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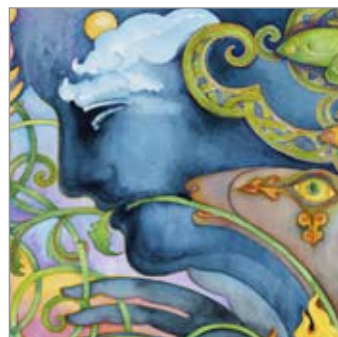
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**Writing in the Dark to Love:
Using a Pen as a Tool in Spiritual Companionship**
Kent Ira Groff

Everyone writes: to-do lists, e-mails, blogs, newsletters, teaching preparations, reminders to a colleague or lover; notes to thank, sympathize, and congratulate. As we tend the souls of people we meet with—formally and informally—I aim to show how ordinary scribbles can lead us into the script of love hidden in each person’s heart.

Writing is a way of “mending the universe” within oneself and the cosmos—*tikkun olam* in kabalistic Jewish tradition. We can pen our way home to the true Self and out into the world’s need.

As with any spiritual practice, how dare we listen in on another’s sacred script if we have not first listened to our own? I alternate between the rhythms of writing as a tool for keeping the guide’s heart open and writing for opening the heart of the journeyer.

Writing in the Dark

As spiritual guides we experience doubt and dark in our lives and in those who meet with us. Since the release of her personal writings in *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light*, the “saint of the streets” has made headlines again. The world’s popular icon of integrity and love reveals that for more than fifty years she felt a sense of emptiness, without the inner peace that she brought to others. Many feel puzzled.

What clues can we take from Mother Teresa’s soul struggles? What if she had never written these private letters and journals? Or had no guides to write them to? What enabled her to give such beautiful pieces of light out of her excruciating night of the soul?

Her amazing life of love seems like even more of a miracle. I will focus on two ordinary “miracles” that

empowered this tiny Albanian nun to move mountains when most human beings would have given up.

First, *the process of writing* into her doubts served as a life raft to keep her from drowning in the emptiness. Second, *behind-the-scenes spiritual guides* provided perspective for her to inhabit the emptiness as a valid form of faith and love.

Writing as a Classic Tool for Spiritual Direction

For centuries spiritual guides have exchanged letters as a primary method of companionship others—as with Saint Paul’s epistles and Brother Lawrence’s *Practice of the Presence of God*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Letters and Papers from Prison* became spiritual companionship with his friend Eberhard Bethge. Teresa of Avila, Evelyn Underhill, C.S. Lewis, Martin Luther King Jr., and Henri Nouwen all offered spiritual guidance through letter writing. Today it can take new forms.

Using your pen or keypad as a tool in spiritual companionship does not mean being a professional writer. I treasure scribbles on placemats and credit card receipts when an inkling of grace drops into our conversation.

Here’s a gem I caught on a napkin at lunch (and later put in my journal with a glue stick): “Sometimes I don’t get answers but I get a sacred response.” This woman’s comment speaks to the issue, “I pray, and nothing happens.” We had been conversing about how for Mother Teresa writing into her emptiness became a way of expressing her yearning for God and joy. To yearn is to pray, and writing is a way to give voice to our yearning.

Writing as sacred response. Writing becomes a tool for listening for the sacred response—without needing answers. Keeping a spiritual journal creates safe space for

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others...*



"Tangos" — Anne Jerardi



exploring our doubts and emptiness. (I tell myself that if after I die someone searches my journals, it may be my final ministry of humility.) If tunneling down into our confusion enables us to love, then it's not self-preoccupation but a tool of compassion.

For guides like myself—and for some companions—writing is a primary tool. For others, it's more meaningful for guide than companion, or vice versa. Yet in Western culture everyone writes some—so we can tap into “some” writing to draw forth the “more” of the spiritual life.

I would say the “sum” of honest doodlings is worth more than tomes of generic rhetoric. Think of Blaise Pascal, who stitched fragments of his thoughts into the lining of his coat. “The loneliness of these infinite spaces frightens me” is one that has validated my lonely feelings and fears for forty years. On a plane back to Chicago, Illinois, USA, after a disillusioning job interview in Pennsylvania, USA, I scribbled these lines:

Ah, when will the loneliness
of these infinite spaces
become the eternal now
transforming then?

Writing during the session and in between. If spiritual direction is about helping another find direction in her or his own life, it's also about the guide discerning the direction of the Spirit in relation to the companion.

While writing this article, I met with a companion who started telling me about thoughts he penned in his journal earlier that morning. I invited him to read me what he wrote, but at first he demurred; he wrote only scattered fragments. I mentioned how Pascal wrote scattered thoughts—*Pensées*—valued fragments that have changed the world! He then began reading his phrases, now with deep feeling, sounding like poetry. Later, as we reviewed the session, he said many things had vali-

dated his “half-baked” yearnings as holy—symbolized by Pascal's “fragments” as a way of journaling.

Introducing writing in the meeting. Though not everyone who meets with me keeps a journal, I am sure that *my* journaling helps me listen more deeply into everyone's hurts, hopes, and hungers. In each session I keep my journal with me and occasionally use a prayer or a poem from it—or enter a thought the person gives me. I believe in the mentoring power of example.

In a first or second meeting with a person, I ask, “Do you keep a journal?” If so—even if the answer is “I haven't looked at it for ages”—I say, “It's good to bring it along each time. For one thing, during our conversations you may utter something amazing and I'll say, ‘Catch what you said, and put it in your journal!’ Or a golden line will drop into the synergy of our conversation—an insight

neither of us had thought of—and we'll both write it down. Maybe you'll want to tell me a line from a movie, a dream, a reflection on a book you've read—and you can turn to a note in your journal.”

Honoring varied needs. For persons who don't have a journal or who journal on computer, I keep large Post-it notes for them to catch unexpected thoughts—they can stick it in a notebook or workspace back home. Some keep an art journal with word-images.

I don't make writing a big deal. Merely mentioning it as a spiritual practice occasionally in the spiritual direction session can goad both seeker and guide to look for a spiritual spin on writing they already do.

But like asking a companion about any spiritual discipline, we can feel honored if we view another person as one sent to teach us. For a guide who doesn't keep much of a journal, a companion who journals bears treasures—just as a dreamer gets me in touch with my own dreams or a musician gets me appreciating music.

Methods for Writing as Companionship

Every form of writing—practical notes or analytical

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essays, fiction or nonfiction, poetry or memoirs—has the potential of calling forth the spiritual dimension that can unlock the treasure of one's life purpose.

Writing into gratitude. In the movie *Finding Forrester*, the seasoned writer Forrester wants young Jamal to drop beneath his intellect to discover his passion. “No thinking—that comes later. You must write your first draft with your heart. You rewrite with your head. The first key to writing is to write, not to think!”

Spiritual direction is like writing a first draft with your heart. We can use our fingertips to find the keys to our real desire. We can start by inviting a companion to track everyday joys and blessings; doing so can lead to the treasure of one's deeper passion and mission, as Henri Nouwen wrote:

As we simply sit down in front of a sheet of paper and start to express in words what is in our minds or in our hearts, new ideas emerge, ideas that can surprise us and lead us to inner places we hardly knew were there. One of the most satisfying aspects of writing is that it can open in us deep wells of hidden treasures that are beautiful for us as well as for others to see. (136)

To temper my own mood swings I begin each journal entry with *¡Gracias!*— followed by one simple gratitude with this intent:

Open my eyes
to see the joys—
the gratuities that rise
from suffering and surprise.

Writing into an obstacle. I tell myself and invite others to practice what Mother Teresa learned: if you want to find new light, then enter into the dark places in the same old stuff you deal with every day or in the stuff you avoid. The Hebrew prophet Isaiah described it in chapter 45 (v 3): “I will give you the treasures of darkness / and

riches hidden in secret places.” The more we get in touch with our own buried scripts and stories, the more we see the treasures hidden in events around us and in souls who cross our path.

When someone meeting with me seems blocked by a work situation, a physical limitation, financial issues, or a barrier in a relationship, I often ask, “What would it look like to lean into the barrier?” Writing is a good tool for cracking open the acorn script of love in the dark Ground of one's being.

Writing into troubled relationships. How dare I meet with another soul unless I am open to learn some new thing? “When the pupil is ready, the teacher will appear,” goes a Zen saying. If the pupil of my eye and heart is wide awake, I can be digging or diapering or delving into books and my teachers appear out of nowhere.

A troubling person can be my teacher. A bright pastor contributed insights in a seminar I was leading. The last night he got angry. I awakened early and conversed with him in my journal. Through my fingertips I heard: “It's so frustrating—when I go back to my Kentucky mountain church, I can't talk about Kierkegaard and Dostoyevsky the way I've done here.” Trying on his moccasins changed me. We conversed at breakfast, and I enlisted his help in the final class.

Struggles like this ground me as a guide for other strugglers. To be genuine I need to keep finding direction in my stresses to invite others to do the same.

Writing as soul tending. Failing to tend our souls endangers ourselves and others in our care. A journal helps me play with words and get surprised with ideas—and it helps me pray my pain and tend my anger. After my father died, unresolved grief reared its head. By writing a dialogue with him about his verbal nonresponsiveness, I began understanding him and that nonresponsive part of me. Then I realized he was a master at communicating through intuition and gestures! I celebrate those gifts in myself. I can now recommend the dialogue practice to others.

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*Poems allow spiritual direction
to happen by indirection.*

*“Tell all the truth / but tell it slant,” Emily Dickinson wrote.
Direct God-talk or sin-talk can be too stark.*

Surprise can happen while tending another. A spiritual guide tells of meeting with a young man who had just lost his father. Toward the end of the session, the guide told him the Serenity Prayer. Not knowing the prayer, the young man asked, “Can you write it down for me?” Instinctively the guide handed the man pad and pen to write it for himself. As the man wrote, “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,” he began to weep with each phrase, “the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” Writing unlocked the gates of his grief.

Acting as sacred scribes. As in many native cultures, we may be privileged to record ancestral stories that could be lost forever. In the early 1900s, Alexander Carmichael recorded vanishing Celtic prayers and runes in *Carmina Gadelica*. Sarah Hopkins Bradford recorded the life story of Harriet Tubman, the Underground Railroad “Moses” who helped slaves to freedom in the pre-Civil War United States. Oral tradition has nurtured humanity’s life in myriad primal epochs, in contrast to the brief slice of written traditions.

Some companions need a guide to act as scribe for their sacred scripts and stories; others need the guide to encourage them to act as sacred scribes for somebody else’s stories. Listening and writing can be a matter of life and death.

For example, a pair of spiritual guides (husband and wife) felt helpless as a mother of small children lay dying of cancer. She was estranged from her father. As a way

of praying with her, the woman asked if there were things the mother wanted to talk about, offering to take notes. The dying woman whispered a story of childhood abuse by her father. She chose to share the notes with her siblings and her mother; all requested that the male guide deliver the “letter” to her father. It was very risky; things could blow up. Nevertheless he delivered the letter. People prayed. What happened the next day the two guides describe as a miracle. The father asked to be reconciled, and the daughter welcomed him as a caretaker for her final days. Mending relationships can be healing even though the body dies.

Spiritual direction is not an end in itself; it’s about becoming God’s ears for the least and the littlest. A mother recorded special sayings of each of her children, like this one: “You were two years old, and I was loading the dishwasher while you were talking. You stopped and said: ‘Mommy, *look* at me!’” The saying still blesses the family.

Poetry. Poems allow spiritual direction to happen by indirection. “Tell all the truth / but tell it slant,” Emily Dickinson wrote. Direct God-talk or sin-talk can be too stark. I listen for poetry in people’s stammerings and scribbles. When words falter, they become more contemplative, punctuated by pauses, liminal spaces. When a person tells me something that seems trifling, I need to listen. Truth inhabits silly stuff.

William Stafford says that we have to kneel down to discover poems; that’s why successful people rarely find them. We write into the universe when we get down close



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"one beggar showing another beggar where to find bread."*

to the ground of humanity. A scientist tells of finding new ideas by dropping beneath "facts" into the rich humus of doubt. Guides can encourage this dropping beneath.

Kneeling down for truth parallels the idea that the Messiah hangs out with the lowly and the marginalized—whether dirt poor or filthy rich—and in the marginalized parts of one's own psyche. When spiritual companions disclose their margins of discomfort, their edges of uncertainty, that's where I suggest they write to find a gift. Poetry creates a fresh way. Writing phrases or words down the page (rather than sentences from left to right) can induce ordinary folks to write poetically.

I may open a session with a few lines of a poem, like this one by Wislawa Szymborska: "I teach silence / in all languages" (5). Or this one by Rainer Maria Rilke: "I am the rest between two notes / which are somehow always in discord" (Whyte, 241).

Responding to sacred texts, readings, and quotations. Writing becomes a tool for companions to share responses to their readings. Attempting to befriend her soul's dark night, a companion tells me how she and her husband found meaning in reflecting on J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. Frodo inhabits a dark personality, while Sam tends toward the bright. Golem identifies with the depths and really understands Frodo's brooding. Yet Sam is Frodo's close friend—more so than Golem. Responding to this story, my spiritual friend tells how it began to liberate their marriage. She sees herself as pensive, like Frodo, and her husband sees himself as lighthearted, like

Sam. "It was so freeing because I knew he understood without having to understand!"

Another companion tells how meditating on a Christian scripture story in John chapter 9 (a blind son is healed by Jesus) helped him urge his son to take responsibility for some legal issues. He journaled with the text: "His parents said, 'Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.'"

Quotations can emerge to light one's path. In times of my own neediness as a guide, I tell myself the ancient proverb that I am "one beggar showing another beggar where to find bread." I love it when others discover their own quotations, like this one by a pastor in an interim position: "I think Jesus was the ultimate interim." Or this one: "Let loose with listening, / Live into loving."

Writing an unsent letter. How dare I tend others' vulnerable souls if I don't tend my needy soul first? A quick letter or e-mail written out of anger can "kill" a relationship. Yet that same letter, written but never sent, can prevent or restore a broken relationship.

Tension with colleagues can kidnap our loving attention to a spiritual companion. One time I scheduled lunch with a colleague I thought had failed to support a common project. I felt so fussed I wrote three pages—till I got to a sense of God's desire beneath my anger—then shredded them. When we broke bread, I was free: we found ways to support one another. Afterward, as I drove home to meet with a spiritual companion in my sabbath room, I felt free to enter another's holy space. By



practicing the unsent letter for my own needy soul, I can authentically suggest it to another soul.

Recording dreamings. Dreams are a way to listen to our unconscious longings, warnings, and hopes. Everyone dreams, but many don't recall their dreams partly because modern culture doesn't value them ("I had a silly dream last night"). I asked a person about her dreams, and the next time she brought a vivid dream: she is bicycling down a mountain—when she takes an unexpected turn to a "health" center. It opened up a new direction for her vocation.

Tending our dreamings—our active imagination, daydreams, or momentary epiphanies—can be as effective as tending our night dreams. Writing one's dreamings and reflecting on them is a way of valuing the Spirit in one's unconscious. So even without understanding all the symbols, simply honoring dreams will reap great benefit.

Writing into one's life mission. At some point I usually ask if a spiritual companion has written a life mission statement—inviting the person to revisit or create one. "Follow your bliss," said mythologist Joseph Campbell (117–121); those three words act as markers to design a life mission. *Follow* is a disciple word implying obstacles, pilgrimage. *Your* means one's path is unique, no one else's; *bliss* will issue in blessing, not destruction. Following traces of joy that bless the world can crack the acorn script of one's passion—one's little piece for "mending the universe" (Groff, 136–167).

E-mail and spiritual direction. There are many ways to offer spiritual guidance using the Internet—e-mails, blogs, text messages, or Web sites. For me, much of it is informal—typing a printed poem or blessing at the end of a task-oriented message. Often new thoughts occur with unique friends. I often sign off with "Holding you in the web of my prayers," which means not just mine but prayers of the ancestors and faithful friends. A Franciscan hermit e-mailed me a photo of himself at prayer; I keep it on a bulletin board by my computer, where he quietly

calls me to prayer as I write this.

Formal spiritual direction can happen via e-mail—a new form of an ancient tradition. In my experience, e-mails tend to go well for a period but usually don't last as long as face-to-face spiritual companionship.

A "middle" way has emerged, combining e-mail and phone. I send an e-mail confirming the phone meeting and add a tag such as: "Send me a sentence about areas you want to focus on so I can be praying." I got this idea from the Jewish *rebbe-hassid* tradition, in which the seeker writes a *kvittel* (summary of intent) and hands it to the *rebbe* (Schachter-Shalomi, 122–125). In preparing for a phone meeting, I may feel drawn to read a line of a poem or to ring a Tibetan bowl to lead into a brief silence, and then I listen. A phone session lasts 40–45 minutes, so the advance e-mail

summary helps focus our limited time.

Breaking through shopworn religious language. I may invite persons struggling with shopworn or abusive images of God to journal myriad names for the holy One—to move beyond parental images—or, as in Jewish tradition, divinity beyond all language. People come back with *Light, Rock, Lover, Great Spirit, Midwife, Gardener, Homemaker*—or jazz composer John Coltrane's phrase, *a Love Supreme*.

I've concluded that one of the most damaging phrases in several traditions is "the will of God." Whereas the term was originally meant to convey a sense of unfolding divine guidance for good, it now conveys a verdict of divine punishment and creates human passivity. "Well, it must have been God's will," people say in time of tragedy. (An exception would be some Amish believers, who view the phrase as a mandate to forgive enemies and show compassion.)

In the wake of a natural disaster or a suicide, a person does not come to us looking for explanations. People are seeking *creative responses* to life's pains and pleasures. "For our next meeting," I may suggest, "try writing 'the will of God' on a blank document—then brainstorm as many

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alternatives as possible.” Quakers have helped me: God’s *intent* or *desire*. I may ask, “In this time, what is *your* deepest desire?” And maybe, “How does that connect with the divine desire in you?” Or, “Responding to this situation, what do think may be God’s intent for your life?”

Writing in the Dark to Love

Mother Teresa called herself “a pencil in God’s hand” (Kolodiejchuk, xi). Maybe writing in the dark enabled her to live and love in the light.

In 1999, I had the privilege of going on a sabbatical retreat in India directed by Father Carl Dincher, a Jesuit priest who I learned was Mother Teresa’s spiritual director for much of her life. Some mornings at 5 a.m., I would ride with Carl to various centers of the Missionaries of Charity, where he would celebrate Eucharist. In every chapel a plain wooden crucifix would hang with Jesus’ words from the cross: “I thirst.”

By quenching the thirst in dying and rejected people, Mother Teresa came to believe she was quenching Jesus’ thirst in them and herself. It was in writing with one of her spiritual confessors that she came to this insight:

For the first time in 11 years—I have come to love the darkness—for I believe now that it is part of a very, very small part of Jesus’ darkness & pain on earth. You have taught me to accept it [as] a “spiritual side of ‘your work,’” as you wrote. (Kolodiejchuk, 208)

Here we see *writing* and *spiritual guidance* coming together to inspire one of the world’s beloved active contemplatives. Combined, they focus the lens so we can trace inklings of grace in our own dark times and help others do the same. ■

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