

Tell Me Your Story: How to Write Your Spiritual Memoir

By The Rev. Dr. William B. Randolph

In the years since my parents' passing, I have found myself saying, "I wish I had asked Dad or Mom about something when they were still living." This wish applies doubly when it comes to asking them questions about their faith, since they were the original source of my understanding of God. Though they shared openly their own beliefs and stories about how they came to faith, unfortunately, I never recorded any of it. Neither did they leave behind their own record of faith. Because I have come to realize just how much my own faith journey was influenced by my parents' relationship with God, I have learned how important it is to write — and periodically update — my own spiritual autobiography. I know the gift that a spiritual memoir can be to loved ones left behind. But even more so, I am aware of the gift that spiritual memoirs or autobiographies can be to those who write them. They can help their authors better appreciate their own lives and comprehend God's presence throughout their life times.

Spiritual autobiographies can be a wonderful ministry tool with baby boomers and older adults who are thinking about their legacy and purpose in life. For many people, the idea of writing their life story is a daunting and overwhelming task. Left to their own devices, older adults may not know how and where to begin to record or keep their stories going. There are several common methods and systems available for recording a spiritual autobiography. Older-adult leaders should pick one method they trust and then experiment with this method themselves before handing it off to those they serve. Chances are, if a leader finds the method too time consuming, it will be too time consuming for the average older adult. Or if a leader finds the method is incomplete or confusing, then it will seem incomplete and confusing to the older adults.

One of the more common methods of spiritual autobiography is the question and answer method, which has proven questions that are designed to reveal patterns and common themes in a person's life. The responses to the question form the core of a narrative which becomes the autobiography. When this method is followed, the writer only needs to link the answers together to form a spiritual autobiography.

A second common methodology begins with having the writer list the major events from his/her life and reflect on the events with the idea of looking for a common theme or unifying principle to tie the events together. This methodology becomes a guided tour of life, so the writer is able to see the moments of life that changed, challenged, and contributed to the faith journey.

Perhaps less known, but equally effective, is the methodology that begins with the desired result and reverse engineers it by working backward from the greatest faith insights one has learned in growing more like Christ.

Churches can use a variety of formats in helping older adults write their spiritual memoirs. A creative approach for smaller, less affluent churches might be to train volunteers to conduct interviews and write the autobiographies for the older adults. This also works well as a group activity. Older Adult members could be assigned to interview one another and serve as writing partners who work together on each other's memoirs. Churches could use an intergenerational approach and ask children and youth in the church to record interviews with the older adults. One church asked older adults to bring their photograph albums and collections of pictures, slides, and images to church. Then they were to describe to the youth and youth leaders what was happening when the picture was taken. Another intergenerational approach is to interview the adult children of older adults and their older-adult parents, asking them to answer the same series of questions about faith.

Whatever the method chosen to help older adults write their autobiographies, it is a great form of older-adult ministry. Helping older adults write their faith narratives can be a valuable gift for their loved ones

and themselves. In writing their spiritual memoirs, older adults can see how sustaining their faith has been. They will grow in appreciation for who God created them to become in life as they share their stories with loved ones. A good book to use in this process is: Remembering Your Story by Dr. Richard Morgan, Upper Room Books

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