

Writing the Christian life: The essence of spiritual memoir

by [Richard Lischer](#) in the [September 2, 2015](#) issue



A sparrow flutters through the window into a banquet hall filled with light, music, and feasting. Then, just as quickly, the bird flies away again into the darkness. The flight of the bird is our life—brief, dramatic, and framed by two immense darkneses. Where has it come from? From what primordial past? Where is it going? Into what unknowable future?

The ancient parable suggests a religious dimension to the telling of any life. It begins in mystery and ends in faith. So compelling is the mystery that it must be puzzled over and prayed out and finally written down.

Several years ago I gathered with pastors from around our state to read spiritual autobiographies and memoirs. We met one full day a month for an entire year, reading and reflecting on “the life of faith.” We were all hungry for the genre. Our enthusiasm corresponded to the surging popularity of memoir not merely in

bookstores or on Amazon but in life-writing clubs, blogs, and self-published books in what the *New York Times* has called “the Age of Memoir.”

The books we read offered us much-needed vocational reinforcement. In a culture brimming with stories, we had somehow mislaid the beauty and the drama of the narratives that belonged to us, or to which we belonged. The courage of Perpetua and Felicitas, the misfortunes of Abelard, the strength of Teresa of Ávila, the anxieties of Bunyan, the kindness of Thérèse of Lisieux—these and many others reminded us that the autobiographical genre is not a fad but an established practice of the church, as old as Augustine and as fresh as Anne Lamott.

At its best, Christian memoir serves as a kind of reality check for our own, less literary lives of faith. The art of memoir imaginatively reprises the language and experiences of ordinary Christians and their communities—prayer, testimony, praise, confession, doubt, and lament. When Dorothy Day begins *The Long Loneliness* by evoking the smell of candle wax and incense in the confessional, she is associating the act of writing with the faithful observances of the church. Writing is like confessing, except it is harder, more exposed, and almost never followed by absolution. When joined to the traditional practices of preaching, sacrament, and catechesis, the telling of a life helps shape Christian identity and discipleship.

Christians were not the first to explore the significance of a single life. Socrates counseled the value of self-knowledge, insisting that the unexamined life is not worth living. He conducted oral exams, called dialogues, in which he and his friends explored in Q-and-A form the essentials of a life well lived.

In the millennium after Socrates, many praised his excellent advice but no one seriously followed it in narrative form until a 43-year-old North African bishop decided it was time to tell the story of his life. Augustine was fascinated by two mysteries at work in the world, the mystery of God and the mystery of human life, his own being Exhibit A. In the *Confessions*, he crafts them into a double helix, not as two phases or chapters of a story but as one profoundly tangled mystery. He narrates the facts of his life as he remembers them, but what he’s after is the meaning of it all, or what Henry James called “the figure in the carpet.” If you acknowledge only the divine, you get hagiography. If you focus only on your own life, you run the risk of narcissism of the sort with which Rousseau begins his own *Confessions*: “I am made unlike anyone I have ever met; I will even venture to say that I am like no one in the whole world.”

Augustine was as fascinated with himself as Rousseau, but his fascination led him in a different direction. He never tires of exploring the motives behind his moral and intellectual development: How did I become so self-centered? Why did I steal a few pears (when I hate pears)? Must my every sexual and professional conquest leave me dissatisfied? Why? How is it that I cried buckets when I read about the death of Dido in Virgil's *Aeneid* but couldn't squeeze out a tear when Mother died? His penchant for introspection has become second nature to us all.

He concludes that his life, no matter how fascinating or successful, will never be made whole until it is taken up into Another's life. Which is why his life story does not begin "I was born in a humble log cabin in Upper Numidia," but "*Magnus es domine*" ("God, you are great!"). On the very same page the reader encounters five *domines* (Lord), seven *laudares* (praise), and nine *invocares* (invoke). This is not the stuff of a traditional Roman life. This is not Caesar's Gallic Wars or Colin Powell's *My American Journey*. It is the language of liturgy. What follows will be a new kind of life, like Paul's, still focused on the "I," to be sure, but a chastened, crucified, and transfigured "I." Even the sacrament of baptism follows a narrative arc. "Once I was dead in sin, then I was buried with Jesus, now I walk in newness of life."

A spiritual memoir becomes explicitly Christian when it derives its literary power from the power of the gospel. It doesn't preach, it shows, and it does not—or should not—generalize or go soft-focus at the hard parts. It is a narrative in which some dimension of Christian faith, thought, or practice shapes the character of the work as a whole.

The word *whole* is significant. For example, most critics do not consider Barack Obama's memoir, *Dreams from My Father*, a Christian or religious autobiography, even though it contains the story of the author's conversion. That is because the conversion does not appear as the culmination of the plot or the impetus for a new direction in the narrative. On the other hand, Sara Miles's *Take This Bread* comes across as a religious memoir because, despite the secularity of the narrator's voice, her story originates in sacramental desire and persistently seeks a new understanding of the Eucharist as a form of prophetic service.

Some have argued that the nature of memoir makes it an unavoidably Western and individualistic exercise, that the autobiographical genre is unthinkable apart from the birth of self-awareness. Some spiritual memoirs follow this track, the modern psychologized view, which celebrates the move away from the repressiveness of the

group toward the realization of individual consciousness. But this is to marginalize cultures in which the self exists as part of the whole. It devalues those whose understanding of the Christian life is relational and collective, whose identity is established not by means of difference but by participation in the group.

There is another way. It leads away from the celebration of the self toward an ecclesial understanding of human beings in community. What made *The Cloister Walk*, by Kathleen Norris, such a groundbreaking work was precisely this counterthesis: a gifted young poet discovers in the catholic tradition something larger than the realization of her own talent. She moves to South Dakota, joins a Presbyterian church, sings in the choir, and becomes a Benedictine oblate. This is a hard sell these days. Her work exemplifies the challenge of those who write autobiographically “in Christ.”

There are no rules for writing a life, but there are coordinates for locating God in the story. In books 10–12 of the *Confessions*, Augustine mentions several: time, memory, and truth. Let’s add one more: death.

Time. When it comes to time, Augustine is of two competing minds. He says he understands time, but when he tries to explain it, “I can’t do it.” Like Einstein and Stephen Hawking, he links the existence of time to physical space as we experience it in our bodies. The past and the future do not exist. Even the present *now* is known only in retrospect as it departs for *then*. Where is it? Augustine comes near to admitting that time does not exist, which is a titillating enough notion, except that its byproduct is the minimizing of suffering and sin. Fortunately, God is eternal and is equally present to today, yesterday, and tomorrow, thereby guaranteeing the significance of every life and every death. For the dead, it is always “today.”

In Christ, this temporal life assumes the forward-leaning plot with which Christians are familiar: once I was lost, now I am found. “Salvation is nearer than we when we first believed.” “I press on toward the goal . . .” This is Time’s very arrow. If Homer sang of the human quest for glory, the Bible tells of God’s unrelenting quest for us. Each Christian narrative discerns something of the divine movement in human life. First, the Word becomes flesh. Then, through the miracle of memoir, flesh becomes word.

Among modern and postmodern memoirists the redemptive arrow has faded, but the importance of time has not. One senses that among modern writers—Virginia

Woolf and Vladimir Nabokov come to mind—the meticulous recovery of life’s every detail constitutes an act of self-creation. The narrator is, in effect, writing herself into existence. In the same vein, the atrocity or abuse narrative, like the Puritan memoir *The Narrative of the Persecutions of Agnes Beaumont* or Nawal El Saadawi’s contemporary classic *Woman at Point Zero*, expresses a defiant determination to survive (if only in print) and to write oneself back into the story of human life.

Memory. Augustine’s confession, “Lord, all that I have discovered about you I have done so by remembering,” could be made by every memoirist. For Augustine, memory is the gift that keeps on giving, the companion whose reliability is never tainted by falsity and self-deception. Since God dwells in memory, Augustine is able to trace the continuity that we all feel in our bones between the youngster we once were and the senior citizen we have become, between the callow Augustine who once made a joke of baptism and the chastened Augustine who is saved by it. Memory enables him to say “I” in a way no autobiographer had before.

Memoir is perspectival—and here is a difference between it and autobiography. Autobiography tends to be linear and chronological; memoir tends to replicate the mind’s helter-skelter way of processing the past. The memoirist does not examine the past but his or her memory of the past. This leads to the now fashionable blur between fiction and nonfiction.

Yet as Sven Birkerts has written in *The Art of Time in Memoir*, the genius of memoir is that one can say about it, “This really happened”—this despite the virtual impossibility of reproducing *anything* as it really happened. Even public occurrences, like the shooting of a president or the killing of a black teenager, are reconstructed in a fog of conflicting motives, perceptions, and memories. And personal experiences, like falling in love, getting saved, or facing death, are even more elusive; they age like good wine and become more dramatically satisfying with each retelling. Religious writers as diverse as Julian of Norwich, John Bunyan, and Martin Luther King Jr. edited—revised, altered—their private, pivotal religious experiences in succeeding editions of their memoirs, not because they were lying but because every story needs a new audience to complete it and make it better. Emotion that is recollected in tranquillity, which is how Wordsworth defined poetry, never quite captures the chaos of emotion in its raw state.

Memory is important for the Christian writer because it is in God’s memory we are held and in God’s memory we are saved. What God forgets is the boring chronology

of Israel's sins. What God remembers is God's love for Israel—and for us. “Can a mother forget her nursing child?” God asks. “These may forget, but I will not forget you. I have engraved your name in the palm of my hand.” Divine love remembers us even when we are lost to the world's memory, as we all shall be, or, through the curse of dementia, lost to ourselves. In the resurrection, Jesus performs God's memory. By raising Jesus from the dead, God says in effect, “This is how I will remember you.”

Truth. Among modern truth tellers, we might consider Anne Lamott's graphic account of her alcoholism, or C. S. Lewis's clinical record of his grief (which includes his “disgusting” personal hygiene and his blasphemous thoughts), or Mother Teresa's 30-year battle with “the darkness.” Christians should be the last people to falsify their own lives. Truthfulness is crucial not only for the sake of honesty, but because there is a connection between the truth of God and the truth of a life in which the grace of God is disclosed. Fudging on one's own life invariably sentimentalizes the Jesus who saved it.

In order to tell the truth about God, the writer employs tools usually associated with fiction, such as physical description, poetic language, or extensive dialogue. For example, in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Thomas Merton will make an artistic investment in order to put the reader on the streets of upper Manhattan on the morning of his baptism at Corpus Christi Church because he wants to reveal something of the character of baptism itself. It's not just a weather report when he writes, “The sky was bright and cold. The river glittered like steel. There was a clean wind in the street. It was one of those fall days full of life and triumph, made for great beginnings.”

In spiritual memoir, the more skillfully the writer crystallizes the long process of conversion into a single dramatic moment, the greater the role of art. When Augustine's world is “teetering,” as he says in book 8, the garden in Milan, with its convenient fig tree, calls to mind the drama of another garden. This garden, too, is crowded with actors. A weeping Augustine is there along with several personifications of his sensuality whispering in his ear, “Surely, you can't do without us, can you?” His best friend is standing by helplessly. Then the figure of Lady Constance shows up to strengthen his resolve. And just outside the garden wall a child is chanting, “Pick it up, read it!” as if to encourage Augustine to open his Bible. His mother, Monica, is in the next room, no doubt with her ear to the door, monitoring events. Thus the truth of Augustine's shattering conversion is a mob

scene rendered by the telltale methods of theological art.

Death. Truth is the stuff of autobiography. Memory is its tool. Time is its shape. Death is its precondition. This thought comes to me by way of an interesting article, “The Art of Losing,” by Timothy Baker of Aberdeen University, and from my own, less tutored, experience of listening to stories. One cannot help noticing how many of them are organized around the possibility of death. This is how we read *Romeo and Juliet* as well as *Tuesdays with Morrie* and everything in between. Listen carefully and don’t relax, the storyteller warns, somebody just might die. I am convinced there is no telling a life without a death. Someone has to pay.

Even God’s autobiography, the Holy Bible, is subject to the gravitational pull of the hero’s death. An overbold editor might well have pruned the begats, abbreviated Leviticus, and cut 3 John, but only for the purpose of moving more quickly to the core of the reader’s need. That need is met in the story of the death of Jesus, which cuts a gash in the symmetry of an inspiring story. Every smaller story about Jesus gains its significance from his end. Every Christian autobiographer draws from the necessity of that event.

Augustine’s life of faith is framed by two deaths, that of his nameless friend and his mother, Monica. The first death provides a clue to his own shallow understanding of the Catholic faith; the second provides the coda to his conversion. Now that Monica is dead, Augustine is free to write about the journey of life in its entirety.

Julian of Norwich’s autobiography, *Revelations of Divine Love*, begins with the author on her supposed deathbed. Only the certainty of death grants her the vision of God’s all-encompassing love.

In Jonathan Edwards’s *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*, the revival in Northampton, Massachusetts, begins with a fatal illness and ends with a suicide.

Young Tom Merton’s wanderings on the face of the earth begin with the horrific scene in which his mother’s coffin goes rumbling through the steel doors of the crematorium toward the furnace. Years later, the death of his father is the last remaining hurdle before he is freed to search for the meaning of his own life.

More recently, poet Christian Wiman’s reflections on God in *My Bright Abyss* cannot be understood and experienced apart from the author’s mosaic-like narrative of his own confrontations with cancer, pain, and death.

Death is the unseen guest in every autobiography, secular or sacred. Death makes a complete autobiography impossible, since no one dies with laptop blazing. We can never finish our own story. Death is the ultimate writer's block.

Since there can be no authentic grasp of life without death, and since the narrator cannot narrate his or her own death, the story requires a borrowed death—the death of an important character—which lends to the work a borrowed wholeness, as it were, with which to ensure its authenticity as a human document.

And what is most authentic about human life? That it has an end! “Why should I tell the story of my life?” the writer Martin Amis asks in his memoir, *Experience*. His answer: “I do it because my father is dead . . .” That is the one “fact” that is not optional.

The cultural critic Georges Gusdorf reminds us that a great autobiography thrusts beyond the temporal boundaries of a single life to apprehend something larger. Gusdorf's word for the larger truth is *eschatology*.

The possibility of death in the narrative is the precondition of the eschatological nature of memoir. The author narrates someone's death in order to represent a genuine life, the very telling of which creates communion between the mortal writer and the mortal reader. For secular writers like Virginia Woolf, Christopher Hitchens, or Julian Barnes, it is *because* we die that the terrors of this life, including its end, must be preserved. The Christian writer is no less a curator of life's sorrows, but reimagines them in a saving way so that something whole and redemptive may come into view. To remember in this way, then to tell it true, is the work of God.

Read the sidebar article on [memoirs with religious themes](#).