Appendix A: Spiritual Autobiography Guidelines

Introduction:

Writing one’s spiritual autobiography is itself a tool for spiritual formation. A spiritual autobiography is not done in the sense of writing a “term paper” or just writing biographical details about your life. This is a process that is done prayerfully, with the author paying attention to what God has to say as he or she reflects back over his or her life. Many individuals find the process of writing to be a time of encountering God and coming to a greater understanding of how God has been at work in his or her life.

A spiritual autobiography is not meant to be a comprehensive chronicle of your spiritual journey, but rather a selective reflection on events, periods, influences, people and experiences that God leads you to write about. Honesty is essential. Be willing to look at the good and the difficult parts of your spiritual journey.

I’ll provide two formats for doing a spiritual autobiography. The first is a thematic approach and the second is a historical format. You may choose either approach for your spiritual autobiography.

A Thematic Spiritual Autobiography:

What follows is a series of questions for you to use as stepping stones into the writing process. Use any of these questions that are of interest to you. Come up with your own questions or perspectives that you could use to guide your writing. When you are finished using these questions or other ones of your own choosing, you should have about eight to ten different questions/themes you have written on.

1. Richard Foster’s book, *Streams of Living Water*, discusses six main traditions of Christian spirituality. Using his framework, what is your primary tradition and how has that tradition shaped your approach to the spiritual journey? How do you see the strengths and weaknesses of this tradition in your journey? How have any of the other traditions been incorporated into your spiritual formation process? (Note: this is the one question that will require you reading and becoming familiar with an author’s framework so you can respond to it. If you prefer, the next question gets at the same issue of spiritual traditions in a simpler way. You may use that question as an alternative to this one.)

2. Write about the significance of your spiritual heritage and church experience? What were the strengths and weaknesses of your spiritual heritage?

3. What are the earliest memories of your encounters with God?
4. Write about several (five or six) defining moments that have shaped your spiritual life. Defining moments may be decisions you made, events you participated in, experiences you had, etc. To be a defining moment means that these moments in part have shaped who you are today? (Note: Do not include influential people in this section.)

5. Write about several (three to six) people who have had significant influence on your life. These people are so significant that who you are today is in part due to their influence on you.

6. Talk about the use of the spiritual disciplines throughout your journey. What have you practiced, how have you changed in your spiritual disciplines through the years, what has been meaningful for you, and where did you find guidance for your devotional life? What about things right now? What does an average week look like for you in terms of your use of the spiritual disciplines and practices? How do you evaluate the impact of these disciplines for growing in your personal intimacy with God?

7. In recent months, where do you see God at work in your life? To ask it in a slightly different way, how are you experiencing God (or) where is God encouraging growth and transformation in your life?

8. Use a metaphor of your own choosing to describe your spiritual life.

9. If you have ever received spiritual direction, write about that experience. Provide some details about length, with whom, the nature of the direction and what kind of progress you saw take place?

An Historical Spiritual Autobiography:

The first task is to divide your life into appropriate chronological periods. You have two main options.

You can work with ten year blocks as your life framework (i.e. ages 1-10, 11-20, 21-30 and so on).

You can work with life transitions as your life framework. This requires a little more insight and processing on your part. Look for the most significant transitions in your life. Perhaps graduation from high school, graduation from college, conversion to Christ, marriage, children, major moves, significant career changes, or a time of major crisis. I suggest you have no more than six or seven of these transitions.

After you have divided your life into one of these frameworks, now come up with a list of anything you believe is significant in each of these periods. These items may be about
people, places, events, experiences, decisions, beliefs, challenges, problems, opportunities, etc. Later you may eliminate some of the items on this list and add others.

At this point you have a rough (broad, general) chronological outline of your life. Now you are ready to begin writing. Here is the key point: Anything you write about must have spiritual significance. This is a spiritual autobiography you are writing. How do any of these items in your chronology shape and direct your spiritual life?

Finally, write about the future and what you envision the future may hold for you. Where are you going? What is needed for you to get to that point? What would you like to see God do in and through you in the years ahead?

Ongoing Avenues to Consider:

It will be useful for you to include a copy of your spiritual autobiography as part of your journal record. If you are new to journaling, your spiritual autobiography might be your first entry.

Now that you have your spiritual autobiography finished, read through it again. How do you feel when you read through it? What are the dominant reactions you have as you consider the story of your life and the story of God in your life?

At a larger level (the forest and not the individual trees), how do you see the “hand of God” at work in your life journey? Is there anything you believe God is saying to you right now in light of your journey as you have remembered it?

What clues have you uncovered in your past that give insights into who you are today? Is there anything you sense God asking you to revisit in your past? Why those things and what do you think God may be up to in a revisit?