

How to keep a journal during your short term

by Mark Labberton

We may come back from our summer breathless, carrying trays full of slides. But will we also come back with changed lives? Without even realizing it, we can find ourselves feeding on experience (which demands only activity) and miss the nourishment of wisdom (which requires reflection). During a short-term mission, with its pace and intensity, this tendency becomes all the greater. But God wants us to grow in wisdom. The writer of Proverbs puts it plainly, "Wisdom is supreme, therefore get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding" (Proverbs 4:7).

WHY KEEP A JOURNAL?

We "keep" journals but "write" letters. Think of your journal as a treasure where you store the experiences God is giving you. As you store them and remember them, God can turn them into wisdom.

Realize that working for and with Christ in a new world that you don't understand can be a life-changing gift. If you just coast through the experience and move on, you may miss the growth God wants to give you as a disciple. Forgetfulness can be your excuse for immaturity. But remembrance, the Bible assures us, is essential to the way of wisdom.

Your cross-cultural experience is something like being sealed a great feast. You can't take everything in at one sitting. You can listen, smell, touch, taste and savor only a little bit of what lies before you at one time. It all begins in the moment the first rush of humid air hits you in the face as you step off the plane in Manila, or in the first evening you smell the dung fires as they are lit for cooking in Calcutta, or in the early morning when you hear the sounds of unfamiliar birds on the Serengeti Plain, or in the call to prayer piercing the mid-afternoon heat in Istanbul.

At these moments, the feast is real and clear. Experience the tastes and smells, the thoughts and emotions, the insights and questions, the remembrances and dreams. But unless you capture and clarify them, these first sensations will leave quickly as other experiences tumble in upon them. A journal is the perfect place to record this feast. It allows you to consider and savor the experience in order to digest it and gain the nourishment of wisdom from it.

Writing in your journal is like chewing your food. Once the first course is digested, you'll be able to more deeply experience and enter into each course that follows. However, if you haven't digested your initial experience, you'll probably start getting full and won't have as much capacity to take in more.

Sometimes it's hard to sense what you're feeling, know what you're learning, or see where you're going, unless you write it down. Sure, you might be able to talk things out with somebody else, but your conversation will soon evaporate. You may find it difficult to share at an early stage with your teammates or find it inappropriate to express yourself to your hosts. If you write in a journal, you can speak in any degree of intensity, in any kind of order (or chaos), or in any style you choose.

Later in the feast, when you feel acquainted with what is before you, but frustrated with the people, the food or the pace (or lack of it), a journal can be a place to think, feel and pray. In this way a journal makes a difference months into your short term.

When you return home, your particular opportunity for cross-cultural experience will have passed. Immediately, the lightning speed of your life will resume. You come back to school

or to a job or to move and start other new responsibilities in ministry. In a few short months, your summer mission seems like ancient history.

You know you're to be a responsible steward of the opportunity God has given, but with the passing of time and the activity of the moment, the memories of the summer can easily begin to blur. Perhaps, you need to record more than only the interesting and more enjoyable ones. You may find yourself reducing your experience to the three- or four-sentence reply you give when a casual friend asks, "So, like, how was it in Mombozombo?" Your journal will enable you to continue to feed on what has happened as you reread portions of it and as you continue to write.

Your journal will also enable you to be a better communicator of your experience by helping you to share precisely some of the anecdotes and a bit of your feelings. It can be a great tool to help you remember what you saw, how you felt and what you learned. It will help you to communicate vivid stories that breathe life into your times of sharing with large groups such as your church or campus fellowship.

HOW TO KEEP A JOURNAL

The first thing in keeping a journal is to decide to do it. If you don't already keep a journal, do you want to? If so, why? Are you willing to try keeping a journal as an experiment? If you do keep a journal, are you going to continue it over your short term?

To write a useful journal:

1. Write for yourself. Journal-keeping is a private act. That doesn't mean you have to write it in a closet and place it under lock and key (though it's wise to keep it out of sight of those who may be tempted to read it, or those whose culture doesn't forbid them reading it). It's private because your motive in writing is for personal exploration and growth, not for a grade or for publication.

Don't paralyze yourself by trying to write your autobiography. Chances are, your "memoirs" will never be published. Relax. You're the only audience. As in all things, God will be your companion and teacher, but the workbook you develop before him is whatever you make it.

2. Be yourself in what you write. God sees and knows everything. He knows how you're feeling and what you're thinking and doing. And he loves you. During your summer of ministry you will be trying in every way possible to express that God loves the people you visit and you have a good opportunity to practice what you preach. Dare to trust that you can't surprise God by what you write. Honesty about the full range of your thoughts and emotions will not cause Jesus to love you any less and may allow you to love and recognize his love for you all the more.
3. Be yourself in how you write. Some people keep a journal like a logbook. They find that lists of experiences, details and prayer requests are most helpful as they think about what they're going through. Others use a more stream-of-consciousness style, which may include lists, sentences, poems, illustrations, glued-in-memorabilia and whatever else they find inspiring. Still others write in letter form to God or to themselves. Many find a narrative style to be most natural to them, and they fill their journal with the behind-the-scenes details of what's really happening.

Your journal doesn't have to be like Jim Elliott's or Amy Carmichael's. And it shouldn't be. After all, you're not either one of them and you never will be. You're uniquely created for a unique purpose. Your journal doesn't have to be great prose or full of lilting poetry.

(You're not Hemingway or Shakespeare, either.) Trying to write like someone else will only cramp your style and frustrate you.

Whatever style you choose, and whether it gets written in an empty book or a loose-leaf binder, in a small, plain book with no lines or a flowered one with wide lines, do it your way and revel in it being your own; it may be the only thing all summer that is.

4. Be consistent but flexible about when you write. You don't have to write in your journal every fifth hour or even every fifth day. Some people choose to see journal-keeping like other disciplines. As such, they find it helpful to do it regularly and at the same time, for example, each evening before bed or just after dinner. Often the style of summer missions is such that you won't have the sort of consistent schedule that makes this type of pattern easy. If you want to use your journal as a personal discipline, it can be a great tool. But in order to keep it up you may want to seek the support and help of your team-mates in finding the time and arranging the schedule and place where you can spend 15 to 30 minutes each day writing.

If you approach journal-keeping with a definite structure in mind, please remember: as a discipline, it's meant to be a means of grace, not guilt. If you don't write in your journal for a week or two – or even for a month – don't let it get you down. I usually think of journal-keeping as a gift. I don't have to, but I get to. It's not the only way to get the most from my experience, and it certainly isn't worth feeling guilty if I don't. But it is a delightful and deeply enriching part of a short-term experience. I write in my journal as frequently as I can or want to, often in the short transitions between places or activities. At other times, I find I like writing for an hour or longer at the end of a week. But there are many times when I don't feel like writing, but I do anyway. I'm always glad that I did.

WHEN ALL IS SAID AND DONE

However and whenever you write in or read your journal, enjoy the fact that God is always there as a listener and comforter, guide and teacher. It's out of the real stuff of our lives and experiences that the fire of his love will purify and mold us. This is the way we will grow in wisdom. But let me warn you. In the midst of it all, don't let your journal become a way to hide from teammates or others to whom God has called you to minister. And don't allow your reflections to become more important than the real people and experiences with which God will surround you. That will defeat your journal's very purpose. Do allow it to be the means by which you slow down and chew rather than just ravenously consume your short-term experience.

As one person has observed, "To say that going to church will make us a Christian is like saying that going into the garage will make us a car." So it is with journal-keeping. In itself, it won't make us become wise, any more than going on a short-term ministry project will automatically make us obedient and thoughtful world Christians. Wisdom and obedience are ultimately a function of grace and of decisions.

The kingdom of God needs people of wisdom and not just experience. May you return with slides that enable you and others to celebrate all the remarkable moments God provides in your short-term experience. May you also return with a journal under your arm and with a mind and heart full of new-found wisdom.