



Journaling Your Experiences

Why Keep a Journal? (A perspective from Mark Labberton in Stepping Out: A Guide to Short Term Missions. Evanston: SMA Publications, 1987.)

Your intercultural experience is something like being seated at a great feast. You can't take everything in at one sitting. You can listen, smell, touch, taste, and savor only a little bit of what lies before you at one time.

It all begins in the moment the first rush of humid air hits you in the face as you step off the plane in Manila, or in the first evening you smell the dung fires as they are lit in Calcutta, or in the early morning when you hear the sounds of unfamiliar birds on the Serengeti Plain, or in the call to prayer piercing the mid-afternoon heat in Istanbul.

At these moments, the feast is real and clear. Experience the tastes and smells, the thoughts and emotions, the insights and questions, the remembrances and dreams. But unless you capture and clarify them, these first sensations will leave quickly as other experiences tumble in upon them.

A journal is the perfect place to record the feast. It allows you to consider and savor the experience in order to digest it and gain in the nourishment of wisdom from it. (See Proverbs 4:7)

The Effective Journal

- **Journal Because You Want To** – Keeping a journal will enable you to savor the intercultural experience (difficult moments as well as enjoyable ones), preserving a record of thoughts, emotions, intellectual challenge, and feelings that are intrinsically a part of the experience. Nevertheless, journaling should emerge out of a desire to preserve, and interpret the experience rather than doing it out of duty or guilt. Go easy on yourself in the discipline of journaling.
- **Journal For Yourself Not Others** – Do not record your experience as though you are writing it for someone else you are imaging in your mind. Journaling is intensely private, between you and the Lord, as a tool for personal exploration and growth. Create your own pattern of journaling, as no one way is the “only” way.
- **Be Honest As You Write** – Once you are confident that you are journaling for yourself and not another, it should become easier and easier (yet through practice) to journal with honesty. It still may be difficult to record your own full range of emotions and feelings, yet over time you should become more at ease in recording at the “gut” level.
- **Find Your Own Style** – Some choose to write in the style of a letter, others may simply record

thoughts as they come to mind. The point is, find a narrative style that is natural to you. You do not need to write on endlessly, which will discourage a person after a short time. Make the journal style your own, enjoying the sense that it is your own journal.

- **Build Consistency In Journaling** — As stated earlier, journaling should not be done out of duty or guilt. Nevertheless, find the space-in-time that works well for your journal effort. Discipline in seeing the task through is still a needed quality in staying at the practice of journaling. Being consistent at even 10-15 minutes a day is something you will thank yourself for as you reflect back on what you have preserved from your experience.
- **Describe - Interpret - Evaluate (D-I-E)** — Gary Athen, in the book entitled “American Ways” gives this acronym to help us distinguish between various reactions to another culture. Description (what one actually sees), Interpretation (what one thinks about one sees), and Evaluation (what one feels about what one sees).

The significance of this is to help you, the foreigner, distinguish between your reactions (description & interpretation), and then to delay passing judgment (evaluation). Therefore, when you have a chance to reflect upon your day - both privately and in your team meetings, you will have the chance to process your experience in a healthy way. The following day, you may find yourself conferring with a teammate, missionary (or cross cultural expert), or even a national, on what you have experienced “after” being well thought through.

Journaling and GV

A very beneficial part of GV is to reflect on what you saw, experienced, and learned. To provide some guidance in this process, we are providing some suggested questions you may use to help you in your journal design. As you take time to journal during your GV experience, on a consistent basis, a greater degree of significance will be attached to the experience.

Even a few months following the experience, you may forget some of the initial reactions, feelings, or insights you had processed. Your journal will help you guard these moments for a lifetime.

You may want to revisit several of these questions every day:

1. Was there something in this new cultural that intrigued, confused, and/or made you upset?
2. What are some of the values that are important to the people of this culture and to the national Christians?
3. Was there a high point of the day that you could describe?
4. What did you learn about yourself today?
5. What obstacles did you face today? How did you deal with them?
6. Did you learn anything about your culture by bring in this country?
7. Where did you see God at work today?
8. What insights did you gain about the life of a missionary?
9. In what ways is your culture (values & beliefs) similar to and different from this new culture?
10. What did you learn about yourself that could make an impact on your future direction?

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