may be nearly as old as the history of writing itself. There is a drive within the human heart to memorialize, to preserve, to explain, to articulate dreams. Beyond that we may need simply to remember what life was once like and how we got to where we are.

When I started journaling it was because I needed a "friend," and I wasn't doing well with the human kind. It sounds a bit narcissistic to suggest a journal as a surrogate friend, like talking to oneself in a mirror. But a journal is more than a mirror, I think. It is a tool to reflect on experiences and assess their significance.

Journaling, I think, is the discipline-of-choice for people who are intuitive and reflective, who walk through life asking, "What does this (or that) mean?" I've met good people who aren't like this, and perhaps for them journaling would be a bore (but I still think they should do it). Wasn't the Psalmist journaling when he wrote:

"As for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong... Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure... . When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny" (Psalm 73).

Sounds like great journal writing to me. I could have written these words—but not nearly as well.

What triggered my venture into journaling? I had passed through several weeks of high stress, the kind that young pastors are never ready to face. I'd ignored the need for spiritual refreshment; I'd neglected the family; I'd allowed myself to become overwhelmed by the problems of people. There I was, one Saturday morning, crying uncontrollably in the arms of my wife.

It was a scary moment and gave me a taste of the empty soul. This must not happen again, I thought, and it came to me that writing each day in a journal would press me to deal more forthrightly with my emotions, with my spiritual state (or lack of same), and with the meanings of my life. The journal would help me concentrate in a prayerful manner and provide an opportunity for me to commune with God. With those expectations I went to the store and bought the spiral-bound notebook.

I was not disappointed. Not that the journal solved all the difficulties of a wandering heart, and not that it made me into a spiritual giant, but it did provide a tool for focusing my mental and spiritual effort.

A few days ago I opened one of the safes and retrieved the first few years of journals. I hadn't looked at them for many years. There was my bad handwriting and self-manufactured shorthand. I had written in the journals in script until about 1989, when I switched to the computer and solved the problem of my illegibility.

Turning the pages, I found entries that noted memorable events:

"Karl Barth died the other day in his sleep. What a way to go!"

A day later:

"At 0651 this morning the astronauts head for the moon for the first time."

There were moments of personal crisis in my young family:

"At 4:45 Gail called to say that Kristy (our almost-four year old) had eaten a bottle of candied aspirin. We spent 30 minutes trying to get her to vomit, but the doctor finally had me take her to the hospital. They took blood and urine and decided to admit her. It was quite a blow to us all. She finally fell asleep at 10 p.m."

And you could see all the hopes and dreams of a young pastor in motion:

"Sunday was a great day. Morning service especially good. I preached from Genesis 12 ... 549 in attendance, 472 in Sunday school. Spirit running high in the church. Leaders thrilled that we have met our budget for the year. I spoke on the subject of worry in the evening and felt it was a flop."

And there were the moments of discouragement, of discovering the shallowness of the soul:

"I fully admit that there are times when I would like to quit the whole thing ... or be forced out. Last night I dreamed that I resigned. It was really quite real. Scares me that feelings of victory and personal defeat are so close to each other."

There were accounts of days that seemed so innocuous at the time. For example on one day alone, these two notations:

"Breakfast with \_\_\_\_\_. He is a strange young man whose life is hard to penetrate. We talked for 90 minutes about his conflict with his family and agreed to meet again soon. Late afternoon meeting with \_\_\_\_\_. He will definitely go to seminary this coming year. We discussed the possibility of his returning here some day to work with me."

Both of these very young men are outstanding Christian leaders today.

It took a long time for journaling to become a part of my life habits. I went through all the phases that I hear others talk about. I worried about being too candid in my journal lest someone read and hold those words against me. At times I was overly self-conscious, writing something with the thought in mind that, some day, someone would read my ruminations and be impressed.

While there are many pages of my journals I hope no one but those closest to me would ever read, I have stopped worrying about potential exposure. Anyone who

wishes to know can find out my worst secrets anyway. The self-consciousness? It simply went away over the years.

Once or twice during the years of journal writing there were periods of significant neglect:

(13 August 1974) "It has been almost five months since I last made an entry in my journal. So difficult to begin again. Busyness and laziness have both been my master. While I've been productive, I have become progressively dry in my spirit. I have thirsted for God but failed often to come to the springs of living water. I have needed wisdom but have too often depended on knowledge and talent. Results have been obvious: doubt, discouragement, thinness of resolve, uncontrolled thoughts, impatience ..."

Twenty years ago, I broke the vows of my marriage. Was I truthful in my journal then? No. I lied to it just as I lied to myself, God, and those I loved the most. But the journal was the canvass upon which I repainted life as God, in his mercy, gave it back to me. A journal doesn't prevent failure. But it's a good tool for dealing with failure, head-on.

What was my journal's purpose? A journal—at least in my book—is a dialogue with the soul. It includes a record of events, but it attempts to expose the significance of the events. What is God saying through this? What am I learning? How do I feel? What are the principles that ooze from these events?

Beyond that I wanted the journal to be a story of my own journey and the journey (as much as possible) of those closest to me. The high and low points of my marriage are in the journals. Our children and grandchildren will one day be able to go back and recapture the salient events of their lives as seen through a father's eyes. They will know how much I have loved them and how proud I am of their life-choices. The journals tell the story of our son and daughter as athletes—the scores of their games and what happened on the field. Kristy's first date (and her father's anxieties) is there, and Mark's drivers license test-day (anxieties again). There's the day I first beat my father in a game of golf (I waited 34 years). There's a long description of the day our first granddaughter was born.

There are commentaries on books I've read, the events of my ministry—the best and the worse. The times I felt anger or ecstasy as a leader. How I felt the day I published my first book. The terribly trying times when I tried to seek a word from God about a change in personal direction.

Since I am by nature a doubter, the journals contain many accounts of my struggles to believe and the surprises when God so powerfully vindicated Himself in my experience. Poet Phillip Levine wrote: "When (my sons) talk about our lives together, they get everything wrong—according to me. I seldom correct them, but

I've come to realize that each of us carries a mythology of what took place. The truths are far more complex."

What Levine is saying, of course, is that the memory is extremely unreliable. Even as I read through these journals today I have been reminded several times that what I wrote then and what I remember now of certain events is often quite different. The crowds I preached to 25 years ago are far larger in my memory today than what my journal reports. Bottom line: don't journal if you want to evade the truth.

#### Spiritual breakthrough

There are the many moments when I have used my journal to pray and worship. Often I have lapsed into a more archaic English:

(Sunday) "It is His day—Thou art the Lord, O God, and we will gather today to call Thy name blessed and holy. We will give thanks to Thee for the safety of another week; we will acknowledge our helplessness without Thy strength. We will call ourselves sinners and rely upon thy grace. And we will open our hearts with the hope that Thou mayest speak and bless us with Thy splendid presence."

Here and there are the indications of spiritual breakthroughs. Sometimes they show up in the way of quotes from my readings. "Christians today appear to know Christ only after the flesh. They try to achieve communion with Him by divesting Him of His burning holiness and unapproachable majesty, the very attributes He veiled while on earth but assumed in fullness of glory upon His ascension to the Father's right hand" (A.W. Tozer, a constant favorite of mine).

That quote comes in one of my 1972 journals and reveals my growing hunger to know a God who is much greater than the one I learned about in my childhood.

By 2002 I was quoting Thomas Merton to myself: "God sometimes permits men to retain certain defects and imperfections, blind-spots and eccentricities, even after they have reached a high degree of sanctity, and because of these things their sanctity remains hidden from them and from other men.

In another place I find myself musing about what I learn in my daily runs:

"This morning I realized that I often hear two inner voices every time I start running. The first is 'You don't really want to do this.' That voice tempts me to think of all the reasons why this might be a good day to avoid all this exertion. And then when I overcome that voice, a second begins to speak: 'You're not doing enough, do more!' And if I do more than I'd planned, then I get so tired that I am even more susceptible to the tempting of the first voice the next morning."

I guess I was reflecting on the inner battle that all disciplined people face.

When I was once considering an invitation to lead an organization, I sought the advice of trusted people. I reflected their words to me in the journal:

"G\_\_\_\_\_ warned about the seductiveness of such a job. He said there would be a perennial battle not to get too absorbed in the task at the expense of marriage and personal life."

The journal has preserved vivid memories of the most remarkable (good and bad) moments of life. The years of being an adviser to a President of the United States, the times when I failed a person (or a congregation), and life at Ground Zero when my wife and I joined the Salvation Army team at the World Trade Center a day or two after 9/11:

"Life at 'the pit' has enhanced the richness of my marriage. Gail and I loved being together. Never was there a cross word between us. We supported each other, prayed for each other, shared stories with each other.

"Every once in a while we'd retreat to a dark corner and embrace and talk about how fortunate we were to be here. And when we crawled into bed at one or two each morning, we would hold one another close and pray, thanking God for the opportunity to serve and asking that he would uphold those at the pit in the dead of night. I was so proud of her."

If God allows Gail and me to reach our eighties, we may have time to re-read these journals and rehearse the delights of a marriage (grounded both in vow and mercy) that will have lasted sixty years. And I will read to her words like these:

"I must be sure that Gail knows how much I appreciate her attentiveness over the last few days. We have had some wonderful laughs together. Yesterday we spent a couple of hours cleaning up winter debris in the front field. She raked and I put the leaves and sticks through the chipper. Now Gail has plenty of stuff for her mulching operation. Not hard to make her happy."

What journaling produces

When journaling is done regularly, several things become possible.

The invisible and the ephemeral are forced into reality. Once feelings, fears, and dreams are named, they can be dealt with, prayed for, and surrendered to God. They come under control, no longer existing in a way that pollutes the soul and the mind.

Learning experiences are preserved. If I record and reflect on the experiences of each day, I add to my base of wisdom. Things usually forgotten or lost in the unconscious now, like books on a library shelf, wait to be tapped when parallel moments arise in the future. Now one has precedents to draw from.

Memories of God's great and gracious acts are preserved. "Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it," God said to Moses after a great victory. As Israel wandered through the wilderness and experienced God's providential care, he had them build monuments so that they could remember. One day I realized that every day of journal writing was a memorial to God's sufficiency.

I can chart areas where I need most to grow and mature. As I look at journals of 30 years ago, I realize I have struggled with the same knot of issues throughout the years. The good news: the steps I took in the early days as I wrote of these issues turned into disciplines. And today, while issues remain, my "overcoming" rate is substantially higher. I wouldn't have spotted many of these issues if I'd not written about them day after day.

It brings dreams alive. As ideas have flooded my mind over the years, I have written about them. Putting them into words helped me to discern the foolish ideas and develop the good ones. Many things I've done in the last few years had origins I can find in earlier journals.

Glad I started this discipline. Soon I'll need another Home Depot safe.

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