

Keeping a Journal



Keeping a Journal



Marilyn Kielbasa
Thomas Zanzig, General Editor

To Jaclyn Lee—a deep-thinking, sensitive, loving, caring, amazing, precious, bright, honest, gentle, challenging, take-charge, sparkling, profound, miraculous person who makes the universe a much better place and brings great joy to my life



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Introduction



An Overview of This Course

It is an instinctive human need to remember, record, and reflect on life. Throughout history, people have used creative methods to record the events of a society: cave paintings, papyrus, tapestries, photographs, newspapers, genealogies, war chronicles, and histories of places. Many people have also pursued some means of recording their personal life. Journals, diaries, and daybooks have always been a part of recorded human history, but they have become much more common in the last century due to the widespread growth of literacy.

Some of these personal journals are famous: Dag Hammarskjöld's *Markings*, Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*, and Henry David Thoreau's journals are classics. *Doogie Howser, MD*, was a television show that always concluded with Doogie making an insightful entry into his computer-file journal. Most of us have tried keeping a journal or a diary at some time in our life. For some it was a whimsical phase of late childhood. For others it has become a life-giving passion. For still others it is a pastime to dabble in occasionally as life takes us through its changes.

A journal can be anything its author wants it to be—from a simple chronicle of daily events to a journey into the writer's soul. Because time is limited in this course, we will not focus on the simple diary, which by definition is a daily log of activity. A journal usually goes beyond the simple recording of events to explore the inner world that accompanies the daily, outer world. Journal keeping can take many forms, and this course is designed to help young people explore some of those forms.

The reasons for keeping a journal are as varied as the types of journals. A journal can be a tool to get to know oneself better. It is an invitation to turn inward and grow in self-understanding and in faith. It is an opportunity to look back on the process of change and growth. It can help a person make decisions and provide a sense of objectivity. Besides all these serious reasons for keeping a journal, it is just fun to keep track of experiences, thoughts, and feelings.

A journal is also as a temporary or permanent receptacle of feelings, thoughts, and ideas about the process of life. Many young people are looking for such an outlet and may have begun writing in a journal on their own. Others might just be intrigued with the idea and are taking this course to gain more information before trying it.

Keeping a Journal is not an intensive course focused on a particular method. Rather, the course introduces a wide variety of techniques with the intention of helping each young person find methods or a style that works for her or him. It is not based on any one method of journal keeping, nor does it follow a particular program. In that sense, the course is more a collection of interesting experiments in journal writing than an integrated presentation on the topic. In addition, these journal experiments are designed to provoke reflection by the young people on their personal and spiritual growth.

Keeping a Journal may be particularly meaningful to young people who have already participated in the first core unit on the theme of identity and relationships. Besides being an exploration in personal journal keeping, this course can also prepare the young people to benefit more fully from the journal options that are suggested in the remaining core units of the Horizons Program. In making decisions about the sequence of courses in the program, refer to the coordinator's manual.

Keeping a Journal is intended to be taught as three 2-hour sessions presented one a week for three consecutive weeks. Extended breaks between sessions might interrupt the flow of the course. The activities are structured with a group of about ten teenagers in mind. If your group has considerably more or fewer members, you may have to make minor adjustments in the session plans. If you need assistance with this task, consult your program coordinator.

Each session in the course is self-contained, has a particular focus, and offers different techniques to explore. The exercises in session 1 center on *the world around me*. In session 2, the focus is on *the world within me*. And in the last session, the young people will use different techniques to pray with their journal and reflect on their experiences of *God through it all*. Sessions 1 and 2 are also followed by optional exercises for those who are interested in going deeper.

Journals are very private things. To allow another to read one's journal is an act of trust. An important part of this course is the feedback that you can offer to individual young people in response to their journal entries. Take time between sessions to read the entries of the persons who give you permission to do so. Jot down appropriate observations and reactions in the journals. Even brief comments can affirm a teenage boy who is unsure of himself, show care and support to an adolescent girl who is having trouble at home, or witness to the power of God to a young person who is struggling. The relationship that you build with each person and the interaction that happens through the course may be as valuable as the skills learned—and may be particularly important to someone who has little positive one-on-one contact with adults. Further explanation of this issue and suggestions for responding to journals are provided later in this section.

You play a vital role in the success of this course. At the very least, you are giving your young people some new tools for self-discovery, prayer, and growth. And you may be helping them develop a habit that can sustain them for the rest of their life.

Judy Blume, an author with particular appeal for young people, gets many letters from readers. She compiled these into a collection titled *Letters to Judy: What Kids Wish They Could Tell You*. Some are sad, some are funny, some are insightful, but all are poignant glimpses into the lives and hearts of young people. The following excerpt is from a letter

she received from a fourteen-year-old girl. The letter affirms the gift that a journal can be in a young person's life.

Dear Judy,

Last Christmas, a friend gave me a diary. Although I had started to keep diaries before I never really committed myself to them. This diary, though, saved my sanity and perhaps, my life. This diary made me want to write. It helped me through the most difficult year of my life. . . .

As I read back through my diary one statement I see at the bottom of an October page sort of explains what I felt this year. *I'm scared . . . I'm so scared. I wish somebody would talk to me and tell me it's going to be all right.* . . .

This is a year I will never forget. I have grown and learned in many ways. (P. 148)

Background for This Course

The Adolescent and This Course

A course on journal keeping is ideally suited to the needs of young people. They have a deep need for self-exploration and discovery, and they want a chance to interact positively with others their age and with adults. They need to express themselves, use their imagination, and be creative, but they learn best when their earliest efforts are guided within a structure. It is important for them to know that what they are learning and doing will make a difference to them or to someone else. They must believe that their life is important and has value. They are searching for ways to communicate with themselves, with others, and with their God. This course has the potential to meet all these needs.

Adolescents also need to define themselves in terms of sexuality in its broadest sense, including naming what they see as appropriate male and female roles. If this course is taught as an elective, you may find that your group consists of more girls than boys. If it is not an elective, you may have some unwilling participants of both sexes. Teenage males are commonly reluctant to explore journal keeping, even if they find the topic appealing, due in part to cultural conditioning. The personal journal is popularly thought of as a woman's instrument for self-discovery, even though many men keep a journal and derive the same benefits as

women. Be aware, however, that when adolescent boys are reluctant to write, their resistance may be only on the surface. Some barriers may come down with a personal invitation. Or some boys may decide to give it a try only after hearing reports of a good experience from peers who already took the course.

The exercises included in this course will each appeal to different people, male or female. This is part of the process of finding a style that works for each individual. The handouts purposely include excerpts from both male and female journal keepers. Your encouragement, your enthusiasm, your affirmation of individuals, and your own belief in the value of journal keeping for everyone will have a significant effect on those who are reluctant as well as those who are eager.

One other need that is indirectly met through the discipline of keeping a journal is the need for silence. Today's teenagers are busier—and perhaps noisier—than their counterparts in the past. Additionally, our culture places little value on the pursuit of silence. Yet most people, teenagers included, need quiet times. Being quiet and being silent, however, are different; quiet does not necessarily imply silence. Quiet happens; silence is cultivated. Keeping a journal can teach someone about the value of silence and of taking time to listen to one's inner self. It is significant that the word *silent* and the word *listen* include the same letters. It is in silence that we are most able to listen to God. It is in silence that we respond to the Spirit of God that dwells within us, and only later is that response translated into action. It is in silence that we are able to be intimate with the God who created us, the God who saves us, and the God who nourishes us.

The Theology of This Course

"Whether or not you admit it, your life is a theological statement. It is a statement of your action and interaction with God" (Wood, *A Thirty-Day Experiment in Prayer*, p. 11). Keeping a journal is one way of tracking that interaction. It is a way of becoming more conscious of God's presence and impact on one's life. It is a place to speak to God, and a place to listen to God. It helps us to examine our motivations and choices and to make sure that we have not gotten sidetracked in some deceptively comfortable and pleasant spot on the journey toward holiness. Over the years, a journal can become a

chronicle of personal salvation history, not unlike the revelation of God's loving care for humanity that unfolds in the Scriptures or the writings of holy men and women of the past. As adults, we may recognize through our journal reflections God's care for us and companionship on our journey. Awareness of and confidence in this care are perhaps the most important gifts we can give to young people.

Journal keeping can be a way to make the Scriptures come alive for us. In the Scriptures we read about the joys, struggles, triumphs, and challenges of our spiritual ancestors. But those human experiences are universal and are real in our life and in the lives of young people as well. We are called to pray with the Scriptures by applying to our own life the situations and the messages recorded in them. A journal can help a young person see the parallels and make God's word real, right here and right now.

The lives of great and holy people in our tradition are another source of inspiration for us and a way for young people to explore paths others have taken to live the Gospel message to build the Reign of God on earth. The lives of the saints; the journals of Pope John XXIII, Saint Elizabeth Seton, and Thomas Merton; and the writings of Dorothy Day, Saint Teresa of Ávila, and Saint Thérèse of Lisieux all help to tell the story of the church. Their lives are models of Christian living. Their writings invite us to enter into the process of their lives and make comparisons with our own and changes if we need to. This course on journal keeping may prompt the young people to explore such writings in the future.

We hold in common with all of humanity past and present a deep hunger and search for truth. It is a search that takes on many forms throughout life. Few pursuits can put us in touch with truth more readily than serious journal keeping. If we are completely honest with ourselves through a journal, it will be impossible not to encounter the God of Truth in the experience. "If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31–32).

This Course and Evangelization

In *The Challenge of Catholic Youth Evangelization*, evangelization is described as "the initial effort by the faith community as a whole to proclaim through word and witness the Good News of the Gospel to those who have not yet heard or seen it,

and then to invite those persons into a relationship with Jesus Christ and the community of believers" (National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry [NFCYM], p. 3). Evangelization is also the ongoing witness of the community of believers and, as such, the basis and energizing core of all the ministries in the church.

The Horizons Program is grounded in a commitment to evangelize young people effectively. Each course reflects that commitment in both content and methodology. All the courses, even those on topics that do not appear overtly "religious," explore the connection between the lived experience of the young person and Jesus' proclamation of the Good News. All the courses employ strategies that actively engage the whole person, demonstrating that religious education can be not only informative but life-giving and even fun! In other words, the Horizons Program tries to *be* "good news," not just proclaim the Good News.

The evangelization of young people is rooted in the theology of the Incarnation, when the

Word became flesh
and made his dwelling among us.
(John 1:14)

Incarnation theology is a theology of relationship: God and humanity in intimate union. God is present *in* and present *to* each of us. We are called to grow in relationship with God and with one another.

A large part of the adolescent world focuses on relationships. Every young person is in the midst of defining and redefining what it means to be a friend, part of a family, a student, a boyfriend or a girlfriend, a world citizen, a member of a community, and a child of God. In the midst of the turmoil of adolescence, young people welcome experiences of feeling cared for and valued. They look to people who care for them for guidance, and they hold up these same people as models.

A catechist or a youth minister is in a unique position to evangelize young people: to proclaim the message of Jesus, to witness to the power of God, to model the Christian life, and to invite a young person to grow in holiness. A young person will be much more receptive to the message if the messenger is perceived as someone who sincerely cares.

Keeping a Journal offers a distinct opportunity for evangelization. First, through various exercises you can invite young people into and guide them through private "conversations" with God. Second,

as a significant adult in young people's lives, you can offer your support and encouragement for their journey of faith by taking a few moments to comment on their journal entries. Just a word or two in the margins of a journal may have an impact that lasts a lifetime. Through you, God touches young people. And, in turn, they reach out to God. That is the essence of evangelization.

On Teaching This Course

A Video Resource for Teachers

The information presented in this section identifies the elements requiring special consideration when leading *Keeping a Journal*. The creators of Horizons developed an informative video to prepare teachers to lead any of the courses. The video is accompanied by a guide that summarizes the content of the tape, offers additional tips for teaching adolescents, and invites the teacher to track her or his experience with the program.

Both the video for teachers and its companion guide are included in the resources developed for coordinators of the Horizons Program. Contact the program coordinator in your parish for further information.

A course on journal keeping is person centered rather than content centered. One learns to keep a journal by keeping a journal. In this course, very little *instruction* goes on in the common sense of that word, though some truly significant *learning* will take place. Your role is primarily that of a facilitator in the process of that learning. The success of *Keeping a Journal* depends almost entirely on the willingness of the individuals to participate, though even reluctant participants may benefit to some degree. The axiom You get out of it what you put into it is particularly true in this case. As in any course, however, the leader creates the environment, sets the tone, lays the ground rules, presents the material, and directs the process. The following information is intended to help you prepare for that role.

Putting Yourself into It

The following qualities or experiences can help you successfully lead your group through this course:

- some personal experience with keeping a journal—however brief or occasional—and an appreciation of the possibilities for growth that are offered by keeping one
- an openness to participating in some form of personal journal keeping throughout the course (You might consider doing the exercises before you present them in the session and doing some of the optional exercises in between sessions.)
- a willingness to share your own journal entries when appropriate
- an eagerness to go the extra mile to respond personally to your students' individual journals

Preparing the Learning Environment

Though journal keeping is possible in any environment, novice writers will find it easier to get into the proper frame of mind if the physical and community environment is conducive to the activity. Here are some suggestions for creating that type of environment:

Create a good physical atmosphere. You will need a physically comfortable space with sufficient room for the young people to be apart from one another during journal activities. Comfortable furniture and living-room lighting will help create a homey feeling. Clipboards, pieces of hardboard, or notebooks with sturdy covers will make it easier for the students to write. For this age-group, avoid using magazines or books for writing surfaces, as these may distract the writers. Use markers, and large sheets of newsprint or a flip chart for writing things to share with the whole group. A chalkboard would work too, but a traditional classroom arrangement is the least desirable situation. If such a room is your only option, try using music, candles, slides, icons, or other sensory devices to create a more inviting environment.

Clarify expectations. At the beginning of the course, state the ground rules and clarify expectations. Because journal keeping is quiet by its very nature, the course does not include a lot of games or high-energy activities. In fact, some of the time the group will be invited to total silence. Stress the importance of respecting one another, by asking the young people to keep their distance from others when necessary, to avoid reading the answers to other people's exercises, and to remain quiet when it is time to do so.

Invite honesty. Invite your students to be open and honest in their journal. Assure them that unless they freely choose to share their journal with you or with their friends, their privacy will be held sacred.

Preparing the Material

Before each session, read through the session plan and try to picture the processes happening in your group. You may need to make some adjustments based on your knowledge of the participants and the physical setting. Some of the activities will require preparation. Allow yourself adequate time to get ready.

All the sessions include brief periods of teacher input. Some of these presentations are informational, but most are intended to bring closure to a part of the session so that the participants might understand the connections between life and faith, between themselves and God. The session plans offer guidelines for these brief talks. Spend time putting these presentations together so that they are clear and hold the attention of the participants. Where it is helpful and appropriate, do not be afraid to share parts of your own story with the young people.

Sharing Your Own Story

Every course in Horizons connects elements of the Christian faith with the life experiences of young people. As an adult, you have much to share from your own life that will be of value to the young people. Your willingness to share your experiences will enrich this course. It will also send the message that telling one's personal story in the group is okay. When you share your experiences with the young people, you show that you trust them enough to speak from your heart. And without saying it, you also invite them to do the same.

Some commonsense guidelines can help you share your faith story in a way that adds to the understanding of the participants but does not distract them from their own life story:

- Be brief and to the point. Remember, the young people are there to reflect on their own life story, not yours.
- Talk about your experiences as a teenager without preaching or moving into the fatal "When I was your age . . ." mode.
- Share only the things that young adolescents are emotionally prepared to handle.

- Be realistic. Talk about your struggles, triumphs, and growth over the years. This will let the participants know that self-knowledge and a relationship with God are indeed processes. Do not mislead them into thinking that adults have all the answers. It is also unfair to suggest or imply that adolescents have no answers.
- Be honest and sincere. The young people will see through you if you are not, and your effectiveness as a teacher will be diminished.

Using Optional Exercises

The first two sessions are accompanied by optional exercises for those who want to do more (see handouts 1–A and 2–C). It is up to you as the leader to decide if these exercises will be truly optional in the sense that each person decides whether to do them, or if the exercises will be assigned in some fashion as homework. Here are some suggestions for using them:

- Give each person one of the optional exercise handouts and explain that it contains journal exercises similar to the ones used during the regular session as well as some new ideas. Ask the participants to do two or three additional exercises of their choice between this session and the next. Ask for reports at the next session.
- Cut up the suggestions and have each person choose a strip of paper. Each person does the activity described on the slip and reports on it at the next session.
- Consider using one of the above approaches following session 1, and the other after session 2.

The logistics of the optional exercises could be tricky. If you are keeping their journals to write responses, the students obviously will not be able to take them to do the optional exercises. If you intend to encourage use of the options, the following approach should work well: For the primary journals, use gusseted folders with pockets, three-ring binders, or another setup with the capacity for adding paper. In addition, provide simple pocket folders for the optional exercise handouts and extra sheets of paper. The students can take these folders home and bring the completed activities with them to the next session to be added to their primary journal. (See the section Special Preparation Needs later in this introduction.)

Using Handouts

This teaching guide includes a number of reproducible handouts for student use. Generally, handouts are a helpful tool for providing information, but some students quickly tire of them. Though every effort was made to keep the handouts to a minimum, some handouts were necessary in a course that, by definition, requires considerable writing. Here are some suggestions for keeping the paper shuffling to a minimum:

- Put a copy of each handout in the participants' journals before the session begins.
- Use a copier to create transparencies of some of the handouts and put them on an overhead projector.
- Use a copier to enlarge the handouts to a size that everyone can see.

Using Music

Some groups are easily distracted by nearby sounds. If your group has a hard time concentrating, consider using background music to help the participants focus. Even for those who do not have trouble concentrating, music can alter the mood and contribute to a sense of peace and inner silence. For background music, use mellow, soothing instrumental selections with no words, preferably something that is unrecognizable to the group. Labels such as Windham Hill and Narada, which are known for their alternative adult-contemporary recordings, are particularly useful for this purpose. Some classical music can also help to create the type of environment you need. Or use recordings of natural sounds, such as those produced by an ocean surf, rain forests, or running streams.

Do not be tempted, however, to overuse music. As noted earlier, it is important for young people to appreciate silence and to be able to think in silence. Without encouragement from you and experience with writing in silence, they might find it difficult to keep a journal outside the controlled environment that you provide. They will not always be able to find soothing music to help them focus. With some effort, though, they can probably find silence.

Music can provide a useful function in addition to creating a pleasant atmosphere. A journal technique that you might encourage the students to use is listening to their favorite song and writing about it. What do the words mean to them? How are they feeling when they are listening to the song? Or play

a piece of instrumental music, even classical music, and ask the students to write about the images and feelings that come to mind while they are listening.

Remembering Prayer

This course is designed to balance personal introspection and private prayer with group discussion, scriptural sharing, and communal prayer. Individual and group prayer times are as important to this process as the exercises themselves. These prayer times allow the participants to put the seal of prayer on the day's activities, acknowledging that they are who they are because of the God who created each of them.

Many books about the craft of journal keeping are available, some of them designed for young people. Many schools use journals to help students engage in self-discovery and learn about the world. But without a faith dimension, something is missing. You can take your students one step beyond self-discovery and help them engage in God discovery. With that you will give them, as the saying goes, a gift that keeps on giving.

Responding to Journal Entries

Keeping a journal is a very private endeavor because it often involves bearing one's soul. But the dialog that can take place between you and a young person can be a valuable source of support and insight and the basis of a significant relationship. If you are willing to read and comment on the entries, describe to the participants the process for doing so as explained in the first session. Some teenagers will not want you to read their entries. Respect their wishes. They may change their mind later in the course.

Permission to read a young person's journal carries with it privileges and responsibilities. All journal entries will reveal something of the writer. Some teenagers will be more serious about journal keeping than others. Some will find it difficult or too threatening to get beneath the surface. Some people will find self-examination or deep thinking easier than others. But a young person who gives you permission to read his or her journal is entrusting you with something sacred. Approach each person's journal as you would an object of great value, for that is what it is. Always respond in some way to those who give you permission. Your response does

not have to be long; many times a simple word or phrase will be sufficient. An affirmation (“You really handled that well”), an acknowledgment of difficulty (“Sounds like a tough spot to be in”), or an offer to help (“Is there some way I can help? Let me know”) will show your journal writers that you are taking their thoughts and your role seriously.

Sometimes reading journal entries will alert you to a young person’s struggle and cry for help. If this is the case, it may be necessary to follow up with that person. Most of the time, following up is a matter of listening and helping the young person work through the difficulties. But know your role and your limits. Your role is not that of a professional counselor. Severe or prolonged depression, suicidal thoughts, chemical abuse or dependency, sexual or physical abuse, and eating disorders are all situations that require professional intervention. Let the group know *up front* that these are situations that you cannot keep confidential, but also that you will not share information about these issues with anyone who does not have a right and need to know. If it appears appropriate or necessary, talk to a student and his or her family about seeking professional help. If you find yourself confronted by a situation you are not sure how to handle, seek help from your pastor, the program coordinator, or another trained professional. Continue to show support and care to the young person who found the courage to reach out to you.

Tracking Progress

If you have the opportunity for ongoing contact with the young people through the year, consider keeping a “growth journal” of each participant’s progress. At the beginning of the course, jot down your first impressions of each student, or write a brief profile or character sketch if you already know the students. Keep track of your observations of their spiritual and personal growth, problems they are having, or just your general impressions throughout your time together. After your time with them is over, write an affirming note to each of them and send it along with your journal entry if you feel comfortable doing so and if it is appropriate. If keeping a growth journal on the progress of each young person is not possible, consider simply writing each one a short note of affirmation at the end of the course.

Evaluating

At the end of each session is a place to evaluate how things went. Take time to answer the questions right in this book while the details of how the session went are fresh in your mind. Your comments will be useful to you next time you teach the course.

Using This Course as a Retreat

Many courses in the Horizons Program can be recast as a daylong experience or combined with other topics to create a longer program. *Keeping a Journal* may be suitable for adaptation as a retreat depending on the parish program, the timing, the leaders, the purpose, and, above all, the young people themselves. If you want to consider using *Keeping a Journal* as a retreat, weigh the following advantages and disadvantages:

Advantages

- In a full-day retreat, the group would have the opportunity to concentrate on the topic for a longer period of time and explore more options.
- Such a retreat would have wide appeal for an often-neglected group of teenagers: quiet ones who do not say much and do not make a lot of noise.
- For participants who are not sure about the topic, devoting one day, rather than three weeks, may be more appealing (but see Disadvantages below).

Disadvantages

- The course may be too intense for any more than one short day.
- Committing three evenings to the topic may sound better to the skeptics than devoting what will likely be a weekend day to it.
- Journal keeping is a rather sedentary topic. In a retreat format, physical activity would have to be added to keep the group engaged.
- A retreat does not afford much time for teacher feedback. Unless it happens after the retreat, the teacher-student interaction will probably be minimal.

- A one-day or even weekend retreat will not likely encourage or develop a pattern or habit of journal keeping.

The last two reasons are perhaps the biggest argument against doing *Keeping a Journal* as a retreat. But some of the activities and techniques outlined in this course could be part of a broader retreat on identity and relationships, self-knowledge, faith journeys, or related topics.

Special Preparation Needs

For the Young People

Purchase or otherwise obtain something for the young people to write in. Blank sheets of paper in a gusseted folder with pockets allow for flexibility in your method and give the participants a place to tuck optional weekly assignments, extra sheets, or special notes or memorabilia. A blank book or spiral-bound notebook may give the writers a sense of encouragement to continue keeping the journal after the course is over. Or consider having the young people choose from among the options. You might be able to get samples of various styles from a bookstore or stationery store.

For You

Reflect on your own experiences with keeping a journal or diary or recording your thoughts and experiences in other ways through the years. How important were such experiences in helping you to know yourself better? to talk to or listen to God? to keep track of your activities? to monitor your personal and spiritual growth?

Spend time looking over the session plans and experimenting with some of the journal techniques.

If you are using the option of a growth journal, in a notebook write on a separate page for each student the following information: name, birth date, school, extracurricular activities, and any other personal information you wish to include. Such information may act as a reminder during the school year to send a birthday card or a note of encouragement (e.g., before the big debate competition).

Each session plan contains prayer and reflection suggestions for you as teacher. They are designed to take no more than 10 minutes, but can be a helpful way to center yourself before meeting your group. Consider using these as personal journal opportunities. Perhaps set aside a place in your regular journal for these reflections.

This Course and Total Youth Ministry

Additional Youth Ministry Program Suggestions

The Horizons Program includes a manual entitled *Youth Ministry Strategies: Creative Activities to Complement the Horizons Curriculum*. It contains a variety of activities and strategies organized into thematic categories and cross-referenced according to the courses in the curriculum. It includes suggestions for shortened and extended programs, off-site events, intergenerational gatherings, parish involvement, and prayer and liturgical celebrations.

This valuable resource can enhance the young people’s experience of the Horizons Program and help your parish fulfill a commitment to total youth ministry. Contact your program coordinator about the availability of the manual.

Parish Program Connections

A religious education curriculum is, ideally, just one component of a total parish program in which all those responsible for the formation of young people work together with the entire parish to meet the holistic needs of its youth. *Keeping a Journal* can be a springboard for connections with other youth ministry experiences. You might develop these connections by doing the following:

- Use journal exercises on retreats or in the context of sacramental preparation programs, other religious education classes, or theme sessions on special topics such as friendship, saints, world hunger, stress, or heroes.

- Include journal writing as part of your plan for special prayer times or in association with liturgical seasons, for example, days of reflection during Advent or Lent.
- Take photographs of youth events and post them in a place for the entire parish to see. In addition to photos, have participants keep a record of happenings and personal reflections on retreats or service experiences. Journal entries regarding an “urban plunge” or other immersion experiences or regular visits to a local nursing home can be shared with adult service groups in the parish, the parish council, or the pastor.
- Consider doing a group journal of one of the events listed above. Instead of keeping individual journals, participants could be invited to write their reflections in a community journal that is later shared with others in the parish.
- Arrange for the participants to help younger children explore fundamental journal keeping during a vacation Bible school, an after-school or latchkey program, or a special “teen to ’tween” program at the parish, where teenagers (with adult supervision) lead a daylong or overnight event for the parish “’tweens,” those who are in between childhood and adolescence (usually fourth, fifth, and sixth graders).
- For those interested in going deeper or just making journal keeping a habit, arrange a monthly update session where participants explore and practice new techniques, read parts of published journals, share their own experiences of journal keeping, or pray together. This group could be led by adult volunteers from the parish who are themselves avid journal keepers.
- Arrange one-on-one meetings between adult journal keepers and young people who are just discovering the gift that a journal can be. The adults can serve as sounding boards, guides, and perhaps even mentors for the young persons. The program coordinator will need to provide these adults with some basic training that includes a discussion of boundaries.

Family Connections

Parents are interested in knowing what their child is learning. They are entitled to know what is going on in the program, what a course on keeping a journal has to do with religious education, and how

they can be involved if they choose to be. Most sessions include activities for parents or for parents and teenagers. Before the start of the course, consider putting together a flyer or a letter to send home to parents that includes the following information:

- An explanation of *Keeping a Journal*, an outline of the content, and a description of how this course fits into the religious education program.
- An assurance that the journals are private and confidential unless the young people give you permission to read and respond to them.
- A promise that if permission to read their journal is granted by the young person, you will contact the parent(s) if something is revealed in the journal that warrants the parent(s)’ knowledge and attention.
- A description of the optional assignments with a request that they encourage their teenager to explore further options. You might even suggest that they do the optional activities themselves and share with their teenager their own experiences of keeping a journal.
- A request for volunteers to lead a group of interested teenagers beyond the course or to meet with students one-on-one. If you have already discussed the need for basic training with the program coordinator, you might describe the type of training they would be involved in before such a commitment.

Goals and Objectives in This Course

Why Use Goals and Objectives?

Curriculums take on greater clarity, direction, and purpose if they are described in terms of their intended goals and objectives. This observation is based on a commonsense principle: We have a difficult time getting somewhere if we do not know where we are going. Educators who design learning experiences must identify their destination as a first step in determining how to get there. The statement of goals and objectives is a practical way to identify the desired outcomes for a program.

In the Horizons Program, goals and objectives are used in the following ways:

Goals. Goals are broad statements of what we wish to accomplish—learning outcomes we hope to achieve. The coordinator’s manual for the Horizons Program provides the goals for the entire curriculum. Each course within the total program also includes a statement of its goals. The goals often have an idealistic quality, inviting the teacher to reflect on how the course relates to the personal and faith development of the young people. At the same time, the course goals are realistic, measurable, and attainable. As a teacher, at the end of the course you should be able to look back and determine if you have in fact achieved the course goals.

Objectives. Objectives are statements that define how to get to the goals. They name the specific tasks that must be accomplished if the goals are to be achieved. Each course supplies a clear statement of objectives for each session in the course.

The Goals and Objectives of Keeping a Journal

Goals

The two goals for this course are as follows:

- That young people discover ways that journals can help them learn about themselves, explore their thoughts and feelings, and pray
- That they practice a variety of styles and techniques of journal keeping with the intention of finding approaches that work for them

Objectives

Each session has its own objectives, which will help realize the two course goals. The objectives of *Keeping a Journal* follow:

- Session 1: “The World Around Me”*
- To help the young people recognize the value of keeping a journal as one way of coming to know themselves better and developing their relationship with God
 - To provide opportunities for them to explore a variety of techniques used in journal keeping, focusing primarily on their daily experiences and relationships

Session 2: “The World Within Me”

- To enable the young people to see a journal as a tool they can use to learn about themselves, look back at ways they have grown, and see ways in which they need to grow
- To introduce them to various journal styles
- To expand their repertoire of journal techniques, focusing primarily on their own thoughts and feelings

Session 3: “God Through It All”

- To lead the young people through additional journal-keeping techniques, focusing primarily on prayer and their relationship with God
- To encourage them to pursue journal keeping and to help them identify some methods that work well for them

Suggested Resources

For Adults

The following materials may be helpful to you as background reading or to expand on the concepts and activities in this course:

- Adams, Kathleen. *Journal to the Self: Twenty-two Paths to Personal Growth*. New York: Warner Books, 1990.
- Kelsey, Morton T. *Adventure Inward*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1980.
- Progoff, Ira. *At a Journal Workshop*. New York: Dialogue House Library, 1975.
- Rainer, Tristine. *The New Diary*. Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, 1978.
- Simons, George F. *Keeping Your Personal Journal*. New York: Paulist Press, 1978.
- Wood, Robert. *A Thirty-Day Experiment in Prayer*. Nashville, TN: Upper Room, 1978.

For Young People

These books provide additional material for follow-up sessions or as recommendations for young people who want to go further:

Artman, John. *Insights: Writing About My Thoughts, My Feelings, and My Experiences*. Carthage, IL: Good Apple Books, 1989.

Bingham, Mindy, Judy Edmonson, and Sandy Striker. *Challenges: A Young Man's Journal for Self-Awareness and Personal Planning*. Santa Barbara, CA: Advocacy Press, 1984.

———. *Choices: A Teen Woman's Journal for Self-Awareness and Personal Planning*. Santa Barbara, CA: Advocacy Press, 1984, 1987.

Dahlstrom, Lorraine. *Writing Down the Days: 365 Creative Journaling Ideas for Young People*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 1990.

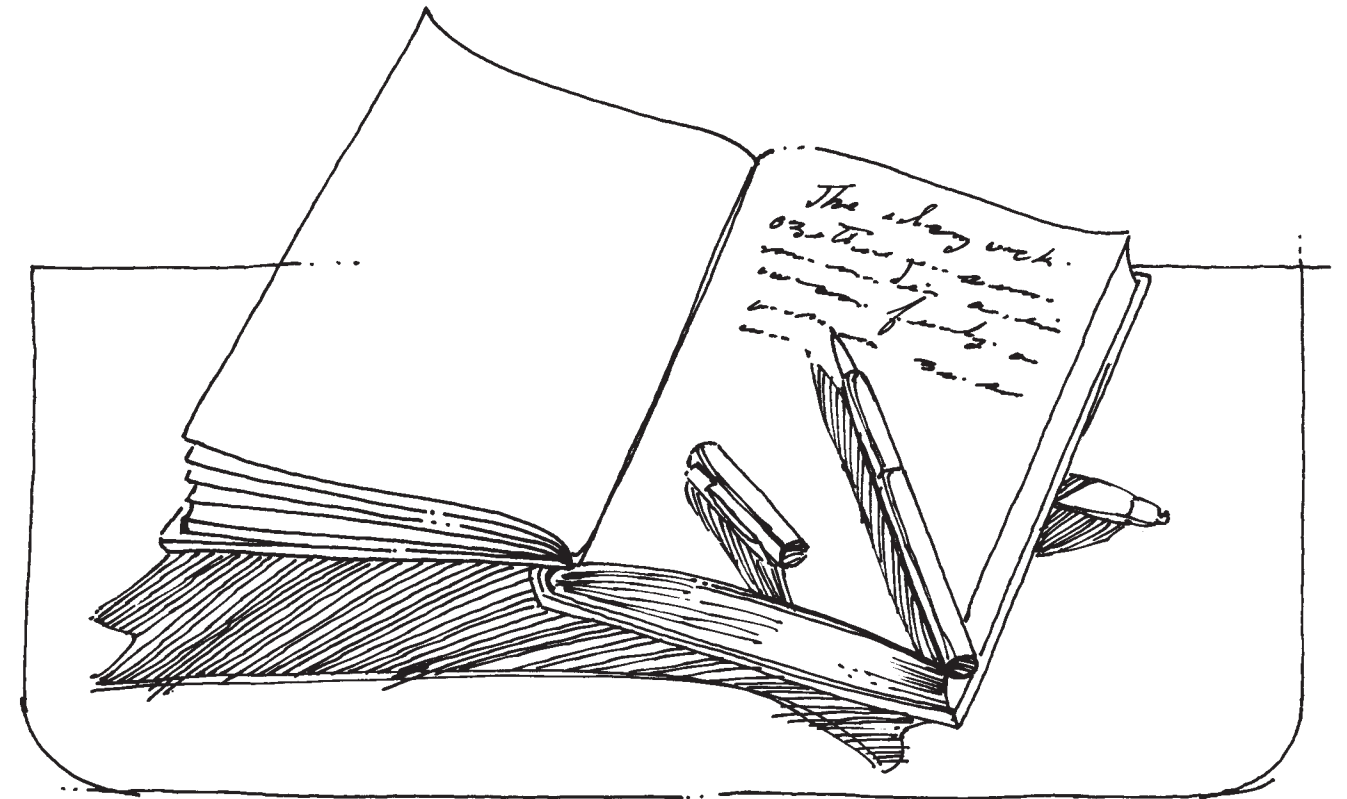
Espelund, Pamela, and Rosemary Wallner. *Making the Most of Today*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 1991.

McMahon, Betsy Martin. *The Days of My Life*. New York: New Chapter Press, 1987.

Rubly-Burggraff, Roberta. *Magnum Opus: An Affirmation Journal*. Milwaukee: Hi-Time Publishing, 1989.

SESSION 1

The World Around Me



Objectives

- To help the young people recognize the value of keeping a journal as one way of coming to know themselves better and developing their relationship with God
- To provide opportunities for them to explore a variety of techniques used in journal keeping, focusing primarily on their daily experiences and relationships

Session Steps

- an introduction to this course (15 minutes)
- expectations and ground rules (15 minutes)
- distribution and personalization of the journals (20 minutes)
- a break (10 minutes)
- an exercise with sentence starters (15 minutes)
- character sketches (15 minutes)
- a springboard exercise (15 minutes)
- blessing of the journals (10 minutes)
- closing statements (5 minutes)

Background for the Teacher

This session opens by addressing the questions everyone brings to a new experience: What is this all about? What's expected of me? and What will I get out of it? The goal of this session is to explore some reasons why people keep journals and to begin to experiment with personal journal techniques. The young people are encouraged to use a number of basic techniques to focus on their world and their relationships.

Before getting into the material, you must outline expectations and ground rules for the group. This is especially important for this course because the nature of the topic demands a different treatment and a different atmosphere than do many other courses in the Horizons Program. Depending on their experience with religious education in the past, the young people may be expecting either a course that is structured in a conventional presentation and discussion format or a course that involves lots of games and physical activity. *Keeping a Journal* is neither. It will be helpful to you and to them if they are clear about what to expect from the beginning.

The next step is to talk about the young people's past experience with journal keeping. Some may have kept a journal on their own; others may have done it as part of a class at school. To allow persons who have done some work with journals to talk about their experiences is important for two reasons. First, it will show the rest of the group, particularly those who might be skeptical, that people their age do, in fact, keep journals and perhaps enjoy doing so. Second, it will reveal that people have different ways and different reasons to keep a journal. This sets the stage for the experimentation that is part of the rest of the course.

In asking for feedback on prior experiences with journals, be careful that the group is getting a balanced perspective from girls and boys. The group needs to be aware that keeping a journal is a good way to stay in touch with oneself no matter what age, gender, or life experience. Keeping a journal is not just for girls or adults or people with exciting day-to-day lives. It does not matter what one's outer life is like. Everyone has an interesting inner life, and that is the stuff of a personal journal.

After the preliminary work is done, it is time to dive into the topic. The bulk of the session is devoted to creating a journal and then engaging in three journal exercises. Before the course begins, review

the comments about journal materials in the introduction and decide what the group will use. Select an option that will work for you as the teacher and accommodate the choices you make about the optional exercises and the journal responses.

Not everyone will get into every exercise in this session or in the following sessions. Know that this is okay, and acknowledge that to the group. What is important is that each person try a technique at least once before discarding it. After each exercise, you are asked to lead the group in a short debriefing process. The point of the debriefing is to talk about the exercise itself and not the content, though some may freely offer their journal entries. Though such sharing is acceptable, avoid holding it up as the standard for responding. It is the content that will make the course come alive for the participants, because what goes into their journal will come from their heart. Just be careful of what you are asking the young people to share with the rest of the group, and do not ask them for anything that might be uncomfortable for them to reveal.

You will need to make two more decisions before you start teaching this course. The first decision is how you will handle the optional exercises. Refer to the discussion of these exercises in the introduction. The second decision is whether you are willing to read and respond to the participants' journals in between sessions. Both of these topics are discussed with the group just after the closing prayer, which is intended to affirm the sacredness of these journals as the stories of their lives, their hearts, and their souls.

Preparation

Materials Needed

- something for the participants to use as journals
- if you will be collecting the journals in order to give the young people feedback, an inexpensive pocket folder with blank sheets of paper, for each participant
- a copy of handout 1-A, "Optional Exercises: Going Deeper," for each participant
- pens or pencils
- a tape or CD player, and reflective music (optional)
- a variety of art materials—magazines, scissors, markers, glue, tape

- one of your own journals if you have kept one (perhaps a journal or diary from your own teen years)
- transparent adhesive covering (like Con-Tact paper) if you are using folders for journals
- snacks (optional)
- newsprint
- masking tape
- a box of paper clips
- a Bible
- items for the prayer space (e.g., a candle and matches, a cross, a picture or other piece of religious art, cloth, flowers or a plant, and a small table)

Other Necessary Preparations

Prepare to lead this session by doing the following things and checking them off as you accomplish them:

- For step A.* Decide on the type of journals you will use.
- For step B.* Write the expectation statements from step B on a sheet of newsprint.
- For step E.* Write the sentence starters from step E on a sheet of newsprint.
- For step G.* Write the springboard statements from step G on a sheet of newsprint.
- For step H.* Prepare a prayer space.
- For step I.* Add three or four paper clips to the blank journals.
- For step I.* Decide if you are willing to make the offer to respond to individual journals. Practice presenting this option.
- Decide if you are going to handle the optional exercises differently than the method described in the Procedure section. If needed, include a copy of handout 1-A in each participant's pocket folder.
- Determine if you wish to change this session by using one or more of the alternative approaches described at the end of this session plan.
- Reflect on your own experiences of keeping a journal or a diary.
- Try some of the journal techniques or the optional exercises described in the session plan.



Opening Teacher Prayer

Reading. "My being proclaims your greatness, and my spirit finds joy in you, God my Savior. For you have looked upon me, your servant, in my lowliness; all ages to come shall call me blessed. God, you who are mighty, have done great things for me. Holy is your name" (Schreck and Leach, comps., *Psalms Anew*, p. 16).

Reflection. With little apparent hesitation, Mary agreed to be the one person who would bring the world closer to God. Yet she must have felt a sense of awe and responsibility, if not total inadequacy. Mary's yes changed the world. You have accepted the challenge of teaching this course. By saying yes, you have agreed to be the person who will bring a group of teenagers closer to God. You, too, are blessed.

Reflect on the following questions. Enter into your journal your responses to these questions and any other thoughts you might have.

- What in you speaks of God's greatness? What gifts do you have to offer young people that will give them a glimpse of God?
- You may have agreed to teach this course some time ago. Now that the moment is here, how are you feeling about saying yes?
- Do you have a personal hope for this course? Do you have any fears or hesitations?

Prayer. Close your reflection time with the following prayer:

My being proclaims your greatness, and my spirit finds joy in you, God, my savior. I pray that through me and through this course these young people will come to know themselves and you better. I also pray that they might come to believe in their own greatness and find their joy in you. Fill me with courage, compassion, a sense of humor, a gentle spirit, and, most of all, with your grace. I put this day in your hands. Be for me all that I need. Amen.

Procedure

A Introduction (15 minutes)

1. If the young people do not know you, introduce yourself and tell them a little bit about your family, your work, your hobbies, and other things that are important to you. Then ask the participants to think about how their family has kept records of its growth and activities through the years. If helpful or necessary, offer suggestions by telling them that some families have kept photo albums, video-cassettes, audio recordings of family history, Christmas letters to family and friends, or genealogies.

Next, invite them to think about how they keep records of their own life. Some of them may have scrapbooks with everything meticulously organized from birth to the present day. Others may simply have a box underneath their bed where they throw things they want to keep. Others might have a “memory wall” that changes from year to year.

2. Ask the young people to pair up with someone, preferably someone they do not know or do not know well. After they have done this, invite the partners to introduce themselves to each other and to tell each other about their family’s record-keeping system and their own attempts at keeping track of their own life. Because they may be quite uncomfortable at this point, allow no more than 2 minutes for this exercise.

3. Call the young people back together. If they do not know one another well, ask each person to introduce her or his partner and tell the group what she or he learned about how the partner keeps memories and tracks growth.

4. Introduce the course by explaining that most people have ways of keeping records of the important events in their life and in the life of their family. They also have ways of preserving their memories. Looking through such collections can provoke funny, sad, warm, thoughtful, or happy feelings.

5. If you have some of your own journals or diaries, show these to the group. It is not necessary to read anything from your journals or to let the young people browse through them. If a journal or diary was part of your life as a teenager, tell the

group about your experience. Follow this by incorporating the following ideas into the introduction to the course:

- Families and individuals have many ways of keeping track of physical growth and memories: photographs, videos, albums, scrapbooks, and memory walls are some options.
- Journals are a way of keeping track of what is going on inside of us. They can help us to know ourselves better and to sort out our thoughts when we are confused or angry. Journals also provide a way to record the good things that happen in our life.
- Different people use different methods of journal keeping. They might do artwork, write poetry, collect quotes, or pray. In short, a journal can be anything the journal keeper wants it to be.
- Who in your group has kept a journal or a diary at some time in their life?

Those who are willing could tell the group about their experiences: When did they keep their journal? How often did they write in it? What kinds of things did they write about? If you have a large group or a lot of people who have kept journals before, you may want to cut this short to conserve time.

Conclude this introduction by distinguishing a diary (a daily record of outer events) from a journal (a way to get in touch with what is going on inside). Tell the group that this course is about keeping a journal. In its three sessions they will have a chance to experiment with different ways to record their thoughts. They will also have a chance to look at some journals that other people have kept. Hopefully, they will leave the course with some ideas for keeping a journal that they really enjoy and might use in the future.

B Expectations and Ground Rules (15 minutes)

Each young person comes with a set of expectations about what this course will be like. Many of them also come with ideas of what they want to get out of this course. It is important for them to articulate their expectations. It is also important for you to set down the ground rules for your time together and tell them what you have in mind for the course, so that they are clear about the limits. It is only after knowing what the limits are that a young person can act freely within those limits.

Before the session. Divide a sheet of newsprint into three sections, each headed by one of the following statements:

- I signed up for this course because . . .
- I’d like to learn . . .
- At the end of this course . . .

1. To begin, ask the participants to divide into groups of no more than four people. Distribute a large sheet of newsprint to each group and enough markers so that each person has one. Display the sheet that you prepared before the session. Instruct each group to duplicate your model.

After the papers have been prepared, tell the groups that they have 5 minutes to write their answers to the statements. Each person in a small group must write something under each of the categories. After 5 minutes is up, ask the small groups to tape their expectations sheets on a wall. Ask someone from each group to read his or her group’s responses.

2. Ask the participants if they have anything to add now that they have heard everyone’s ideas. Then begin talking about your expectations for the course by expressing the following ideas in your own words:

- The young people in your group have things they want to get out of this course. In order to do that, everyone will have to work together to make it happen.
- They will learn to keep a journal by keeping a journal. There will be little talking about journals; rather, they will do many journal exercises and then have a chance to talk about their thoughts and feelings about those exercises.
- This course will not offer a lot of games or a lot of physical activity. It will present no movies or skits. At times it will be necessary to be silent so that everyone can concentrate without being distracted.
- Everyone should try all the exercises. They may decide that they like some and not others, but they will not know unless they try them all.
- They will have an opportunity in between sessions to explore some other ideas for journal keeping.
- The thoughts in a journal are very personal, but honesty is very important. They should respect one another’s privacy by not trying to read what someone is writing and by not asking what someone else wrote about.

- The journals will stay with you between sessions, especially if you are offering the response option. The journals will not be read unless the participants give you permission to do so. This issue will be discussed further at the end of the session.

C Distribution and Personalization of Journals (20 minutes)

1. Give each person a blank journal. Put out a variety of art materials—magazines, markers, scissors, glue, and so on. Tell the group that they will spend the next 20 minutes making their first journal “entry,” but they will do no writing. As noted, the purpose of a journal is to explore what goes on inside one’s world. Their first task is to decorate their journal by creating a collage of words and pictures or doing drawings that describe them: their likes, their hobbies, things that are important to them or that they care about, things they would like to do someday, and whatever else they can think of. Their name should be visible somewhere in the collage.

If you are using three-hole gusset folders or notebooks, have them do this activity on the cover. After they are through, they can seal their creation by covering it with a clear adhesive sheet such as Contact paper. If you are using bound books, suggest that they do the activity on the first page.

Encourage them to talk about their creations as they are doing them. This activity could go on for a long time, so watch the clock and stick to the limit.

2. After everyone is done and the space is cleaned up, ask the group to display their collages in a particular place so that others can look at them during the break. Tell the group that keeping a journal does not have to mean only writing in it. Their journal can be anything they want it to be. Tell them to keep an eye out for interesting pictures or words in newspapers or magazines and to add these to their journal periodically, with or without an explanation. Also remind them that if they want to keep track of what they are thinking at different times in the year or in their life, it is important to date every entry.

D Break (10 minutes)

Invite the group to move around and look at the collages. Encourage them to ask the person who made the collage for an explanation of unusual or interesting elements. Provide snacks, if possible.

E Journal Exercise: Sentence Starters (15 minutes)

Many people find a blank page paralyzing. For some, the hardest part of writing in a journal is starting a new entry. Sentence starters are a way of putting the mind in gear so that the focus is on what is going on inside and not on the writing process itself.

Before the session. Write the following sentence starters or some of your own on a sheet of newsprint:

- An adjective that describes my day is . . .
- One thing that went right today is . . .
- One thing that went wrong today is . . .
- The best thing that has happened to me in the last week is . . .

If you make up your own sentence starters, keep in mind that it is important to set a light tone for this early experience with journal writing. If you get too deep too fast, some teenagers may find the activity uncomfortable.

1. Ask the young people to turn to a blank page in their journal and to write in the date. Display the sentence starter sheet that you prepared before the session and ask the participants to copy the phrases and finish the sentences. Give them about 7 minutes to do this. Some people may need or want more time, but explain that this is just a time to experiment and that finishing is not as important as trying out this journal-writing technique.

2. After 7 minutes, ask the young people to evaluate the exercise by answering the following questions. This can be done in the full group. Be aware that since this is only the first session, the feedback might be minimal.

- What did you like or dislike about doing this exercise?

- Do you think you could come up with some sentence starters for yourself or for the rest of the group?
- Is this a good journal technique for you? Why or why not?

Conclude by talking about sentence starters as a good way to get their mind moving when they cannot think of anything to write about in their journal. They might like to keep a running list of sentence stems in their journal and go back to it periodically if they are stuck. If the group needs a short stretch break, allow them to take one at this point.

F Journal Exercise: Character Sketches (15 minutes)

A character sketch is a written description of another person, or even of oneself. It is a good tool to use when two people are in conflict or when one meets someone new and wants to record first impressions. A self-sketch can help a person evaluate himself or herself, recognize strengths, identify weaknesses, and formulate a plan for growth or change.

1. Announce that this activity focuses on another person in the participants' life. Ask the young people to turn to another blank page, date it, and close their eyes. When they have settled down, lead them through this brief reflection. Pause briefly after each question to give the young people a chance to answer it in their mind.

- Think about the people who live with you at home. Get a picture of your family in your mind. Choose one person from that group. It could be the person you feel closest to or the person you feel furthest from right now. Get a mental picture of this person. What do you really like about this person? What is this person good at? not so good at? If you could change anything about this person, what would it be? What are some things you've noticed about the way this person handles life? What does this person like to do for fun? What makes this person angry? What makes him or her sad? When is this person happiest? What kind of mood has this person been in lately? Why?

Ask them to open their eyes and begin writing a character sketch of the person they have been thinking of. They should begin with the words

"There is a person who lives with me whose name is" and then write that person's name and describe her or his character and qualities.

2. When the time is up, regather the group to process the experience for about 5 minutes. Ask the following questions:

- Was it easy to do a character sketch? What made it easy or hard for you?
- Why could this be a good journal technique? How could it help your relationships with other people?
- Are there any other people you would like to do character sketches of? Take a moment to jot their names on the same page in your journal.

Close the process by asking if anyone has more observations. Encourage the participants to do one or two other sketches before the next session if they indicated an interest in doing so. If the group needs to stretch at this point, allow them to do so. Keep this and all breaks in between activities brief.

G Journal Exercise: Springboard Statements (15 minutes)

Another way to get started with a journal entry is to use something else as a springboard for one's thoughts. Quotes, prayers, artwork, photographs, and poems are some of the things that work well. To close the first session of *Keeping a Journal*, the young people will combine the springboard technique with prayer.

Before the session. Write the following statements on a sheet of newsprint:

- In the name of the God who created the world, today I am thankful for [a blessing]
- In the name of the Son who taught us how to live, today I would like to help [a person who needs me or an injustice I want to do something about]
- In the name of the Holy Spirit who guides us, today I need help with [a problem or question]

1. Begin by briefly describing the springboard technique as a method where a person uses something else to generate spontaneous thoughts and ideas to write about in a journal. Announce that the

last journal experiment uses this technique based on the traditional Catholic gesture prayer, the sign of the cross. Ask the group to focus and get quiet. If you have a tape or CD player and some instrumental centering music, this would be a good time to use it. As your group becomes quiet, softly play the music. Pause for a few seconds to let the young people adjust to the meditative atmosphere. Then ask them to join you in praying the sign of the cross, slowly and reverently, thinking about each phrase and gesture as they do it:

- In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

2. After they have done the sign, announce that you are going to do it again, but instead of the original words you will add new words to help them think about how this prayer applies to their own life. Ask them to join with you in doing the gestures. Then begin:

- In the name of the God who created the world, the God who made each of us and loves us for all we are and all we will be;

And in the name of the Son who saved us and taught us how to live, so that others might come to know God's love through our actions and through the love we show them;

And in the name of the Holy Spirit who guides us through life, giving us the gifts of courage, strength, wisdom, understanding, and right judgment. Amen.

3. Next, ask the young people to open their journal to a blank page and date it. Display the sheet of paper that you prepared before the session. Tell the group to spend the next 5 minutes completing the sentence starters in their journal.

4. Ask the participants to remain quiet even after they have finished writing. If you have been using music, keep it playing. You may want to turn the volume down lower while making the following comments.

Tell the young people that a springboard can be helpful in getting their thoughts going. Many options are useful as springboards, including television shows, prayers, movies, photographs, poems, pictures, and songs. Sometimes just being quiet after reading or seeing something can start the thoughts moving. Encourage them to try something like this springboard journal entry before the next session.

H Blessing of the Journals (10 minutes)

Before the session. Prepare a prayer space. For example, cover a small table with a cloth and set a Bible, candle, and cross on it. You could wait to do this until you need it and then take a moment to set up a prayer circle in the middle of the group.

1. Ask the group to move quietly to the prayer space if they are not already there. If you have been using background music, let it continue. Dim the lights if you can, and light a candle. Invite the students to spend a quiet moment thinking about all the thoughts, feelings, and emotions that they experienced this week. Ask them to think about times this week when they were angry, happy, embarrassed, afraid, frustrated, joyful, or aware of being loved. After a moment express these thoughts in your own words:

- A journal is a sacred treasure. It can hold thoughts, dreams, feelings, and prayers. It can be a record of personal accomplishments and triumphs, or it can be a place to let true feelings show. It can help a person know himself or herself better and come closer to God. It is where one can be totally honest and totally free to speak the truth, knowing that God will listen. And it is a place where that truth is held sacred.

2. Tell the participants that in a moment you are going to ask them to bless their journal and place it around the prayer circle. Explain that one by one they are to slowly make the sign of the cross on the cover of their journal with their thumb, saying the words of the prayer out loud, stopping before they say “Amen.” Then they should place their journal near the focal point of the prayer space, while everyone in the group says together “Amen!” Tell them that as they do that, they should keep in mind the last exercise they did, using the sign of the cross as the springboard, and in their heart ask God to answer each person’s journal prayer.

Begin with yourself if you have a journal, so that you can model the process for them. After the entire group has done this, read the following passage from the Gospel of John:

- “Jesus then said to those Jews who believed in him, ‘If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free’” (8:31–32).

Close your prayer time by making the sign of the cross using this paraphrased version:

- In the name of the God who created us, the Son who saved us and taught us how to live, and the Holy Spirit who guides us. Amen.

I Closing (5 minutes)

Before the group leaves, discuss with them the optional exercises and, if you decided to respond to individual journals, your feedback on the journals.

Optional Exercises

The activities on handout 1–A, “Optional Exercises: Going Deeper,” can be handled in a number of ways. Some of these are described in the introduction. The process described here is only one of the methods.

If you have decided to collect the journals, remind the young people that you had talked about ways they could continue working with their journal in between sessions. Give each person an inexpensive pocket folder with some blank sheets of paper and handout 1–A. Explain that the activities on this handout are *optional*, but that you encourage them to do at least two different exercises between now and the next session. Tell them to bring those exercises to the next meeting, to be added to their journal. Note that you will also ask them to volunteer to tell the group what exercises they did and how they worked.

Teacher Feedback

Remind the group that you mentioned at the beginning of the session that the journals would remain with you between sessions. You also told the group that journals are very private things and that you would not read them without permission. Combine the following points with your own thoughts, explaining that privacy is important, but privacy does not have to mean that only the journal keeper knows what is in the journal. He or she can decide to share certain things in the book. Tell the young people that you would like to read their entries if they are willing to have you do so. Assure them that what any individual writes and what you write back to her or him will be just between the two of you.

The young people may wonder why you want to read their journal. You may want to give some reasons like these: first, to see how the exercises work for different people; second, because you really care about them as people and want to see how life is working for them. Add any other reasons you can think of.

Assure them that you do not care about spelling, sentence structure, or punctuation. All their ideas are important to you. Tell them not to limit their writing to things they *think* you want to hear.

Guarantee that if they allow you to read their journal, you will hold their trust sacred. Tell them of one exception—if you think they are involved in a dangerous situation, you cannot keep this confidence. But other than some extreme situations, the content of their journal is between you and them and God.

If they agree to let you read their entries, tell them to simply turn in their journal. If they don’t want you to read the entries on some pages, tell them to paper clip those pages (or all the pages if they don’t want you to read any of their journal). Assure them that you will always respect their wishes.

Point out the paper clips that are attached to each journal. Ask the participants to reclaim their journal and, if needed, to clip the pages they don’t want you to read. Tell them to put their journal in a place you designate, as they leave. Remind them of the optional exercises and the date and time of the next session.

Alternative Approaches

After reading through the session plan, you may choose to do some things differently or to make additions to an activity. Consider your time limitations first and then these alternative approaches.

For step E. If your group members do not know one another, after they complete the sentence starters in step E, ask them to divide into smaller groups and share whatever answers they want to. Limit the time for sharing to no more than a minute for each person. Remember, you told them they would never have to share content if they did not feel comfortable doing so. This information is non-threatening enough that most participants should

be able to divulge at least some of their answers. If your group is small enough, it would be fun to do this in the full group so that people get to know a little bit about one another.

For step E. Divide the group into pairs and ask each pair to come up with some sentence starters that they think the others would enjoy writing about in their journal. Compile these and give each person a list at the next session. They could use these sentence starters as one of their optional exercises.

Two good resources for springboard questions are *The Book of Questions* (1985) and *The Kids’ Book of Questions* (1988), both by Gregory Stock (New York: Workman Publishing).

For step G. Ask the group to rewrite the sign of the cross in their own words. This can be done individually or in pairs. Then continue with the exercise as it is outlined, or go directly to the prayer. Rewriting the prayer will shift the tone of the exercise so that it is not so serious and may even be humorous at times. You may have to make some adjustments as you proceed into the closing prayer, to regain a sense of reverence. Lightening up the level of discussion has its advantages, particularly if your group is very young or if you have a number of reluctant participants.

Family Connections

- Consider sending a short description of the session and the optional exercises to the parents. Ask them to encourage their son or daughter to do the optional exercises. Suggest that the parents might want to do them as well. It is never too late to start a journal.
- Send the participants a description of the character sketch exercise in step F. Suggest that the parents write an affirming character sketch of their teenager and give it to him or her after a bad (or even a good) day.

Closing Prayer and Evaluation

Before your prayer time, you may want to think about some of the questions in the evaluation on the following page.



Closing Teacher Prayer

God of all promises, I ask your blessings on these young people—your gift to me, to the world, and to our church. I hope that in some way they felt the touch of your love today. I pray that this loving touch gives them the courage to seek the truth that comes in knowing you.

I especially pray for _____ because _____.

Thank you for your constant presence and the power of your love in my life. I pray that my love for you is a contagious witness to that presence and power. Amen.



Evaluation

Take a few moments after the session to evaluate how it went. Think about the following questions and write your thoughts in the spaces provided, for future reference.

- What worked best in this session?

- What would make this session better next time?

- Circle the number on the following scale that, on the whole, reflects how you rate this session:

A total failure; it bombed!	↔	An answer to a prayer; fabulous!
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10		

- What are the reasons for your rating?

- In prayerful reflection, think about the individual teenagers in your group, then answer these questions:
 - Did anyone in the group seem to be struggling?

 - What kind of follow-up with the person or persons named in the previous question is necessary or would be helpful?

 - Are there any particular needs of the young people that you recognized and would like to bring to God?



Going Deeper

Try these journal activities. Remember to date your entries.

Springboard song. What is your favorite song? Write down the name of the song and the artist(s). Consider the following questions and write your ideas in your journal:

- Why do I like the song?
- What feelings do I have when I listen to it?
- What special meaning do the lyrics have for me right now?

Pack rat journal keeping. Start collecting quotes, comic strips, or other interesting things that say something to you. Keep them in a special section of your journal. Newspapers and magazines are good sources. Check the public or school library for books of quotes and cartoons. Also, keep a collection of your favorite Bible verses.

Daybooks. Many newspapers include a daily log of important events in history, birthdays of famous people like your favorite musician, or special occasions like National Hug Somebody Day. Certain books list these dates too. The most famous daybook is *Chase's Book of Annual Events*. Check the library. Keep track of events that are interesting to you. Write a few lines in your journal about what meaning a particular day has for you.

Worth a thousand words. Find a picture or photograph that catches your attention in a magazine, newspaper, or book. If you can, cut it out and paste it in your journal. Write a few lines about what that picture or photo means to you.

Inspiration safari. Take a camera and go for a walk or a bike ride. Take pictures of things that speak to you of God's glory: a pot of flowers, a happy dog, children playing, a tree changing colors, the bustle of city life, a park, a farm, someone with a big smile . . . the possibilities are infinite! When you get the pictures developed, put them in your journal and date them. If you want to, write a few lines about why each scene struck you. If not, just put them in a section called "God's Glory."

In the news. Pick a news story that touches you. Write about your reactions, thoughts, and feelings.



Going Deeper 2

Real characters. Do a character sketch of each member of your family and your friends. Do one of yourself. Do one of God.

A walk to nowhere. Take a walk. Write about what you saw. Try to capture every detail your senses remember: the sounds, colors, smells, textures, sights, and feelings.

A new twist to recycling. If your family saves old magazines and catalogs, a collage may be fun to do and could make a good journal activity. Here are some ideas:

- On one side of a page, paste pictures and words that speak of God's love for you. On the other side, make a collage of pictures and words that show your love for God.
- Create a collage of pictures and words that represent the emotions you have experienced this week or this month.
- Make a dreams collage—of things you would like to do and be someday.

Take that! If you are facing a tough encounter with someone, write out an imaginary dialog in your journal. This activity can help you plan what you are going to say or just vent some anger and frustration in a safe way.