

Spiritual memoirs offer a path to soul

By Meg Bryant

"External facts about a life can be researched generations later, but the inner life is irrevocably lost unless written during one's lifetime."

Those are the opening words of Nan Phifer's widely celebrated book, *Memoirs of the Soul*. On a drizzly fall evening in mid-October, more than 20 people gathered in a warm conference room at the Church of the Epiphany in downtown D.C. as Phifer guided them along the initial steps of writing their own spiritual memoirs.

Phifer, who is associate director of the Oregon Writing Project at the University of Oregon, has been conducting how-to workshops on writing personal memoirs since 1998, providing an easy yet structured process that cuts through writer's block and allows experienced and inexperienced writers alike to explore and write about their hopes and fears, successes, disappointments, joys and quest for meaning. The process involves a series of prompts aimed at helping people identify subjects that they might want to write about - people that have played a defining role in their lives, meaningful places and pivotal experiences. These, explains Phifer, will become the table of contents of their spiritual memoir.

Unlike autobiographies, which tend to be linear in nature, begin-

ning at birth, and can be overwhelmed with data and statistics, memoirs recount an individual's inner life, or essence. Phifer encourages writers to utilize visceral clues - times when your breathing seemed to stop, times

To get started, she offers some basic advice: don't write chronologically, begin with outer events and work gradually more inward, and don't worry about spelling and style. "I insist that the rough draft be filled with mechanical

tiality and encourage affirmation of the reader's work. The idea is to create a safe, nonjudgmental atmosphere in which writers can explore their thoughts more fully, Phifer says.

Writers also are urged to reflect on a series of questions, including what emotions they felt as they wrote about an experience, what longings or concerns they had as they recalled a time in their life, and whether the process led them to any gleanings of transcendence, belonging or grace.

"Transcendence and grace," notes Phifer, "that won't happen with everything you write, but once in awhile it will."

The workshop brought accolades from those who attended. "It really helped me in terms of reflecting on my life and realizing how many stories I have to tell," said Theresa Hobgood, a member of the vestry at Epiphany. Darlene Ferguson, a seminarian who attended the session, called the evening "profound and soul-searching and nonthreatening."

Of her own spiritual memoir, Phifer calls it a "work in progress," adding that the process of delving into her inner self has yielded many "ah-ha!" revelations, those special moments when connections - causes, links and recognitions - between people and experiences in her own life become strikingly clear and more powerful.

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Nan Phifer, author of *Memoirs of the Soul*

when you gasped, times when you felt goose bumps or broke into a sweat - in recalling major moments in their lives.

"Many people would like to write spiritual memoirs, but they don't know how to begin," she says. "My purpose is to help people see the sacred in their daily lives."

Phifer has created a seven-step writing process to help people accomplish this goal, but stresses that the formula is flexible and that people should freely alter it if they feel a need to. The steps are as follows: gather ideas; share what you are considering with a friend or writing partner; write a quick draft; read the draft aloud to yourself or with a friend; revise, if desired; proofread, and; make a final draft.

mistakes so that people aren't distracted by thoughts of editing and proofreading," she says. "That can come later." And she tells people, "Dare to ramble."

Once participants in the workshop have identified possible topics, Phifer asks them to choose several they feel they could write about that evening. Then the would-be memoirists were given 15 minutes to compose a rough draft about one of those people or events. The group becomes amazingly quiet as 20-odd pens begin scratching the surface of buried emotions and memories.

After the initial memoirs have been written down, writers break into small groups to share their stories and receive feedback, using guidelines for listening and responding that guard confiden-

Monthly Meditation

A Eucharistic meal to remember

It was a rainy and dreary afternoon as we made our way to a workers' hostel in a township outside Cape Town, South Africa. The unpaved roads and walkways were muddy. We encountered chickens, dogs and cats our way to the concrete building. After ascending two flights of stairs, we entered the unit of our hosts, people I did not know.

Their apartment was small. The tables were built into the walls as were the benches we sat on. There was a two-burner stove with no oven in the kitchen area.

The family consisted of many adults and children. They told us they came there to work so they could send money home, but there was never any money to send.

As we talked they served us tea and cookies. But there was still activity in the kitchen area. A few minutes later we were served stewed chicken and potatoes. I was given three pieces of chicken as were my friends. But the hosts were not eating. I asked my friend who spoke Xhosa, their language, and acted as our interpreter why they were not eating. She said there was not enough for them and us. I said I could not eat if they were not eating. She reminded me that it was bad manners not to accept their hospitality.

I told them that as a priest I believed eating was a communal event - a sacred time - and therefore I would share my food with the children present. That was OK with them. So three children came and sat with me, and others with the couple who brought me there. Conversation continued during the meal as they had many questions about the U.S.

Knowing they would not accept money from me, I said I would leave them money for a meal to be hosted by me since I could not host them in my home. Then when they broke bread and when I broke bread we would remember this sacred time together.

As we celebrate this month of thanksgiving, I remember that sacred time and meal with people who gave of substance to someone they had never met. It is a reminder to me of how much I have and of how much is expected from me to go and do likewise.

The Rev. Nan Peete
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