

SPIRITUAL SPRING TRAINING JOURNALING MARCH 14 2010
ST. LUKE'S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
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When we want to get our bodies in better shape, we exercise and practice certain physical disciplines. When we want to get our spirits in shape, we also need to practice certain spiritual disciplines.

During the past two Sundays we have thought about the discipline of prayer as a way of sharing our honest feelings and thoughts with God any time and any place and about meditation as the discipline of setting aside some quiet time to listen to God.

Today we want to think about the discipline of spiritual journaling as a way to grow spiritually through writing down what God teaches us through Scripture and through our own experiences of life.

I am using a new devotional guide by Bishop Rueben Job entitled *WHEN YOU PRAY; DAILY PRACTICES FOR PRAYERFUL LIVING*. Each week there is a theme for the week and suggested Scriptures each day for that theme. He also writes a personal essay on the theme and includes quotations by other spiritual writers. He encourages us to see what words or phrases from the Scripture catch our attention and then write them down in a prayer journal to help us remember them and reflect on what they might mean in our lives.

This past week the suggested verses were all from Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 12 where Paul gives practical words of advice for living as a follower of Jesus.

Kathy Holman was a long time member of our congregation and a therapist. Before she died about a year ago, she told me that Romans 12 was her favorite passage of Scripture and if we all followed Paul's advice in these verses, we might not need so much therapy.

As I read these verses from Romans 12, I invite you to follow along in your bulletin with a pen or pencil. Whenever I read a phrase that catches your attention, just underline it and take the bulletin home with you and think about applying that word or phrase in your life today. Anything that catches your attention may be a specific message from God for you today.

Are you ready? Get your bulletin out and follow along or you can pick up one of the Bibles from the pew and look up Romans 12 and follow along as I read these selected verses.

Read Romans 12:2-3; 9-18; 21:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Did any of these verses catch your attention? Here are some of the phrases that stood out for me.

DO NOT BE CONFORMED TO THIS WORLD BUT BE TRANSFORMED BY THE RENEWING OF YOUR MINDS.

I SAY TO EVERYONE AMONG YOU NOT TO THINK OF YOURSELF MORE HIGHLY THAN YOU OUGHT TO THINK.

LET LOVE BE GENUINE...LOVE ONE ANOTHER WITH MUTUAL AFFECTION.

LIVE IN HARMONY WITH ONE ANOTHER ...LIVE PEACEABLY WITH EVERYONE.

DO NOT BE OVERCOME BY EVIL BUT OVERCOME EVIL WITH GOOD.

Take this bulletin home with you and read it over again and see what stands out for you; write it down in a notebook or journal so you don't forget it and practice it this week. This is our assignment this week for spiritual spring training.

Let us pray.

Mrs. Vickie Armstrong is a member of our congregation who teaches third graders at Indian Creek Elementary School in Lawrence Township.

February is Black History Month and Vickie asked me to come to Indian Creek one day in February and speak to all the third graders in that school about my experience of marching with Dr. Martin Luther King in March, 1965 in Selma, Alabama to insure voting rights for African Americans in this nation.

So about 130 third graders sat on the floor in front of me in the school gym and I told them about my experiences in meeting Dr. King and marching with him and answering the multitude of questions they had. They thought Dr King lived so long ago that they couldn't believe that someone who met him was still alive. Their main question was about how old I must be to have met Dr. King and what life was like in the old days!

The next day, Vickie Armstrong asked all of her students to write me a letter thanking me for coming and telling me what they liked best about my presentation. I got a wonderful packet of letters from those third graders.

Everyone began their letters by thanking me for coming to their school and sharing what they remembered most about our time together. One little boy named went on to write these words:

I HOPE YOUR BOSS GIVES YOU A RAISE BECAUSE YOU ARE SUCH A GOOD SPEAKER. I THINK YOU SHOULD BE HIGHER THAN A PASTOR. YOU ARE BETTER THAN THAT!

I called to thank Vickie for these wonderful letters and she told me that she asks her students to write a letter every Friday about something they remember from this week at school and then at the end of the year, they bind all of these letters into a booklet and give it to the students as a gift to help them remember all of their experiences in the third grade.

You see, Vicki Armstrong and all the other third grade teachers at Indian Creek, know that if their students write down their experiences, it will make them reflect on and remember what they learned in the third grade.

I think the same thing is true for us as adults as well. When we write something down it helps us put our feelings into words and it helps us remember what we have learned and apply it in our lives.

You see, the whole Bible is a collection of the writings of dozens of Jewish and Christian leaders over a 1,000 year period. Jewish and Christian leaders and prophets had powerful experiences and conversations and encounters with God and they wrote them down so they wouldn't forget them and so people in the future might be inspired by their experiences and conversations with God.

When something important happens in our lives it is good to write it down.

Great spiritual leaders in the past have frequently written down their experiences and thoughts about God and life in spiritual journals. The founder of Methodism, JOHN WESLEY, wrote down his experiences and thoughts about life, friends, challenges and God every day of his long life. His journals are published today and you can read what John Wesley did on any particular day of his life, where he went, what he said in sermons, and his reflections on his life experiences.

When we write down our experiences and reflections on life, it helps us remember the experiences and learn from them.

I have written in spiritual journals at least once a week for the past 25 years and I have always found it a helpful spiritual discipline.

For example, this past week, I read Romans 12 as suggested by my devotional guide book. Each day I would read these verses over and find more golden nuggets of guidance for my life in them.

One day I wrote down Romans 12:2 where Paul wrote: BE TRANSFORMED BY THE RENEWING OF YOUR MINDS. So I wrote in my journal: How does God transform us? God transforms us by the renewing of our minds; changing our ways of thinking.

As we think so we become and if we want to change our lives, we first have to change our way of thinking about life. What we think about we help to bring to reality.

If we think life is mundane and hopeless, then our lives become mundane and hopeless. But if we think life is full of joy and hope then our lives are transformed into lives with joy and hope. As we think so we become; renew our minds and thinking and God will renew our lives.

In every situation we can simply change the conversation and our attitudes toward reality will change. When we are having a negative, cynical conversation about something in our minds, we can change that mental conversation and change our experience of the situation.

No matter what you face, change the conversation and you will change your experience in life.

SHER LEE SOMMERS is a member of our congregation who passed away last week. Sher Lee had an illustrious life; she was a talented opera singer early in her life, she married and raised three wonderful daughters and has seven bright grandchildren. She became a therapist and counselor and helped many people in our community with personal and professional issues. She served on many boards and agencies and made a huge positive contribution in our community.

I first met Sher Lee when we served together on the Methodist Hospital Board when we decided to merge Methodist Hospital with Indiana University Hospital and School of Medicine and the Riley Children's Hospital to form Clarian Health System.

Sher Lee had congestive heart failure and I went to see her last Saturday. When I went into her bedroom at her home she was in bed surrounded by about a dozen members of her family and friends. She was telling humorous stories about her life and everyone was laughing and having a great time.

She had completely accepted her impending death without any fear or anxiety and was enjoying the final days of her journey here on earth with her family. She would look at one of her grandchildren, tell me something about them and then comment on how much she had been blessed by their life.

During the last week of her life, streams of friends and neighbors came to her house to thank God for their experiences with her and to say goodbye to a good friend.

Sher Lee never lost her sense of humor and one of her daughters told me that after some friends left Sher Lee said: I WILL BE SO EMBARRASSED IF THIS IS JUST A BAD CASE OF THE FLU AND I DON'T ACTUALLY DIE AFTER SAYING GOODBYE TO EVERYONE.

What amazed me was how Sher Lee could find humor in her life situation during the last days of her life. Usually, when we think about our own death, we are sad and upset to think that someday we will have to leave this life. But Sher Lee changed her conversation about leaving this life. She had a conversation which said that her life had been blessed in spite of the challenges she faced. She simply counted her blessings as she accepted the fact that her days on earth were numbered.

Do you see how she changed our usual conversation about the end of her life on earth and I saw how her attitude helped her family and friends accept her transition to eternal life just as she did.

Be transformed by the renewal of your mind means change your thinking and you will change your experience of life.

The spiritual spring training exercise I would like you to practice this week is reading this passage from Romans 12 over each day during the week and pay attention to what stands out for you. Then write it down in a notebook or on your computer so you don't forget it and practice it each day and you will discover how your life is changed and improved.

The first way of journaling that I am recommending is to write down verses of Scripture so you can practice them in your life.

The second way of journaling I recommend is to simply write down your thoughts and experiences in life. Write down whatever you are thinking about; your feelings, longings and dreams just get it out on paper and write it down.

I discover that sometimes I struggle with what I should do about a certain situation. My mind is conflicted with should I do this or should I do that? Do you ever have experiences like that?

When I am in that situation, I write in my spiritual journal. I just write in a flow of consciousness way-writing down whatever comes. I write down the challenge I am facing and brainstorm all of the alternative ways of responding to it. Then I read it over and often discover that the answer to the issue leaps off the paper to me. Sometimes without knowing what I was doing, I wrote out an answer or a process to find the answer in my journal.

Often, we have conflicting conversations going on in our minds. We think this way and then we think that way. Writing it down gets it out of our minds and onto the paper or computer and gives us more clarity and a different perspective to look at the situation.

Whenever anyone is going through a marriage conflict or divorce or having a challenging situation with their job or children or facing surgery or critical illness, I encourage them to write down their thoughts about that situation. Just writing it down gets it out of our minds and helps God lead us to an answer.

Last year a member of our congregation discovered that she had ovarian cancer and would have to have surgery and chemotherapy. She was totally surprised and in shock about this news. She notified her family, friends and employer and made arrangements for the surgery and treatments.

Now, a year later she has written a 10 page paper on her experience with cancer during this past year and she sent me a copy. She describes everything that happened during this past year in terms of the diagnosis, the hospital experience, her recovery at home, her chemotherapy treatments and their affect on her life, the monitoring that she goes through in case the cancer returns.

She even tells some of the humorous things her children wrote down that she said when she was coming out of the anesthetic after surgery. Things like:

CALL EVERYONE AND TELL THEM I HAVE ACID REFLUX or I HAVE TO GET UP AND MAKE LASAGNA or I AM PAINTING A LOT THESE DAYS.

She wrote this statement to help others who might be going through a similar experience but I also know that it has helped her to write it all out and reflect on her journey with cancer during this past year.

At the end of her writings she writes about her faith: I WAS ABLE TO COMPLETELY TURN MYSELF OVER TO GOD. I KNEW GOD WOULD BE WITH ME THROUGHOUT THIS ORDEAL WHATEVER THE OUTCOME. MY WORRY IS GONE AND I AM AT PEACE WITH THE SITUATION.

She also thanks God for the prayers, cards, love and support from her family, her friends and her church and says that she is living proof of the power of prayer and support from others.

She has gone through a very difficult year physically and she has written it all down and I suspect that writing it down has contributed to God's healing process in her life.

Think about a problem or challenge you are facing right now. It may be something at home or at work or school or a personal decision you face. I would like to encourage you when you get home from church today to pick up a notebook of paper and just write it all down or go on your computer and start a spiritual journal section and write down what you are facing. Then read it over and ponder what God might be saying to you through this situation.

My mother once told me this story about journaling. For years, Mother had frequent bad dreams about her children. She would dream that one of her four children was harmed or killed in some kind of accident. She told me once that in her dreams I have died by drowning, by a car accident, in a war, in a flood, earthquake and a tornado. About once every couple of months she would have some sort of dream about one of her children dying or being injured somehow. She didn't like these dreams but they came anyway.

Then she read a book about journaling. It said that if you write three pages in your journal every day for 30 days, it will change or transform your life in some way. It didn't matter what you wrote, just that you wrote something down. Mother decided to try it.

She bought a three ring binder and started writing three pages each day for 30 days. She would do it right after breakfast. She would write about the events of the past day or her plans for the coming day. Sometimes she said she couldn't think of anything to write so she would write:

I CAN'T THINK OF ANYTHING TO WRITE. WHY CAN'T I THINK OF ANYTHING TO WRITE ABOUT? BECAUSE NOTHING IS HAPPENING IN MY LIFE. WHY ISN'T ANYTHING HAPPENING IN MY LIFE? MAYBE I SHOULD CALL MY FRIENDS AND SEE HOW THEY ARE DOING. WHO WOULD I CALL?

Then she would make a list of people who were facing challenges and call them and be a huge source of encouragement to them. Or she would think of getting a plant or flowers to take to a sick friend or something else would come to mind and it would set her on a journey of thinking and caring about someone else.

Mother said she loved this experience. Then she noticed something else. After a couple of months she noticed that she no longer had dreams about something bad happening to her children. She continued her journal writing for years and said she never had another dream about something bad happening to her children. I think her journal writing helped to stop the bad dreams from coming into her life.

I don't know how journaling will bless your life or change your life and you will never know unless you try it. Don't knock it until you try it.

I came across a book recently entitled *THANK GOD, I...* and it is a collection of stories about people who have had bad experiences in their lives and they came to the point where they could eventually thank God for those bad experiences.

One of the stories was written by a man named John Joseph from New York City entitled THANK GOD I WAS A RUNAWAY CHILD.

John tells us that his parents were abusive and divorced and he and his two brothers were placed in a foster home in New York City with four other children when they were just little kids. He called it the house of horrors for all of the foster children who lived there because they were starved, beaten and sexually abused by their foster parents and their foster parent's older children.

He lived there for seven years and eventually when he became a teenager he ran away and lived on the streets of New York City. He was filled with anger and hatred for everyone and lived a life of crime, violence and drugs. He was arrested and sent to a juvenile detention center.

When he got out of the detention center he joined the Navy but he had never dealt with his anger and pain and was eventually kicked out of the Navy.

Eventually, he fell in love and his girlfriend helped him get off drugs and get a job. But he was still plagued with nightmares from the unresolved anger and pain from his childhood. One night he poured out all of his pain to his girlfriend and she encouraged him to write it all down as a way to get all that anger and pain out of himself.

He started to write down his years of pain and anger and all of the terrible things that had been done to him and that he had done to others. He wrote every day for months about all of the experiences and challenges of his life.

After he got it all out, he started praying and asking God to heal him from the pain inside and to find a new way forward.

He said God healed him in body, mind and soul and now he speaks at homes for orphaned children and in juvenile detentions centers to give them hope because he knows some of the pain and anger they are going through. He also encourages them to write it all down and give it to God and discover God's healing and forgiving power.

John Joseph's writings and experiences in life were eventually turned into a book to help others in similar situations.

Today he says I thank God for all the terrible things which have happened in my life because now I can use my life experiences to help others facing similar challenges and help them to write it down and turn it over to God. He has also started a food distribution center in downtown Manhattan for hungry and homeless and angry teenagers because that is what he once was.

I find it fascinating that John Joseph found healing when he could write down all the terrible experiences of his life, surrender them to God, pray for those who had hurt him and all those he had hurt.

Are there any painful places in your life that need to be healed? I invite you to write them down; get it out on a piece of paper or computer and surrender it to God and discover how God reads what you write and brings healing through it.

This week I encourage all of us to read Romans 12 and write down the words and phrases that catch our attention and to write down and surrender to God all of the challenges in our lives and discover how writing can be healing.

Our closing hymn is *BREAK THOU THE BREAD OF LIFE* and it refers to the Scriptures as the bread of life. I love this phrase in the hymn: "BEYOND THE SACRED PAGE, I SEEK THEE, LORD". It means that through or beyond the writings in the Scriptures we can see God and even through and beyond our own writings we can see the hand of God.