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Reframing Spiritual Memoir

Howard Schaap

“Okay, Facebook, I need a little help,” read a recent post by a friend of mine. “Can you name memoirs in which the author embarks on a year-long project in an effort to best his or her demons (the more hair-brained, the better)?”

These types of books have been dubbed stunt memoirs, and by the fifty-plus responses to the original post, there is no shortage of them out there. One of the most famous practitioners of the stunt memoir is A.J. Jacobs, with titles such as *The Know-It-All: One Man’s Quest to Become the Smartest Person in the World* and *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man’s Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible* to his name. Another example is Julie Powell’s *Julie and Julia: My Year of Cooking Dangerously*, a stunt that Powell tried to replicate with a racier “stunt.” In *Cleaving: a Story of Marriage, Meat, and Obsession*, Powell apparently chronicles an affair that turns into sexual obsession, along with some stuff about meat. As Powell’s example suggests, to say nothing of Oprah blow-ups such as the James Frey affair, the memoir is highly combustible.

From memoirs to blogs to selfies, there’s a lot of “look-at-me” writing and posing out there today, and in the age of the selfie, it would seem that first-person writing will only increase. That is probably not a good thing. More to our purposes, at Dordt and other Reformed institutions, what are we to do with all this first-person writing by students of the “look-at-me generation”? At Dordt, even as we encourage students to explore their individual places in a collective Body (with an assignment called My Story Inside God’s Story, MSIGS for short), what is the place of “I” in student writing—and in our own?

At the same time that we ask students to do reflective writing about their spiritual lives, there are very few “Reformed memoirs” out there. An un-

official poll of my English department colleagues and emeriti, netted primarily evasion: one concrete answer was John Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* and thereafter “the novel”; another was Lew Smedes *My God and I*. When I suggested to a writer who’s Reformed that he should pen a “spiritual autobiography,” he told me flatly, “There ain’t no story there,” and then added, “There’s no tradition of ‘testimony’ in the Dutch Reformed world.”

In short, writing about spiritual life by recounting our personal journey of faith is not something we do, probably for a variety of reasons. Why is it that we distrust first person testimony? Perhaps because we know that flashy stories that draw attention to ourselves are notoriously hypocritical, or perhaps because we’re more tribal in our understanding of faith, preferring “we” over “me.” Or maybe there’s something about a Reformed understanding of “spirituality” that we like to root in practical things, like work. “We write about life, which is the same thing as writing about spirituality,” we might be tempted to say. If this is true, then we’re sending students mixed messages in asking them to write about faith but expecting something beyond emotional fluff.

Perhaps it’s time Reformed Christians start modeling quality, first-person writing about faith—in memoir. Modeling, of course, is a major tool in teaching student writing. Thus, as we ask students to write about their spiritual development, we should have a shelf full of examples we can point to. As my informal poll shows, I’m not sure that shelf is very well stocked. Take this essay as an attempt to begin stocking that shelf.

Origins: *The Confessions*

To both begin our collections of memoirs and to excavate the very idea of memoir a bit, the first book on our shelf might be, predictably, Augustine’s *The Confessions*. It needs to be there for a

number of reasons, the first of which is its artistry. *The Confessions* is very much a self-portrait. Augustine poses himself—in prayer (Henry Chadwick describes the book as a prose poem to God, which it certainly is) and in a pulpit (Chadwick also describes the book as a polemic, which one can hear loud and clear as Augustine refutes Manicheans and answers critics and political opponents). *The Confessions* reminds us that memoir is always posed—it's the context of the position and the quality of the pose that counts.

The narrative arc of *The Confessions* is even more important to keep in mind. Augustine works throughout the book to bring external plot and internal conflict to a point of intersection. True of much memoir, Augustine does this through both flamboyant means—referring to his sexual improprieties—and run-of-the-mill events—referring to adolescent hijinks like stealing pears that don't seem to qualify as lurid drama, but which he uses to bring out the inner conflict of his conscience. This double move of external and internal is arguably the original pattern for memoir. It's this connection of inner and outer that makes memoir—at least *good* memoir—work. Primarily because of Augustine, as David Mendelsohn points out in a *New Yorker* article, memoir's DNA is “essentially religious.”

(This “essentially religious” nature is another reason for Reformed Christians to reconsider memoir. In a literature landscape where Paul Elie can wonder, “Has Fiction Lost Its Faith?”, perhaps memoir has not—Elie points to memoirs such as Mark Richard's *House of Prayer No.2* as exactly the type of faithful writing that he doesn't find in current fiction.)

Contemporary practitioners of the spiritual memoir, then, find themselves in a long tradition. They also continue to remake this tradition in ways that can challenge us all to pay attention to the story of faith in our lives. What follows is a list of several authors whose work can help us think about our own stories inside God's story.

Faith, Ideas, Practices: *My Grandfather's House*, by Robert Clark

In *My Grandfather's House*, Robert Clark not only tells the story of his upbringing and his conversion to Catholicism but also takes the whole Reformation to task for separating words from things. Like Augustine, Clark mixes the severity of the life

events he shares—adolescent resistance to authority, a kind and forgiving mentor when he needed it most, a divorce that he feels is a sin especially against his daughter. Where Clark's memoir is challenging is in its ideas. Beneath his conversion to Catholicism, Clark finds his distrust of Protestantism, pictured for us in Henry VIII's “reformation” in England:

In all this (Henry VIII's reformation), there is a replacement or substitution being worked; of words for things, or of the names of things for the things themselves. The Bible replaces the statues and images of the shrines and the rites of the saints and the dead. Under Protestantism, preaching would be the principle sacrament; words would fill the disenchanting, disembodied, now merely symbolic shell of the Eucharist.

This, I think, is truly the great divorce, greater and sharper than Henry's and certainly than mine. It is the divorce of things and the signs of things from words and names, the triumph of nominalism, our culture's concession that it knows nothing of God, and that God, for all we know, knows (or at least cares) nothing of us. Since God is no longer assuredly in things and intimately so, we are estranged not only from Him but from his creation, from the things themselves; and even his ‘gifts and creatures of bread and wine’ are nothing more than what we call them, nothing more than names. (46-47)

Clark's memoir illustrates the depths to which spiritual memoir might go. Far from the simple airing of dirty laundry, *My Grandfather's House* illustrates how we might engage history and the underlying ideas of our religious practices.

I'm reminded, here, of Jamie Smith's *Desiring the Kingdom*, a work which also asked us to reflect on how worship practices—whether they happened in church or at the mall—have shaped us. It's precisely that kind of work that memoir can do, both for us and for our students.

Then, too, Clark's memoir offers a challenge to our protestant worldview: is our worship experience, our liturgical understanding of the world simply rhetorical? As we try to understand millennials' faith lives beyond graduation, spiritual memoir may be an important tool for us to use now to affect their choices then.

Waking Up from Evangelicalism: *A Door in the Ocean* by David McGlynn.

Like Augustine before him, David McGlynn's *A*

Door in the Ocean is a memoir with two threads: the execution-style murder of McGlynn's best friends when he was 16, and McGlynn's own struggle with evangelicalism and the view of the world that it gave him. In this second thread, McGlynn is not alone. Writers from John Jeremiah Sullivan to Jonathan Franzen have versions of this story, though McGlynn shows that it is a story that can be told responsibly. Throughout the book, McGlynn increasingly finds the evangelical apparatus wanting as he tries to understand the depth of evil he faces in his friend's murder. This lack is crystallized late in the book as McGlynn, by then firmly entrenched with his wife in an Episcopal church, considers the power and allure of a stereotypical mega-church.

On Sunday afternoons in the summer, Katherine and the boys and I like to drive into the county north of our house in Wisconsin—a road that inevitably leads past the big new evangelical church near the highway. The children's wing has a bank of windows four-stories tall and a marquee that looks like it belongs at Toys "R" Us. If we pass by it at the right time, we can hear the evening service starting up, the music pumping from its doors and windows, the drummer's foot stomping on the bass, four thousand hands all coming together in unison, over and over again, like the great beating heart of the world. Our neighbors down the street, our librarian, the woman who sold us a garlic press at the mall, are all clapping together, all calling out to God. The beat gets inside the windows and disrupts the radio. It's wild and rapturous and yanks me back to the carpeted rooms where I once sat, the speakers and pastors who once hefted their Bibles into the air as they proclaimed a need to "stand up for truth" or to "be in the world but not of it." In those moments I'm tempted to think of my former faith as a delusion, a departure from my moral compass, or else a kind of slow-burning post-traumatic stress disorder brought about by life-shattering events when I was young. I press the accelerator to the floor, hoping to outrun the sound.

However, McGlynn doesn't run. He turns and faces just what his faith is, tangled as it is in evangelicalism and his parents' ideas. He goes out of his way to make clear what he's thankful for in his faith formation.

As hard as I've tried to separate myself from evangelicalism, it continues to define my faith, to shape its boundaries and limits, and I remain grateful for what it taught me. The peace and stillness I felt on

the beach when I was fifteen, the voice that came to me on the wind, has been neither forgotten nor forsaken. The Lord hid his word inside my heart that night, and it's abided there ever since. I love church coffee and communion wine, stained glass and incense, Easter palms folded into crosses; I can still recite the Lord's Prayer, the Nicene Creed, the Apostles' Creed, the Benediction, and I believe every word. Giving up the mysteries of faith would mean exchanging one extreme for another—belief with no room for doubt, for doubt with no room for belief. I can, at last, answer my stepmother's question—Jesus' question—just as Peter did: I believe a holy death can atone for my soul's imperfections. I, too, believe Jesus is the Christ of God. The fundamentals endure, only without fundamentalism.

McGlynn's honesty and even-handedness with those with whom he disagrees—his stepmother in the passage above—may be instructive for us all. Again, as we continue to be concerned about millennials leaving the church, it's these sorts of honest conversations that we need more of. Memoir can be a place for just such conversations to begin.

Writing Out of Community:

***The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*, by Kao Kalia Yang**

One of the strongest arguments against memoir is that the form itself is so Western, so ego-driven. A professor of Native American literature once told me that tribal people as a whole distrust memoir because it elevates the individual over the tribe. Problems with the memoir have also arisen in Asian-American letters when it comes to being faithful to family.

However, *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir* by Kao Kalia Yang stands out as a stark example of what might be done with memoir to move it from "I" to "we," from individual to collective. Even in the subtitle, Yang sets herself up as a voice for the collective, a move not typical in a postmodern world where nobody dares to speak for anybody else, yet Yang sets out to do exactly that in a number of fairly simple ways. For one thing, Yang lets her parents speak in this memoir, rooting her story in theirs, wrapping their stories together.

Then, too, Yang outlines the pressures of a patriarchal culture without exactly blaming anyone. When Yang's mother first gives birth to only girls, this poses a problem. Yang tells us,

The pressure for him to marry another wife was mounting from all his brothers and his mother, too. They all said that my mother could not give him sons; he was still handsome; he could marry another and love my mother just the same. We were only girls, Dawb and I. What would happen to him when he died? What would happen to my mother? As girls, we could not perform the ceremonial rituals to carry my mother and father's spirits back to the land of the ancestors.

These things were said out of love for him. He was a Hmong man and he believed he would die a Hmong death" (80).

Yet Yang does not shy away from the pain this causes her mother either.

On the days that [my mother] knelt by the side of the dirt road, covered in dust, selling bunches of green onion and cilantro that she planted in the little plot of land behind the toilets, the rice cakes that she woke up at dawn to steam on the black iron of our fire ring—while she tried to find the money to keep her two daughters healthy, my father took me on a borrowed motorcycle to see the women on the other side of the camp (85)

Yang resolves the crisis not by denouncing Hmong culture or her father but by simple reference to her father's motives: "Only he was not looking seriously," she says on his behalf (86). The implication is that he was following a cultural pathway half-heartedly, and from this position Yang allows her father to be faithful to all parties involved. Throughout the book Yang affirms Hmong culture while also managing to not efface herself as a woman within a patriarchal culture.

The arc of Yang's book tells the tale of coming to America. However, Yang resolves it in faithfulness to Hmong culture, recounting in detail the death of her grandmother. This seems to be an anticlimax to a Western reader, but it's faithful to Hmong culture by focusing on what matters, the elders and specifically a family matriarch.

By the end of the book, Yang extends her voice not just to her own family but to a wider Hmong family. "Our dreams are coming, Grandmother," she writes. "I am holding on to you as you are holding on to my father and me. Mother, I didn't forget you. My hand is all caught up in yours. Together, we are typing on the keyboards of time. . . Our dreams are coming true, my Hmong brothers and sisters" (274).

Yang's memoir speaks to the possibility of taking memoir beyond the individual ego and becoming the voice for a collective. As we consider how a memoir might speak on behalf of a church or community, memoir can allow us to consider "our story"—not just "my story"—inside God's story," an antidote surely needed in a "look-at-me" world.

The accumulating of mystery:

House of Prayer No. 2

Most simply, first-person writing gives us a way to see the accumulating revelation of God in our lives, and in Mark Richard's *House of Prayer No. 2*, that happens especially through misunderstandings and false starts. Richard's work is noteworthy for its voice, a caffeinated second person ranging through the Faulknerian South of Richard's childhood. Richard recounts moments of childlike doubt—a notable form of truth-telling—when the words of scripture and the desolation he experienced in children's hospital intersect:

In the hospital auditorium you had noticed these words painted in large letters over the stage: SUFFER THE LITTLE CHILDREN TO COME UNTO ME.

Who said that? You ask the nurse who took you to the laboratory, the nurse who sometimes sneaks Coke in your metal spout cup when everybody else gets tap water. Nurse Wilfong.

Jesus. Jesus Christ, she says.

What kind of jerk would want little children to suffer? you wonder.

Throughout his life, however, moments of doubt and mystery accumulate without one necessarily noticing—moments that one realizes by the end are part of the fabric of the story, as Richard comes to understand the divine hand directing that story. At one of these moments, Richard writes,

You look up, and The Preacher is standing with his pipe looking into your cell. He says to the jailer, *And I'll take this one too.*

The Preacher preaches that the end of pride is the beginning of forgiveness, that when a man in sincerity says *I have sinned*, it gives God a chance to say *I forgive*. The Preacher says that he is a sinner, that his witness is that of one beggar telling another where to find bread. The only sin you ever know him to commit is when he sometimes drives too fast up North High Street on his way home and gets caught in the speed trap by the cemetery. His sin is telling the policeman that the reason he was driving

so fast was so that he could get to the hospital before visiting hours were over. Allowed on his way, The Preacher then invariably drives on to the hospital to give truth to the lie and perform little graces of comfort as afforded by the unwitting police department. (74)

The movement of faith in Richard's life, as it is for many of us, is one of subtlety; overt understanding of that movement is rare.

Trying It Out

Personally, I'm not sure that, after Robert Clark's criticism, there isn't a divorce in my life between word and thing. After reading *My Grandfather's House*, I want to explore the connection of the Christian Reformed liturgy to my commute, to the plates I set on the table, to the computer I type on. After reading David McGlynn, I want to have a conversation about the difference between my parents' understanding of faith and my own. Then, in the spirit of *The Latehomecomer*, I don't want to have to divide myself off and individuate; I want to be able to speak about faith more widely, for a family, for a Body. And I wonder with Richard at the accumulation of faith that my life

has been.

The fields for faith exploration in the area of spiritual memoir, it seems to me, are ripe. Sure, there are pitfalls to the memoir, but now more than ever there are ways around those pitfalls. As we continue to fear the mass exodus of young people from the church, we might reconsider the reading and writing of memoir as a significant part of faith formation. Could putting words to faith help put faith into action?

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