

Memoirs with Sacred Resonance

By Nan Phifer

The printed words brightened gradually like warming fluorescent tubes, words by Sarah Stockton published in the June 2003 issue of *Presence*, words that lit up as I read them. Sarah was suggesting a way to penetrate spiritual memoirs for deeper meaning. My mind awakened to Sarah's words because I give workshops in writing spiritual memoirs.

I use the term "memoir" rather than "autobiography" because the latter word suggests chronological writing histories starting with birth and stuffed with statistical data. Chronological writing frequently plods. We more successfully evoke accounts of spiritually significant experiences if, instead of following sequential events, we identify and write about the people, places, and experiences most meaningful in our lives. We find those subjects first by naming the specific sources of our strong emotions.

When I guide groups of people who write spiritual memoirs, I pass out drawings of big, empty, valentine-shaped hearts. Into these hearts, we write the names of people we've loved, feared, hated, who caused trouble, discouraged, assisted, inspired, and filled us with energy. We list too some of the people for whom we have prayed.

Next, we write names of places into the heart. These include places that were sheltering, places of growth, injury, recovery, and places where we felt miserable, hopeful, and optimistic. Finally, we name experiences: successes, failures, births, deaths, times when we felt anxiety, wonder, joy, grief, awe, compassion, and times when we prayed intensely. Powerful memories are identified. The heart soon holds a table of contents.

Workshop participants select any topic they feel like writing about at the moment. We follow a simple, reliable writing process. I say, "Choose today's subject impulsively. Write about whichever memory beckons to you at this moment." If we, as writers, always choose topics in response to our inclinations, our writing will be filled with life and feeling. Later,

after short and long chapters are accumulated, they can be spread on the dining room table and arranged chronologically or by some other order.

If an autobiography that includes statistical data is desired, the writer can easily add factual material and insert intra-chapter transitions. This autobiography will be vibrant because under the dry matter lies a beating heart.

Talking is more natural than writing, so partners find fluency by briefly telling each other about the subjects they're considering. Short, simple conversations enable participants to find their openings and the words they will use. A few minutes later, when I say, "Now write a quick, sloppy rough draft," everyone is able to begin writing without hesitation. We postpone editing and proofreading so as not to interrupt our flow of ideas.

The steps of a writing process that yield heart-felt, well-written memoirs are:

1. Gather ideas.
2. Tell a friend or writing partner about the story you're considering.
3. Scrawl quick drafts. Leave space for revision by skipping lines.

Allow your account to stray into unanticipated realms. When our writing takes unexpected turns, we often make our most exciting discoveries.

4. Hear your draft. Read it aloud to a small group of listeners.
5. Consider your story, using questions for reflection.

People who are writing to explore the spiritual dimensions of their lives are content when they have completed step five. People who want not only to explore but also to create a written account of their lives find the next three steps helpful:

6. Revise by adding, restating, rearranging, or omitting.
7. If mechanical correctness should be considered, have it proofread.



8. Write a lasting draft on acid-free paper.

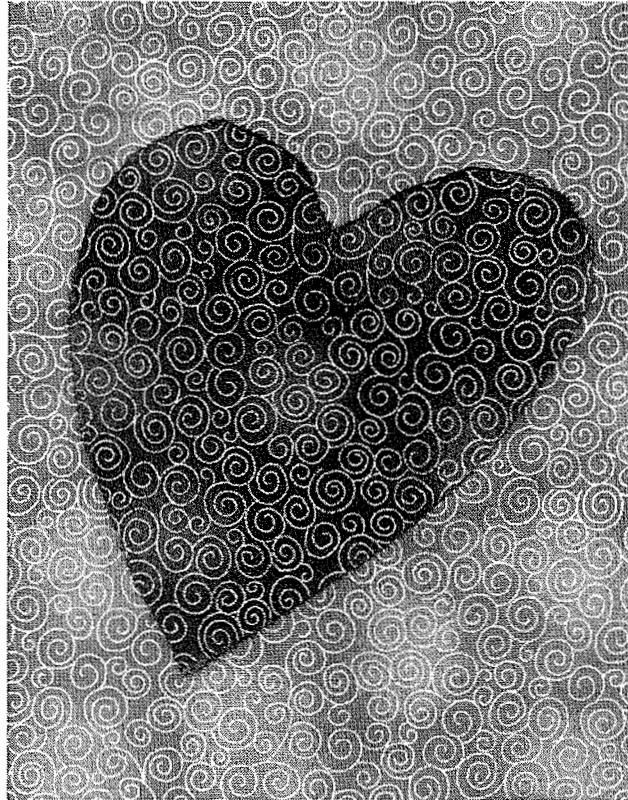
The fourth step, sharing, is very difficult for most people, and yet it is the most penetrating and productive place in the writing of spiritual memoirs. To ensure the emotional comfort and safety of the writers, we form small groups of only three to five people. I state that it's okay to say, "I pass," if reading aloud would be too difficult. Yet, almost everyone does read. I insist that listeners

- * listen with a nonjudgmental, open mind;
- * listen to learn;
- * remain unfailingly confidential about what is read.

Guidelines for responding are to first tell the writer what is admirable about the writing and then ask a question about something not told. That's all. Literary critiquing would be inappropriate.

Readers are frequently surprised when tears spring into their eyes, blurring their vision, interrupting the reading. Participants need reassurance that something changes when written words are spoken, whether joy-filled or agonizing. Significant experiences revive with unexpected energy, sometimes exposing emotion and meaning that was not recognized or acknowledged at the time of the event. Listeners are inevitably compassionate and supportive.

It is at this time of oral sharing in the writing



Laine Barbanell Schipper

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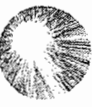
process, this moment of personal revelation and openness and earnest listening, that Sarah Stockton's words illuminate and further deepen the process. She wrote, "Language offers us...the act of writing the experience of the Holy Spirit into our own works; and the felt experience of the creative spirit that arises while writing.... Students are engaging in a form of *Lectio divina* with their own created text as the growing foundation for their creative and spiritual practice" ("Directing the Creative Spirit," *Presence: An International Journal of Spiritual Direction* [June 2003], p. 33).

Applying Lectio Divina

Before I read Sarah's article, it had not occurred to me to apply the ancient practice of lectio divina to our own texts, but why not? Lectio divina, a form

of response going back to the Middle Ages, has traditionally been used with sacred text. Would it be sacrilegious to use it with our own texts? The goal of my workshops is to reveal that which is sacred in our own lives, to cultivate a sense of wonder, to bring awareness of holy presence; so, inspired by Sarah Stockton, I decided to apply this medieval practice to our contemporary stories.

Lectio divina took form before the sixth century in European monasteries where lay people, as well as



monastics, shared it. A monk read holy text to silent listeners who noticed which word or words resonated within themselves and then meditated on those words. I borrow a portion of the full practice.

After workshop participants have read their quick drafts and listeners have commended an aspect of the writing and asked a question, I ask that we listen to re-readings in a more formal, reverent way. We are silent for a minute or two before each reading. The first reader re-reads slowly, allowing time for words to penetrate and for listeners to identify those words or phrases that ring with significance within them. Another minute or two of silence follows the reading. Next, listeners speak aloud the words they remember. I've noticed that these words often point to attributes or longings in the writer, words behind which lie shadows of yearning for, or the felt presence of, divine love.

I like to give listeners half sheets of paper on which to write the words and phrases they have spoken. At a later time, these half pages are passed to the writer. The writer's own words complement a list of questions for reflection that I provide.

The third movement of *lectio* involves prayer. After everyone in each small group has read, members join in a group prayer for each other. Once when I was giving a workshop attended by eighty-five people, one of the small groups, strangers to each other initially, spontaneously concluded their readings by praying. Prayer feels appropriate at this time.

The fourth movement, contemplation, follows naturally if participants are protected from chitchat, as they would be in a medieval monastery. I suggest they separate silently from each other and find spaces where they can quietly rest in God. Thelma Hall, author of *Too Deep for Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina*, writes that *lectio* prepares the way for contemplation "with an attentive listening of the heart, leading to an inner awakening to God's *hesed*, his faithful love, present within us and the answer to our nameless longing" (p. 32).

Sarah Stockton's suggestion adds illumination and insight to the process of writing spiritual memoirs. I'm grateful to her for it. ■

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