

# TO KNOW YOURSELF IS THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM

*“A day unremembered is like a soul unborn, worse than if it had never been. What indeed was that summer if not recalled? That journey? That act of love? To whom did it happen if it has left you with nothing? ....Any bits of warm life preserved by the pen are trophies snatched from the dark, are branches of leaves fished out of the flood, are tiny arrests of mortality.”*

Laurie Lee, *I Can't Stay Long*

*“I can only note that the past is beautiful because one never realizes an emotion at the time. It expands later, and thus we don't have complete emotions about the present, only about the past.... That is why we dwell on the past, I think.”*

*The Diary of Virginia Woolf*

## THE MYSTERY OF MEMOIR

You are your memories. Your memories shape your identity and connect your present with your past. You may not remember where you put your car keys today, but your long-term memories remain. Like your computer your memory is sometimes on overload, but you can recover your vivid memories when you trigger them. Some of these memories may be pleasant, others painful.

In life you are a character in an unfolding story. In writing a memoir you become visible to yourself (and to others who may be privileged to read what you have written). This visibility may be physical, emotional, historical. You can start writing your memoir anywhere, at any time. Each idea or memory can lead you to another memory. In this process your memories are constantly moving from deep within, to the surface, to insight—back and forth.

## THE WISDOM OF MEMOIR WRITING

Wisdom is a universal human longing. To achieve wisdom is the goal of life in many cultures. Using this book will help you grow in self-knowledge, and memory writing will make you aware of your own wisdom. Knowing yourself is the beginning of wisdom, as the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates tells us.

In the Bible wisdom is an attribute of God. God is eternal Wisdom, and Jesus in his incarnation brings that wisdom to dwell among us. In Jesus “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3). Wisdom is a gift of the Holy Spirit, a gift which can lead you to an experiential knowledge of God and of God’s presence in all things.

Peter Gilmour in *The Wisdom of Memoir: Reading and Writing Life’s Sacred Texts* speaks of the wisdom (and value) of memoir writing: “I like to describe wisdom as profound insight into life, living, loving, death, and eternity.” He describes memoirs as “deeply reflective stories that capture and communicate portions of the inestimable mysteries of life and living” (Saint Mary’s Press, p. 13).

As you begin to capture in your own words the mysteries of life and living, ask yourself:

- **How can I re-member, re-imagine, and record my life through developing a memoir?**
- **How can I tap into my personal wisdom and deepen my spirituality?**

Writing your memoir will be a powerful way for you to gain insight into your life. Insight comes through reflecting on and expressing who you are. The wisdom of memoir leads you to capture and communicate your own experiences. By reflecting on your life, you can find and deepen your identity and can value and celebrate who you are. This is a spiritual activity; indeed it is wisdom.

The process of creating a memoir is essentially a spiritual activity because it centers on how you choose to be human, what it means to be human, and what the implications of your humanity are. What you will do in developing a memoir will be to surface your spirituality, whatever that may be for you.

What is spirituality? Spirituality is your life as a whole human being: the fullness of your human development (physical, mental, emotional, spiritual) lived within the context of God’s love. Spirituality is who you really are in your deepest and truest self in relationship to God, other people, all of creation.

- You are attentive to what your senses and heart tell you.
- You keep your mind alive and growing.
- You are free to be fully alive—to respect your need for recreation, getting in touch with your body as well as your spirit.
- You are in relationship with God and others; you work, pray, love others, and deal with life’s joys and sorrows.

Living your spirituality means to be whole, which is another word for holiness, which is another word for wisdom. Memoir writing presumes serious and substantial reflection on life and living.

Other people (those near and dear to you, those unknown to you, and those not yet born) are potential beneficiaries of your memoir writing. But even if no one but you ever reads your written memories, you are enriching the totality of human life.

You share your wisdom when you share your stories and insights with others. Think of all the people throughout history who would be unremembered except for their writings. One such person, a young teenager, was Anne Frank. In *The Diary of a Young Girl*, published after her death in a concentration camp, Anne wrote: “I want to write, but more than that, I want to bring out all kinds of things that lie buried in my heart.”

Before you begin to create your memoir, take some time now to pray for knowledge and wisdom.

## PRAYER FOR WISDOM

*O God of wisdom, be with me. I ask for the gift of wisdom to know you and to know myself. Help me to remember, to reimagine, and to record memories of my life. May my spirit be reflective and my memory active.*

*May your spirit of wisdom be my guide and friend as I tap into my personal wisdom. I pray that you deepen my spirituality, give me renewed insight into the mystery of life and living, and stimulate my memory as I write. Amen.*

## BEGINNING YOUR JOURNEY

What do you remember? What is your own story? Open yourself up to the memories that have shaped you: the scenes, the people, the places, the ideas, the experiences. Some of your memories will be of happy times, some will be sad, some will be quite difficult to recollect. But all of these memories can become part of the memoir you want to write.

Writing your memoir will involve your memory, of course, but also your intelligence, your emotions, your imagination, your spirit. As you begin to capture your life experiences in words and see their significance, you will be both the author and subject of your memoir. If, as Socrates says, the unexamined life is not worth living, then memoir helps to make life very much worth living!

In writing a memoir, you will be writing only about selected portions or aspects of your life. Memoir is not autobiography; autobiography would involve the facts and history of all of your life.

- **Decide on a way to write that is convenient and comfortable for you. You may want to do your writing in a notebook (preferably one with a binding) or in a document set up on your computer for this purpose.**
- **Whenever you are ready to write, find a time and place that is quiet for you. To set an atmosphere, you might want to keep a candle lighted whenever you reflect and write. Do whatever you can to encourage yourself to write!**
- **Write down memories or stories as they come to you. At this point don't worry about the order; just get the words down on paper.**

## YOUR NAME

Begin by writing, lettering, or typing your name. Choose one or all of your names. Put a circle or box around your name(s); this can represent all that is around you (God, creation, family, nature, your home). Now look at your name intently. Sound it with your mouth several times. What does your name say or mean to you? To others? What words or phrases does your name call to your mind?

You might also want to think about your nicknames. What special meanings do they have for you? Honor and treasure your name! It identifies you.

Now that you have reflected on your name(s), begin to think about your memories—about your life. Turn to your notebook or your computer document and begin to write!

## WRITE

Describe in a few words your earliest memory. What insights into yourself does this memory give you?

Begin to follow all the writing suggestions given in this book, and at the end you will have a memoir! Be grateful for the gift of memory and pray that it will serve you well for years to come. Ask God to bless the memories that have surfaced for you so far, whether they are pleasant or unpleasant. Take a moment to be silent, then say—

*O God, only you know the whole truth about me. Guide me with your wisdom and compassion as I move to greater self-knowledge. Amen.*