



JOURNALING

questions for humanitarian workers

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Writing is a powerful process!

Writing can help you document your struggles and triumphs, capture things you want to remember, and understand how you have grown and changed as a result of your experiences.

It can help with stress management too — some research on the effects of writing suggests that writing detailed accounts about stressful or traumatic experiences in a way that links feelings with events can lead to physical and psychological improvements that can endure for months. Writing about positive coping strategies is also helpful. This seems to hold true even if the experience of writing about these topics is upsetting in the short term.

There are no rules when it comes to journaling. You can use your journal as an unstructured gathering space for your thoughts and experiences, or pick a theme for your writing. Some people focus their journaling on their families. Others write specifically about their spiritual reflections, things they're grateful for, their struggles, their travels, or what they're reading. Because humanitarian work is a career with unique joys and challenges, you may also benefit from exploring these deeply on the pages of a journal.

In this booklet I've included questions about which humanitarian workers may be particularly interested in thinking and writing. There are a lot of them, so don't get overwhelmed! You can pick and choose and start wherever you want. Or, you can start with the program outlined on page four.

Happy writing,
Lisa

"Writing is a way of coming to terms with the world and oneself. The whole spirit of writing is to overcome narrowness and fear by giving order, measure, and significance to the flux of experience constantly dinnning into our lives. Out of that din comes fear of ignorance, fear of being alone, fear of dying without having defied the brutal indifference of the physical universe. Everyone who writes makes some attempt to face those fears by the very act of writing as best he can."

(R.V. Cassil)



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A Journaling Program

If you're new to journaling, you may want some structure and guidance as you get started. If so, you could use the following 10-day program:

- **Day 1:** Pick one of the questions under *Capturing today* (page 5) and write for 15 minutes. Then pick another question from that section and write for 15 more minutes.
- **Day 2:** Pick a question from *Why do you do this work?* (page 5) and write for 30 minutes.
- **Day 3:** Look at the last two questions under *The rewards and challenges of humanitarian work* (page 5). Spend 15 minutes writing on each of these questions.
- **Day 4:** Pick a question from *Stress and self-care* (page 6) and write for 30 minutes.
- **Day 5:** Pick a question from *Values* (page 6) and write for 30 minutes.
- **Day 6:** Pick one of the questions under *Capturing Today* (page 5) and write for 15 minutes. Then pick another question from that section and write for 15 more minutes.
- **Day 7:** Pick one of the questions under *Relationships* (page 7) and write for 30 minutes.
- **Day 8:** Pick one of the questions under *Relationships* (page 7) and write for 30 minutes.
- **Day 9:** Pick one of the questions under *Balance in life* (page 7) and write for 30 minutes.
- **Day 10:** Pick one of the questions under *Looking down the road* (page 10) and write for 30 minutes.

Capturing today

(These questions can be particularly good for quick 10-15 minute journaling sessions, or during times when you feel stuck and don't know how to get started.)

- Today was a ___ day.
- The significant events of today were...
- Right now I'm feeling...
- Right now the most important thing to do is...
- Right now what I *want* to do is...
- Today I learned...
- Today's disappointments were...
- The chief joys of today were...
- Today I've been thinking about...

Why do you do this work?

- How and why did you get into this field? What motivated you then? What conscious and unconscious expectations and ideals did you have about this work?
- How have your expectations been met?
- Have your ideals changed? Are your motivations now the same as they were when you started this work? If not, how have they changed and why?

The rewards and challenges of humanitarian work

- What do you find especially rewarding (physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually and relationally) about working in the humanitarian field?
- What do you enjoy most about this work? What do you enjoy giving? What do you get out of it?
- What do you find especially challenging (physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually and relationally) about working in the humanitarian field?

"There are thousands of causes for stress, and one antidote to stress is self-expression. That's what happens to me every day. My thoughts get off my chest, down my sleeves and onto my pad..."
(Gary Kanin)

- What are two ways you feel your work has had a negative influence on the way you see the world, yourself, or what matters to you (your sense of meaning and purpose, hope and faith)?
- What are two ways you feel your work has had a positive influence on the way you see the world, yourself, or what matters to you (your sense of meaning and purpose, hope and faith)?

Stress and self-care

- What are the most significant sources of stress in your life right now?
- When you are under pressure, what are some of your “early warning” signs of stress?
- When you become aware of your early warning signs, what could you do that might prevent your stress from growing?
- What are some of your typical self-care and coping strategies (both negative and positive) when you are stressed, fatigued, or anxious?
- What sustains you in your work (i.e., what refreshes you, energizes you, and gives you hope)?
- What helpful self-care strategies do you wish you were using more regularly?

Values

- Jump ahead to the end of your life. What are the three most important lessons you have learned and why are they so critical?
- How does your job allow you to express or “live out” your values?
- Think about your entire life, not just your job. Does the way that you generally spend your time and energy reflect what you say you value most in life? If yes, how? If not, how not?
- How has what you value most in life changed since starting this work? What has been involved in those changes?

“Get it out of your system! Your journal is a perfectly appropriate place to express yourself – all of yourself. Fifteen minutes of ventilating on paper can save you a migraine headache. If it’s too awful to even reread, much less keep...indulge yourself in the wonderful act of ripping it up and stomping it. Or flushing it down the toilet. Or burning it in the fireplace. Make a ritual out of it!”

(Kathleen Adams)

Balance in life

- Complete this sentence five times, in five different ways: “I sometimes find it difficult to balance _____ with _____.” (Hint: think about demands, responsibilities, and desires across different people, roles, and situations in your life).
- What are two issues or themes around which you most frequently feel as if you struggle to find balance? How?

(After doing one of these exercises you may want to consider focusing more in depth on just one of the areas you identified in your answer next time you write.)

Relationships

(There are times in one’s life when relationship issues feel central, and times when they don’t feel nearly as central as perhaps they should. During these times you may want to choose questions from one of the following categories for your next writing session.)

On family and friendships:

- How do close friends and family support you? How do you support them? What kind of support might you want from them? What gets in the way of asking for that support? Are there any ways to overcome those obstacles?
- How do you invest in community in your life?
- What is one meaningful/funny/challenging interaction you’ve had with someone this week?
- What have you learned from or about your friends and family this year?
- What impact—both positive and negative—has your work had on friendship and family relationships? What do you celebrate in this? What do you mourn?

For those in partnership relationships:

- What are ten things you love about your partner?
- Think of a couple you greatly respect. What are three things you admire about their relationship? How do you see those qualities in your relationship with your partner?
- What impact has humanitarian work had on your relationship – both positive and negative?
- What do you think your partner finds most difficult about your work?

“We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry.”
(William Butler Yeats)

Home and travel

- What do you feel when you hear the word “home?”
- What, where, and who is home to you?
- Write down 15 words or phrases that come to mind when you hear the word “home”. What are some of the things you most value about being at home?
- Write down 15 words or phrases that come to mind when you hear the phrase “on the road”. What are some of the things you most value about being on the road?

Before a trip

- What do you hope to accomplish on this trip? What will help you feel like this trip has been a “success” for you?
- What are you looking forward to about the trip?
- What are you *not* looking forward to? What are you anticipating might be difficult?
- What are you planning on doing to help yourself relax, stay centered, and to cope with stress during this trip?

During a trip

- What stories mark this time with significance?
- What is unique about this trip?
- What faces and stories of people whom you’ve met have stuck with you?
- What are two ideas or experiences you want to share with family and/or friends back home?
- Where, or in whom, did you see hope?
- What did you learn about yourself?
- What do you not want to forget about this time?
- What are you going to be happy to leave behind?
- What will you miss?
- What are you looking forward to about returning home?

“We write to taste life twice, in the moment and in retrospect.”
(Annais Nin)

Coming home after a trip

- How are you feeling about being back? Is there anything that surprises you about these feelings?
- What helps you cope well with transitioning between being away and being home?
- What are you talking about with family—are there issues or conflicts with your family or friends that often seem to surface right before you leave or soon after you return?

Things to write about during difficult times

- What are some of the challenging aspects of this time for you?
- What has contributed to these difficulties? What about people around you? Those at home? What about aspects of yourself?
- How have you responded to these challenges so far? What has been most helpful? Least helpful?
- Make a list of all the positives you can identify about the present situation. Ignore the negatives for the time being—you've probably been focusing too much on them anyway.
- Make a list of all the things you're grateful for. Write about what some of the things on that list bring to your life.
- Think of a peaceful, calm image that promotes relaxation and that you would like to explore or escape to. Describe it. Be detailed in your descriptions of sights, smells, sounds, tastes and touch.
- How might things change for you if you were to focus on one day at a time? What would you focus on today?

A spiritual check-in

(There are times when stepping back to look at the big picture allows us to put current events into perspective. The questions in the following two sections are very useful for that process.)

- How have your beliefs been challenged and/or changed recently?

"The problem lies in the very nature of the journal. If I tell the truth the truth is likely to be petty. If not demoralizing, comical in all the wrong places, crushing in its dullness. If I don't tell the truth I lose all interest in writing."

(Joyce Carol Oates)

- Where do you feel the “pain” of the world most acutely? What questions does this raise for you?
- If you believe in God, do you feel closer or more distant from God?
- How connected do you feel to whatever nourishes you spiritually?
- Do you feel nourished spiritually? If not, what do you need to do to reconnect with your sense of meaning and hope?

Looking down the road

- Looking two years into the future, what personal difficulties and dangers (physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually and relationally) can you see down the road if you continue in your current line of work?
- What would you do if money were not an issue?
- Can you envision *not* doing this work?
- What can you see yourself doing after you leave this position?
- What do you envision yourself doing in 5 years, 10 years?
- What challenges and joys do you foresee with that lifestyle change?

360 degree feedback

Consider writing about the questions below, then asking people you are close to (your spouse, family members, or close friends) to answer them. Do your answers match up?

- *(You)* How do I behave and feel when I’m under pressure? *(Them)* What have you noticed about the way I behave and appear to feel when I’m under pressure?
- *(You)* What are your early warning signs of stress? How do you know when you are *really* stressed? *(Them)* What are my early warning signs of stress? How do you know when I’m *really* stressed?
- *(You)* How has your work impacted you during the last week/month/year? *(Them)* In what ways do you think my work has impacted me during the last week/month/year?
- *(You)* How does this most impact people close to me? *(Them)* From your point of view, how does this most impact you/other people close to me?

“Close the door. Write with no one looking over your shoulder. Don’t try to figure out what other people want to hear from you; figure out what you have to say. It’s the one and only thing you have to offer.”

(Barbara Kingsolver)



Journaling resources

Managing Stress: A Creative Journal (Brian Luke Seaward)

A collection of journaling exercises focused on stress, control issues, anger, values, grief etc.

How to keep a spiritual journal (Ron Klug)

User-friendly and coherent. May be particularly useful for Christians just getting started in the habit of journaling.

Remembering your story: Creative your own spiritual autobiography (Richard L. Morgan)

Simple and readable. Focused on 10 exercises to help you coherently write your own life story.

Storycatcher: Making sense of our lives through the power and practice of story (Christine Balwin)

A great book about how the power of story moves us to love and hate and motivates us to change the whole course of our lives. Narrative intertwined with practical instruction about the nature of story, how it works, and how we can practice it in our lives.

The Artful Journal: A spiritual quest (Carey, Fox & Penney)

Interesting look at how to blend the disciplines of watercoloring and journaling.

Journal to the self: Twenty two paths to personal growth (Kathleen Adams)

Esoteric in some places, but there are some good chapters and exercises in here for advanced journalers. Extensive discussion of unsent letters, altered perspectives, dialogue, and journaling about dreams.

Writing to heal (James W. Pennebaker)

Written by a leading research psychologist in this area, this book focuses on writing about deeply upsetting or traumatic life events. Presents the latest research about writing and healing, and guides you through writing exercises related to trauma.