Journaling about Head, Heart, and Hands: A Vital Tool for Cultivating Formation

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Journaling's Role and Benefits

How would you describe the role of journaling in your theological education? One pastor comments, "Even though I've graduated, I'm still journaling, especially when I struggle to understand a personal or ministry situation. Journaling continues to be the primary avenue for me to make sense of myself, ministry/life situations, and God."[1] Another pastor adds,

> I began journaling as a student, and it was a burden at first. However, the requirement became a respite by the end of class. The discipline of theological reflection is one that I have grown to embrace and cherish. Had it not been for the educational requirement to journal for such an extended period, I would not have been able to see its benefits.[2]

Such reflections probably warm the hearts of those theological field educators who require students to keep journals with the hope of both present benefits during a season of study and future enrichment in ministry. After briefly summarizing some potential benefits of journaling within spiritual

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Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry
ISSN 2325-2847 (print)* ISSN 2325-2855 (online)

formation and field education, this article gives a rationale for a threefold framework for formation journals and describe how such a practice can be a vital tool in formation on personal and communal levels.

With the typical clarity and brevity of her *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, Adele Ahlberg Calhoun describes journaling as a spiritual discipline:

> Desire: to be alert to my life through writing and reflecting on God's presence and activity in, around, and through me. Definition: Journaling is a tool for reflecting on God's presence, guidance, and nurture in daily comings and goings. Journals can be kept regularly or during times of transition.[3]

By writing reflections on God's presence and guidance in a journal, we can become more alert to what God has done and is doing "in, around, and through" us. Such a practice has the potential to help Christ followers to become more receptive and responsive to the Lord's leading and forming work. Since ministry can often feel busy, one of Calhoun's probing reflection questions is especially significant for ministry formation: "If you live your life at full tilt, when and how do you reflect on your life and your experiences?"[4]

While describing some of the biblical and other historical precedents for journaling as a spiritual discipline, Donald Whitney explains the enrichment potential of journaling.

> Keeping a journal not only promotes spiritual growth by means of its own virtues, but it's a valuable aid to many other aspects of the spiritual life as well. Help in Self-Understanding and Evaluation . . . Help in Meditation. . . Help in Expressing Thoughts and Feelings to the Lord. . . Help in Remembering the Lord's Works. . . Help in Creating and Preserving a Spiritual Heritage. . . Help in Clarifying and Articulating Insights. . . Help in Monitoring Goals and Priorities. . . Help in Maintaining Other Spiritual Disciplines.[5]

While the enrichment emphases within courses in field education or spiritual formation may vary from school to school or even course to course, it seems strategic to reinforce the rich formation possible through journaling.

Jim Wilson and Earl Waggoner commend journaling's benefits in slightly different ways. First, the authors frame theological reflection as the task for which journaling can be a tool. They write, "According to the model, theological reflection is identifying how our beliefs, thoughts, and feelings

influence our actions, aligning them to our best understanding of God's truth, and exploring possibilities for future ministry responses."[6] Within this broader integrative task of theological reflection, they describe the purpose of the journal as follows:

> The ministry journal will assist in gaining insight into the routine of life in ministry. It aids in developing discipline within the planning of a day. It requires reflection on ministry and helps in understanding feelings that surface around ministry activities. It assists in developing intentional work habits and sensitivity of emotional responses in your experience. It supports the integration of theology and ministry into the practice of life.[7]

When ministry field educators or spiritual formation instructors invite students to include journaling in their academic and spiritual rhythms, they can draw on any of these potential benefits that seem most compelling within their context.

Journaling, Resilience, and Integration

In a range of contexts, resilience is emerging as an important area of ministry formation, and it may be cultivated through journaling. In his seminal book, *Flourishing in Ministry*, Matt Bloom comments,

Researchers use the term "self-regulation" to describe three of the essential elements of resilience. . . . Self-awareness is the ability to step back from the flow of life to notice what we are feeling, thinking, and doing. It is the capacity to pay attention and recognize what is happening inside us and around us. . . Self-reflectivity is the ability to examine and think about our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, especially in terms of whether or not they are appropriate, good, helpful, or otherwise positive for ourselves, for other people, and for the world around us. Self-reflectivity builds on self-awareness to gain an understanding of how a particular thought, feeling, or response impacted ourselves and others.[8]

Along with making the case that self-awareness and self-reflectivity are essential to resilience and flourishing among those in ministry leadership, Bloom highlights how noticing these can help people explore patterns in "feeling, thinking, and doing" and their impact on oneself and others. From my perspective as a theological field educator and spiritual formation instructor, cultivating deeper awareness and understanding in these three

areas can bring independent and interdependent insights that can be identified and explored through journal entries.

This focus on integration is helpfully underscored by Mark Heinemann in "The Heart of Making Disciples." He summarizes the formational intention of a threefold pattern: "HEAD: What you need to know. HEART: How your attitude needs to change. HANDS: How your behavior needs to change."[9]

Gary Parrett and Steve Kang offer a slightly longer description of formation and transformation along similar lines:

> We aim at transformation of the whole person. . . . Toward that end, all aspects of our humanity must be engaged, including our eyes and ears (perception), heads (cognition), hearts (affection), and hands and feet (behavior). Each of these areas may be viewed as an entry point into the center of our being, and each entry point has its own doorway.[10]

Parrett and Kang highlight both the importance of integration of the whole person and the significance of each "entry point." As I work with students, I certainly see the variety of such entry points as some students want to first think it through with their heads, some need to start with hands-on coaching before they catch on, and others step up when their hearts are stirred up with passion for an area of ministry.

Whatever the point of entry, deep learning seems to occur as all these areas are integrated. Randy Frazee brought together scholars, pastors, and others to design an integrated tool for assessment and discipleship development. Along with assessment statements for ten core beliefs, ten core practices, and ten core virtues, Frazee shares this insight in the implementation section:

> But until a belief takes the twelve-inch journey from our head to our heart, that belief has little impact on our Christian development. The Practices not only help us live out the Christian life but help move a belief from our head to our heart. Once we truly 'buy in' to the idea, it begins the process of changing who we are from the inside out (i.e., Virtues). Virtues are called 'fruit' in the Bible (John 15, Galatians 5:22–23).[11]

Within the seemingly "siloed" tendency within a seminary, it is easy for students to fragment formation with different courses on belief, practices, and virtues. I long for more students to let beliefs drop from their heads to their hearts, not in the sense of leaving the mind behind but in the sense

of internalizing the truth in motivating ways with Christ-like virtues that overflow in hands-on action.

From this perspective, full formation or transformation is the integration of principles, practices, and passion. To give a sense of how this might be framed, let me share some quotations from my description of journaling in one of my spiritual formation syllabi:

> In this time period, how did the Lord broaden, deepen or strengthen in the area of my head-level understanding of God and the formation process? For the head angle, consider Jesus as the Truth teaching you principles about what this aspect of spiritual formation is, why it is important, or what it reveals about God's character and activity. . . . In this time period, how did the Lord broaden, deepen or strengthen in the area of my heart-level connection with the Trinity through spiritual formation? For the heart angle, consider Jesus as the Life filling you with passion and motivation that increases your desire and motivation to grow in this area of spirituality or your struggle with that area. . . . In this time period, how did the Lord broaden, deepen or strengthen in the area of my hands-on experience of spiritual formation practices? For the hands-on side, consider Jesus as the Way, guiding you in the practice of how to walk with Jesus and follow him more fully on your spiritual journey.[12]

A range of terminology can convey what is covered in these categories, which I then tailor to the topics covered in various courses in spiritual formation, mentored ministry (our field education courses), and small group ministry. In seeking to explain and engage students with this framework, I have found the variations in wording helpful in communicating these concepts to students from different backgrounds. What terms would communicate most clearly in your context or for students coming from different backgrounds?

Space and Pace for Cultivating Character with Journaling

Along with terminology, ministry field educators and spiritual formation instructors may want to weigh how the frequency and length of entries fit both with the intentions behind the journaling and the tone indirectly communicated by the demands of each assignment and by the cumulative load of all the assignments taken together. In her description of the function of journaling, Regina Coll highlights how it can help people slow down long enough that they may become open to surprising insights: "No matter

how articulate a person is in expressing an idea or describing a situation, journaling slows down the process and often leads to surprising results."[13] Intriguing insights often arise in journaling when students make space to slow down their pace.

The invitation to such slowing down was profoundly encouraging and challenging while I was being trained as a spiritual director, which included these incisive words by Allan Fadling: "The Spirit of God has been working in my heart to teach me how to move at the pace of grace rather than at my own hurried, self-driven pace."[14] In our seminary training approach, I opt for brevity and clarity, partly in hopes of modeling some of the "pace of grace" in making journal entries. Part of the intention is to slow down long enough for deeper reflections without making the entries so lengthy and weighty that they counteract a grace-full pace.

For Fadling, paying attention to our pace is crucial to cultivating character that is often counter to our culture. He writes, "I like to describe *spiritual leadership* as living a grace-paced life in the midst of a driven culture; living at a vital, life-giving, peaceful pace while remaining engaged and active in the kingdom work Jesus began here on earth."[15] An educational usage of journaling within a faith-based context can consider how the practice cultivates being peaceful and patient or embodying other character attributes or virtues that are valued in that setting. In both form and function, the formation journal seeks to help students pay attention to character formation as part of their overall formation.

> Character is, sadly, greatly undervalued today in so much church life and activity. We'd rather work out the best techniques, formulate successful strategies, and celebrate (or criticize) performance. We look on the outside and assess people by "how they are doing," and pay much less attention to what kind of character they have become or are becoming. But look at the qualities in Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit. They do not focus on what kind of *performance* we can achieve, but what kind of *person* we are. Fruit takes time. Character takes time—a lifetime, in fact.[16]

This insightful quotation resonates with my informal observations of pastoral colleagues in crisis. Although performance can be enhanced in the doing of pastoral ministry, often unresolved or underlying character issues were catalysts for crises because deeper dynamics around what kind of person they were becoming had not been addressed proactively or preventatively. I am writing more about this area of the formation journal in this ar-

ticle because attending to the heart with soul care seems to be such a great need among Christian leaders.

In recent years, I am seeing new resources from different perspectives addressing character for a range of vocational ministry situations. From the character of clinicians to the alignment with attributes in the description of love in 1 Corinthians 13, from reflection on pastoral virtues to assessment of the fruit of the Spirit, from remedies for deadly vices to suggestions for the emotional health of leaders, insightful authors are sounding a clarion call for character formation in ministry preparation and continuing education.[17]

When I was preparing to write this article, a fellow field educator recommended that I read an article from the website of the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University. Before placing their relatively recent practices within representative academic literature affirming the value of reflection for character formation, Scott Parsons describes their process. Students observe "which virtues were the most influential throughout the day," choosing from a list of thirty specific virtues, followed by "a more thorough reflection" on a weekly basis around which virtues contributed to success, could focus growth for the coming week, and were sources of struggle that invited further reflection.[18] Moving forward, I will be considering ways such processes could be adapted for our context, such as connecting heart-level reflection with a specific list of virtues that we have identified as important for maturity and ministry. Whatever the journaling categories or processes, vocational ministry field educators and spiritual formation instructors should select strategies appropriate for their setting, evaluate the effectiveness of existing efforts in cultivating the fruit of the Spirit, or at least consider connections of character to educational content and process.

Journal Variations: Highlight Activity or Interact with an Author

Another way to link content and process is for students to highlight their primary activities monthly within their ministry placement. The ministry log category is added for accountability and/or alignment with ministry priorities within the mentored ministry setting. As mentioned earlier, our approach seeks to reinforce "a pace of grace"[19] in opting for brevity and clarity in each entry rather than a large quantity of entries or extensive details about ministry activity within that time.

Another variation is an invitation to interact with a specific source as a prompter for deeper reflections. In the second year of our mentored ministry course, students interact with Mandy Smith's insightful book *The Vulnerable Pastor: How Human Limitations Empower Our Ministry*, allowing her reflection questions to prompt journal entries. For example, after sharing stories and rich reflections in the chapter on processing emotions, she invites us into reflection upon our own journey of vulnerability by asking, "Which emotions most knock you off your feet? How do you usually respond to that sudden vulnerability? How could it be an opportunity to lean on God?"[20]

Rather than having students write a synopsis or analysis of content in some form of a book report, I want students to pay attention to what Smith's writing is stirring up in them. Whether affirmation arises within students as her reflections resonate with them or students become riled up with reactions that surprise them or have some other type of response, the journal helps them notice and process what is surfacing. The intention is to focus on dynamics of formation more than specifics of information covered by the author. Such an approach gives an alternative way to keep the formation journal both open-ended and focused through evocative questions from an author who functions as a mentor.

I also appreciate Smith's emphasis on vulnerability as an antidote to the cultural tendency to curate a public persona in ways that cover up or selectively omit areas of struggle. In commenting on the role of journaling in writing a spiritual autobiography or narrative summary of one's journey, Evan Howard comments,

> Part of the grace of composing a spiritual autobiography is the opportunity to make sense of our past, to give it meaning. . . . Avoid the temptation to smooth over times of ambiguity and uncertainty. Your aim is not to compose a good autobiography but to honestly discover and interpret your own transforming relationship with God. . . . Knowing the past may give wisdom for the future. Now, having reflected on your story, you are ready to tell it. You may write it down and keep it in a private journal. But I also encourage you to just to tell it. You gain some things from prayerfully reflecting on your life. You gain different things from sharing it with others.[21]

Howard's wise words highlight both the pitfalls of "smoothing over" and the potential of honesty in the personal discovery and communal sharing of our story.

Sharing Journal Entries for Communal Cultivation

Wilson and Waggoner also highlight the potential of sharing, though they focus specifically on sharing from journal entries with a ministry mentor for identifying deeper dynamics, possible "blind spots," and areas to "better align" theology and practice. They write,

> While journals are private documents, ministers do often share them with mentors. After reading the journals, mentors can help ministers identify what is happening around them and clarify what is happening inside of them. With objective eyes, mentors are able to see ministers' blind spots and read between the lines of what is happening in their lives. The journal becomes a living record of what is happening in and around the minister and helps the mentor identify opportunities to better align their operational and confessed theology.[22]

While a perceptive mentor can help clarify outward and inward dynamics for deeper discernment and wider alignment, clarification is needed on the scope of sharing. Regina Coll offers these instructions on the extent of sharing: "Of course the student has the right to withhold any entries from the discussion, but that would probably be a rare occurrence, since one of the points of the journal is to set the agenda for the supervisory session."[23] Whether sharing is required or recommended, students need to be empowered to "set the agenda" within an environment that both supports and stretches them with appropriate self-disclosure.

Under the heading "Companions Become Coreaders," Keith Anderson makes a compelling case for such sharing with mentors: "Spiritual mentoring is one of our most pressing ways to help others read the epic story of God in their own story. Spiritual mentoring is one way we grow deep in knowing the living Lord in companionship. It requires the listening ears of another."[24] Ministry field educators and spiritual formation instructors may want to clarify the extent to which regular or occasional sharing of journal entries is recommended or required as part of the process of companionship. Along with the analogy of spiritual mentors as "coreaders," Anderson also draws our attention to the analogy of farming. He writes,

> Mentoring as farming is one of the most important images I can suggest. . . . Patience is in order. You will learn to pass on the quick fix or the sudden conversion in favor of slow, perhaps steady growth. The work is slow, tedious at times and seemingly without results. The growth is hard to measure from week to week; it is better to look at the long view instead of

> the short, to look back over months instead of weeks. Suddenly, it seems, there is growth and produce and beauty, but it happens thanks to careful attention to the details of planting seeds, cultivating, weeding, watering and waiting.[25]

From this perspective of mentoring as farming, a formation journal can be pictured as a helpful tool for cultivating maturity and ministry in community.

As I reflect on the past few years of reading formation journal entries, I realize that sometimes students are describing seeds planted by class interaction or an author's insight. At other times, I notice that students are cultivating insights from other courses or sources, with a journal entry explaining how these insights are being implemented for flourishing in life and ministry. Students sometimes share how the formation process and course content is correcting or refining[26] what they think, who they are becoming, or what they do. With the affirmation of ambiguity and uncertainty as part of the journey of discovery, some journal entries explore times of waiting and wondering about what is unfolding in situations or seasons of struggle.

Along with other means of grace, journaling can be a vital tool for formation. The threefold framework outlined in this article can help students give "careful attention" to what God is cultivating in their heads, hearts, and hands. Such intentional journaling can help put into practice the multifaceted prayer from Colossians 1:9–13 (NRSV), ". . . so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power." Amen.

NOTES

1 Quoted in Jim Wilson and Earl Waggoner, *A Guide to Theological Reflection: A Fresh Approach for Practical Ministry Courses and Theological Field Education* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020), 81.

2 Wilson and Waggoner, *A Guide to Theological Reflection*, 86.

3 Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 65.

4 Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 66.

5 Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2014), 252–66.

6 Wilson and Waggoner, *A Guide to Theological Reflection*, 43.

7 Wilson and Waggoner, *A Guide to Theological Reflection*, 82.

8 Matt Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry: How to Cultivate Clergy Wellbeing* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 19.

9 Mark Heinemann, "The Heart of Making Disciples," in George Hillman Jr. and Sue Edwards, *Educational Ministry: Foundations of Transformative Christian Education* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2018), 91.

10 Gary Parrett and Steve Kang, *Teaching the Faith, Forming the Faithful: A Biblical Vision for Education in the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 298.

11 Randy Frazee, *The Christian Life Profile Assessment Workbook*, updated ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 53. This tool can help with intentional assessment and development of these thirty core areas, and some of Frazee's related resources can give further background behind each belief, practice, or virtue. See also Randy Frazee with Robert Nolland, *Think, Act, Believe Like Jesus: Becoming a New Person in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014); Randy Frazee, ed., *Believe: Living the Story of the Bible to Become Like Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015).

12 This sample is taken from a spiritual formation course, but I use similar wording for other courses as the subject matter is shifted while the categories remain the same. Along with the recognition of similarity across subject areas, it also is important to have a format flexible enough to be tailored to particular people. Evan Howard notes, "The task of spiritual formation—formation of our thinking, feeling, and choosing or acting—requires wisdom as we learn which means are best suited to which people and which situations." Evan Howard, *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation: How Scripture, Spirit, Community, and Mission Shape Our Souls* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2018), 189.

13 Regina Coll, *Supervision of Ministry Students* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 78.

14 Alan Fadling, *An Unhurried Life: Following Jesus' Rhythms of Work and Rest* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013), 10.

15 Fadling, *An Unhurried Life*, 16.

16 Christopher Wright, *Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit: Growing in Christlikeness* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2017), 22.

17 This sentence is inspired by ideas within the following range of resources, ordered in respect to their particular perspective. Terri Watson, *Developing Clinicians of Character: A Christian Integrative Approach to Clinical Supervision* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2018); Stephen Macchia, *Broken and Whole: A Leader's Path to Spiritual Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015); Richard Gula, *The Way of Goodness and Holiness: A Spirituality for Pastoral Ministers* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2011); Christian Schwarz, *The 3 Colors of Love: The Art of Giving and Receiving Justice, Truth, and Grace* (St. Charles, IL: Church Smart, 2004); Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2020); Peter Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader: How Transforming Your Inner Life Will Deeply Transform Your Church, Team, and the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015). Beyond the character connection or virtue reflection in the formation journal, our students who take The Soul of Leadership spiritual formation elective read one required and one selected resource from this set of resources. On my own ministry journey, Henri Nouwen's candid exploration of common temptations in Christian leadership enriched my reflection on such deeper dynamics. Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroads, 2002).

18 Scott Parsons, "Character Journals: Reflection as a Character Development Strategy," *Good Thought*, June 2021, https://kenan.ethics.duke.edu/good-thought/. Various efforts that pay attention to character formation in vocational formation are described in the blog posts found on the *Good Thought* website. Parsons's article from June 2021 is particularly pertinent to the discussion of character formation.

19 From another context, one pastor echoes the importance of pace as he writes about the transition from journaling as a required practice in seminary to his current practice: "While I do not journal as frequently as I did when it was required, I still value reflection and have found a more sustainable pace for journaling in my personal life." Quoted in Wilson and Waggoner, *A Guide to Theological Reflection*, 86.

20 Mandy Smith, *The Vulnerable Pastor: How Human Limitations Empower Our Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 75.

21 Evan Howard, *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 263. Using somewhat different terminology, Bloom makes some similar points about the value of "life journals" or other forms of reflection on one's journey that can cultivate discernment and be shared within a retreat setting or with a wise guide. Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, 58–59.

22 Wilson and Waggoner, *A Guide to Theological Reflection*, 82.

23 Coll, *Supervision of Ministry Students*, 78.

24 Keith Anderson, *Reading Your Life's Story: An Invitation to Spiritual Mentoring* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 71.

25 Anderson, *Reading Your Life's Story*, 54.

26 It is wise for pastoral mentors or supervisors and field education program directors to recognize and respond to a refining dynamic needing deeper exploration with additional professional input. For a helpful discussion of when referral to a spiritual director or counselor is "advisable" or "mandatory" for ministry field education students, see Ann Garrido, *A Concise Guide to Supervising a Ministry Student* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria, 2008), 100–2.