

# Common Lesson One

## Spiritual Autobiographies

### Supporting Materials

Our spirituality involves every aspect of our existence: body, mind, and soul. In the study of theology and the enterprise of theological reflection we cannot avoid the spiritual aspects of our lives. This section offers first a series of ways to examine our lives by preparing our Spiritual Autobiographies. Additional materials offer ways to explore and deepen our spirituality as part of the development of our theological understanding.

At the beginning of each year, Common Lesson One, “Getting Started,” asks each of you in the seminar to write a version of your life story in a way that seeks to discern God’s presence. This story—your “spiritual autobiography”—when told in your seminar, lays the foundation for a trusting and open community for learning. A number of ways for doing this are offered in this part of the EFM *Common Lessons and Supporting Materials*. In the EFM program, the Christian Tradition is understood to be God’s relationship and revelation to the people of Holy Scripture and to those saints and sinners who have responded to God’s Word—“the story of the people of God.” This tradition becomes useful only as it is incorporated into the life story of those who study it. In the setting of the EFM seminar this process is accomplished in part when everyone shares his or her spiritual autobiography.

### Methods

- 1-1 Steppingstones (Recommended for Year A)
- 1-2 Time Lines (Recommended for Year B)
- 1-3 Pictures (Recommended for Year C)
- 1-4 Your Personal History (Recommended for Year D)
- 1-5 Your Spiritual Autobiography—Key Themes
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### Additional Materials

- 1-10 Spiritual Autobiographies-Introduction

# Steppingstones

## Recommended for Common Lesson One Year A

In the 1950s Ira Progoff began studying human research as it relates to spiritual and physical growth. Originally his work began at Drew University, a Methodist college located in New Jersey. There his research on creative persons led to the development of an extensive method for encouraging individual growth. He founded and now operates Dialogue House, a center where he continues his work. The process presented for reviewing your personal history is based on several procedures Progoff developed for setting the context of one's life. For further information concerning his method, you can consult his book, *At a Journal Workshop*.

On a new page, record today's date and entitle the page "Present Period." Begin thinking about the question, "Where am I now in my life?" Write a few sentences that describe the general tone or atmosphere of this present period in your life. Consider what events mark it off. How far back into the past does it reach? What are the main characteristics of this recent time? Perhaps this recent period began a few months ago. Perhaps it began long ago and has lasted for many years. Record your responses to the questions and any other thoughts that occur to you.

Next, expand your description by considering some specific content. Who are the people of special importance to you in this present period? How would you describe your relationship with them? Include both those about whom you "feel good" as well as those about whom you feel negatively. A person of inner importance is one about whom you "find yourself thinking" whether you want to or not.

What are the work projects and activities that you find engaging? Record the feelings and the experiences that are involved in them.

What are your physical conditions during this period? Comment on your health, your sensory life, your overall relation to your body and its use during this period.

What are the social attitudes during this time, your beliefs, your loyalties? Describe your relation to your family, your nation, your social roots.

Who are the persons who have inspired you? They might be from history or mythology, from the Christian heritage, from the EFM readings. Are there any persons who represent a particular quality of wisdom to you?

You should have a description of your perception of your present situation. The next step guides you into establishing a context of your life as a whole. The purpose is to allow you the opportunity to sense the continuous flow of your life.



Progoff developed a technique of listing the events of a life in order to gain a perspective on that life. He coined the term *Steppingstone* to describe the process.

When we speak of the *steppingstones* of our lives, we are referring to those events that come to our minds when we spontaneously reflect on the course that our lives have taken from the beginning to the present moment. The *steppingstones* are the significant points of movement along the road of an individual's life. They stand forth as indicators of the connectedness of each person's existence, a continuity of development that maintains itself despite the vicissitudes and the apparent shifting of directions that occur in the course of life. The *steppingstones* are indicators that enable a person to recognize the deeper-than-conscious goals toward which the movement of his life is trying to take him (102).

A *steppingstone* is an event you recall as you consider your life as a whole. It is a word or a brief phrase that marks a period of your life—“parenting pre-schoolers” and “early retirement” are examples. Limit the number of *steppingstones* to a dozen. The list of events should cover the whole of your life from its beginning to this present moment. By limiting the list to twelve *steppingstones*, you can more easily walk through the flow of your entire life. Again, the purpose of the listing is for you to see the continuous movement of your life as a whole.

- Step One**      Begin by taking a new page, record today's date, and entitle it “Steppingstones.” Sit quietly for a moment and relax. Start your list with “I was born ...” which becomes your first *steppingstone*. Continue listing *steppingstones* until you reach the present period of your life.
- Step Two**      After you have finished your listing of twelve *steppingstones*, read them to yourself a time or two. Sense the flow of your life, its ups and downs, the quiet periods as well as the active times. Then write a brief paragraph describing your life as a whole. When you have completed your listing and the descriptive paragraph, you are ready to take the third step.
- Step Three**      You now are ready to explore your life more fully. You can do this by using the categories that were used in the “Present Period” description. Begin by selecting a *steppingstone* entry that occurred in your childhood. Take a new page, date it, and write the phrase as the title. Go through the same process you followed in Step One. You begin with a few sentences that describe the tone and atmosphere of the period. “It was a time when ....” Then write about the significant persons and your relationship with them **at that time**. Do the same with the activities of the period. Go on to describe your relationship with your body during that time in your life. Include descriptions of your social attitudes, your beliefs, your loyalties. Describe your relationship with your family, your nation, your social roots. Then, recall those who inspired you. Whom did you imitate in the

games you played? What were the songs you enjoyed? Were there any favorite Bible stories you heard or read? What were your favorite “story books”?

After you have completed your description of a period of your childhood, choose a second *steppingstone* as a title for another period description. Take another new page, date it, and place the *steppingstone* title at the top. Describe the period as you have done before. Write about the persons, works, social attitudes, physical experiences, and sources of inspiration that were involved in this period of your life.

At this point you should have a fairly complete description of your present situation and two past periods. You may want to describe several more *steppingstone* periods. Do at least the three descriptions requested above. If you have time and are so inclined, then do others. Since a primary source for your theological reflection is your personal experience, you might find that the more *steppingstones* you describe, the more your reflection throughout the year will be deepened and enriched.

During your seminar you will be invited to share as much of your life’s *steppingstones* as you wish. Your mentor and your group may decide to suggest some time limits. Twenty to thirty minutes is a good average to allow you to share something of your life. Focus on what you find appropriate to share with your EFM group. This is an occasion to tell others about yourself, to find common ground, and share experiences. It is a time to build relationships with others upon which your common learning experiences can grow. **Your Seminar**



# Time Lines

## Recommended For Common Lesson One Year B

### Personal and Historical Time

Our spiritual life and history form a tapestry of our lives that may be seen in discrete sections, but which really weave together into the greater tapestry of history. We are at once in history and apart from it. One way to examine our personal story is to examine how it weaves itself with the personal stories of others and with the larger history of our times.

Time lines offer an excellent way to catch the flow of life and link it to history. Here is one way to accomplish this:

Draw two parallel lines as below, one for historical events and one for personal events. Note the birth date of the oldest person in the group and begin the historical line at that point. Put today's date at the end.

\_\_\_\_\_>  
**Historical Events**

\_\_\_\_\_>  
**Personal Events**

Step 1. Note the major historical events that the group recalls. Spend some time noting important historical milestones like the end of WW II, the assassination of a significant figure, the first landing on the moon, etc.

Step 2. Ask each person to put the significant events they would like to share on the personal time line. One way to keep things clear is to draw a line for each participant.

Note: It may be helpful to use a wide chalk board or to link several pieces of newsprint together so that the writing surface will have sufficient width. These may be mounted on a wall, set on a large table, or even spread on the floor for each person to write upon.

One way to develop your personal history is to use documents of your life to construct your time line. Birth certificates, records of baptism or confirmation, school enrollments, your first driver's license, marriage certificates, etc., may provide key entry points.

Another way to build your time line is to identify those who have been "God Bearers" in your life and to identify the gifts they have brought to you.

When you have completed your chart, take some time to examine it with the group. Ask some theological questions about some of the events you find especially significant.

Where was God present in those events?

Where was Christ revealed?

What were the signs that the Holy Spirit was present?

Where did you find grace and where was grace denied?

**History and  
Personal  
Story**

Common Lessons Year B concentrate on the Christian tradition. It is a historic tradition and the EFM program presents it chronologically to maintain our sense of history. Our personal histories continue that tradition and our spiritual growth occurs over time just as the Church has grown over centuries and millenia.



# Pictures

## Recommended for Common Lesson One Year C

Our spiritual autobiographies may focus on our personal transitions (Common Lesson One A) or on our history in the context of the history of others and our tradition (Common Lesson One B). But we also speak of “seeing the bigger picture,” of seeing our stories in the context of the culture and the society around us. One way to begin to examine this as a part of our spiritual autobiographies is to focus on our stories in a pictorial way. Thus we can see ourselves in the context of family, friends, and neighbors.

Here is one way to do this:

### Instructions

Close your eyes and be silent for a moment.

When silence occurs for you, imagine that you have a photo album on your lap. It is a special album because it contains your whole life in one volume. It contains pictures that may never have been taken for they exist only in your hearts or minds. The first picture shows the day of your birth and the last one shows you entering this room.

Open the cover of your imaginary album and turn the pages. Pictures may include some common events, your first steps, pictures of parents, brothers and sisters, grandparents, family holidays. Perhaps these include snapshots of your first date, your high school graduation. Some are secrets only you should see. Take some time to leaf through your pictures. Perhaps there is a shot of you leaving for school or military service, your first job, marriage and family.

Are all the events in your album happy? What sad events do you see? Who are the important people in your album? What moments of celebration do you see in the pictures? What are the spiritual events pictured here? Who are the heroes whose images you cherish?

Look through the pages of your life until you come to the last page, the most recent photo. Take a moment to give thanks for the memories and to pray for the concerns they evoke. Then come back to the present and open your eyes.

When everyone is ready, think back over the pictures you have seen. Select some that are especially significant and appropriate to share. Take some time to write about them in your journal or to draw sketches.

Use these pictures or accounts as the basis for sharing your spiritual autobiography and relating them to your group.

Some questions to ask are:

Where did you find community and communion?

When did you find solace and support?

Where was the Church in your life?

How did you reach out to others and others reach out to you?

What form did prayer take and what did it mean to you and those around you?

Adapted from "A Short Form of Spiritual Autobiography" by Catherine Hall.



# Your Personal History

## Recommended for Common Lesson OneYear D

### An Image

The old Navaho woman sits silently in front of her loom weaving as generations before her have done. Outside her hogan, she works with the upright loom swiftly forming the natural yarn into a sacred rug pattern. Her rug seemingly forms by itself. She has done this for so many years that habit, not thought, guides her hands. The familiar actions quiet her mind thereby allowing images to form within her. The images carry her thoughts into a daydream.

*"Our lives are like this rug. We are formed by the Cosmic Woman who makes this world on her loom. Each of us becomes as she weaves us into her Earth Rug. The various colors and textures interrelate to tell the story. Each has a place. Each contributes to the whole. Nothing is unintended. All have purpose."*

The old woman awakens from her daydream. She discovers that the Cosmic Woman's Earth Rug story has been woven into her rug. Her rug now tells of her people and their history. Her rug tells also her own story for she knows now that her story is part of the greater history too.

The Earth Rug image reflects your work within this program. You are striving to know the history of God's people so that you can become more fully a part of that history. Christian history then becomes your history.

Each person has a history because of his or her experiences. But not until the person's history is expressed does it have life. The telling generates the story, giving it form and meaning. Once expressed, a person's history becomes concrete and actual. It becomes something that can speak to the self.

You do not have one history but many. No single expression of your history exhausts what you have experienced. Each telling of your history reveals something different from the history told before.

Your history can be told from several viewpoints. You can tell it from the perspective of your whole life, or you can tell it from the standpoint of the various themes within your life.

The following exercises may guide you in reflecting on your personal history. You can use both exercises or choose only the one that suits your own personality or preferred style. Such reflection is for your private consideration. Later, you will be asked to decide what you are willing and ready to share with members of your seminar. The story you share within the seminar might be part of what you discover as you do the exercise. However, your seminar preparation is separated from this exercise to encourage you to reflect privately first.

### Your Personal History

As you reflect on your experiences, you may encounter thoughts and feelings that you are not ready to share. Often, events in our lives need to be protected from outside judgments. Paul Tournier in a little book called *Secrets* tells of the importance of having privacy. "A creative work is a very fragile thing while it is being produced. It needs secrecy. It can die away, lose its impetus and its conviction by being divulged prematurely.... A criticism, a comment, even praise, can disrupt the creative impetus." Your life is a creative work. The experiences and events that form you need the same initial protection that a creative activity needs. Without allowing you to have the protection of secrecy, the new life emerging within may "lose its impetus and its conviction by being divulged prematurely." He continues, "Yes, a certain secrecy, to just the right extent, ought to enclose every precious thing, every precious experience, so that it can mature and bear fruit" (p. 19). You may wish to maintain a diary or journal to provide a private place where you can write your reflections, memories, and discoveries.

Consider your personal history from several perspectives as if you are constructing several histories of your life, each from a different standpoint. By viewing your life from these various positions, you will be able to discover how the same experiences can be interpreted differently, depending upon the perspective taken. The exercise is designed to enrich your self-awareness and assist you in knowing yourself more fully. Write the following four brief histories of your life in the "Autobiography" section of the notes you keep. You might use a time line from the time of your birth to the present, or you might make a list of significant memories from the beginning of your life. The four standpoints from which to write are as follows.

**Your  
Physical  
Life**

Your physical history can be presented in a variety of ways. You may construct a time line of your physical development and patterns of health. Include the major events or experiences that have constructed your physical life. You may consider what image or metaphor best describes your physical history.

**Your Life  
with  
Others**

Construct your history from the perspective of the significant people in your life. Friendship could be used as a primary focus of this history. For example, you might construct your history of friendship. Who was your first friend? Was there a time when you felt you had no friends? How has your experience with friends developed over the years? What image or picture reflects your life with others?

**Your  
Intellectual  
History**

You may have had little understanding of your intellectual life until a particular event occurred. When was the first time you realized that what you thought "mattered"? What are a few of the thoughts and events that capture the main ideas of your intellectual history?



Here you might trace your history of play. How have you used your leisure? What is the history of the games you have played? Or you might construct your history from the jokes that you have found funny throughout your life. What do you see standing out in your history of play?

After you have finished writing your histories, read them to yourself. Record any insights, ideas, learnings, and reactions.

When you come to your seminar, you will be given an opportunity to share your thoughts. You will need to decide what you find appropriate and helpful to share with your fellow students as you build a learning community which includes the opportunity to learn from each other's lives and discover God's Holy Spirit in the community you establish.

## **Your History of Play**

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## **Your Seminar**





# Your Spiritual Autobiography

## Key Themes

An exercise for exploring your spiritual autobiography:

LORD, you have searched me out and known me;  
you know my sitting down and my rising up;  
you discern my thoughts from afar.

You trace my journeys and my resting-places  
and are acquainted with all my ways.

Indeed, there is not a word on my lips,  
but you, O LORD, know it altogether.

*Psalm 139:1-3 (BCP)*

Having read the first three verses of Psalm 139 you may want to read the Psalm in its entirety as you begin to write your spiritual autobiography. Think about your “journeys” and your “resting-places.” Even when you were unconscious of God’s presence, how might God have been conscious of “all my ways”?

Think about your life in four or five sections, depending on your age:

- 1) Childhood
- 2) Youth
- 3) Young adulthood (20s/30s)
- 4) Mid-life (40s/50s)
- 5) Mature Years (60s and beyond)

What were some of the key themes or images of your life during these years—such as scholar, nurturer, activist, clown, problem solver, etc.? Or might words or phrases such as relationships, questioning, mid-life explosion, settling down, or mellowing be ones that describe the sections of your life?

Draw, doodle, or write the themes, images, or phrases on a piece of paper which you have divided into the sections of your life. Note some of the feelings you had or have about these themes in each of the sections of your life. What were some of the joys and sorrows in these sections of your life? Who were the people who were most influential in your life during these periods?

As you explore more deeply these sections of your life, you may want to chart, through the use of symbols, some of the ups and downs you have experienced.

!!!—You took a big risk.

XX—You encountered an obstacle preventing you from doing or getting what you wanted.

—A critical decision was made by someone else (or an event occurred) that impacted your life.

—You made a critical life decision.

Ask yourself questions such as:

- Do any patterns repeat themselves?
- Are there certain kinds of experiences which are more satisfying or disturbing than others?
- What are some of the successes and frustrations you have encountered?
- What are the implications for your Christian faith and life?
- Do you see signs or emerging clarity about your ministry as a baptized Christian?

### **Preparing for the Seminar**

You may want to keep all your notes from these reflection questions on the paper on which you have drawn the sections of your life, or you may find it helpful to develop a narrative based on what you have done in these sections.

As you look at the chart of the sections of your life, are there any signs that point to the work of ministry that you have been doing all along, perhaps without even knowing it? Are there any key themes or experiences that have shaped the direction of your life? How have they shaped the form of your life and ministry as a baptized Christian?

Make some notes for yourself about your expectations during this year in EFM. Expectations may include things such as learning goals as well as hopes for the kind of group experience you anticipate.

Review your notes about the sections of your life and decide what parts of your story you wish to share. Perhaps you want to choose one or two themes to trace from childhood to the present time, or you may want to talk about obstacles, life decisions, and major events in each section of your life.

If possible, share with the group your sense of ministry as you have seen it emerge in the sections of your life and as you understand it at this time.

# Constructing Your Autobiography

## Themes and Motifs

The following is a suggestion for how you might record your spiritual autobiography. A skeletal structure or outline helps when writing your autobiography because, without one, the experiences, thoughts, and themes of your life become difficult to identify and relate.

Begin this exercise by framing your life in fifteen-year segments. The first segment would begin with the time of your birth and end on your fifteenth birthday; the rest of the segments would continue in like fashion.

You now want to consider the situation of each framed period of time: the significant people, the material surroundings, the economic circumstances, the pleasures and recreations, the religious atmosphere, and the themes or motifs of the period.

Your life has been shaped by certain persons—parents, teachers, siblings, church leaders, characters in books, etc. Beginning with the first fifteen-year segment of your life, consider the people who contributed to your understanding of yourself and of God during this time. Name each person and describe as best you can his or her importance in your life. Perhaps you can recall and describe a particular event which has special significance for you.

### **Significant Persons**

When considering the significant persons of this time frame, you may recall some who did not influence you constructively. It is important that you recall these people also. Several persons will have influenced different time periods, but for now record only what that person meant to you during the first fifteen years of your life. Perhaps you can recall someone who was a special mediator of grace to you. How did this happen?

Material surroundings involve the obvious things such as houses, neighborhoods, and valuable possessions. They also include the technologies that influence and define our situations. “Economy” is basically defined as the system used to distribute resources. Record the description of your material and economic circumstances during the first fifteen years of your life. If changes in these situations occurred during this time, note them as well.

### **Material and Economic Life**

How you have fun is a very important part of your story. Each of us finds pleasure in remarkably different activities, and during our lives our pleasures and recreations are likely to change. Think back to this first period of your life to what was fun for you—what kind of entertainment you sought out and enjoyed.

### **Pleasures and Recreations**



**Religious  
Atmosphere**

In considering this aspect of your life story, it is helpful to think beyond your formal religious experience. The religious atmosphere of your life necessarily is affected by your cultural and family context. Was religion something you addressed one day of the week, never addressed? Or did you live in a religious atmosphere which permeated every event in your life? What religious beliefs were presented to you? Did you attend a church-affiliated school? Were your friends from families with like-minded religious attitudes? What was your community's notion of religion? Again, consider this aspect during the first fifteen years of your life.

**Themes and  
Motifs**

Consider your life story. Are there themes, symbols, underlying values, or motifs which name the reality of your life during certain times? There may be several. Describe the segments of your own life thematically.

Once you have finished recording your first fifteen years, move on to the subsequent fifteen-year segments of your life (sixteen to thirty, thirty-one to forty-five, etc.). Use the same categories suggested above and follow the same format. If you get stuck on a particular category or time in your life, note that and move on.

# Spiritual Autobiographies— Some Guidelines

A spiritual autobiography is your life story—the telling of your journey—told with the purpose of discerning and proclaiming how your experience has shaped your relationship with God. Each year in the program you are asked to recall your life story. Later, you are given an opportunity to share what you think is appropriate with your seminar group. A different structure is provided for your use for each of the four years of the program. These structured methods allow you to look at the whole sweep of your life. Constructing your autobiography provides a firm foundation for the continuing work of integrating the content of your year's study with the events of your life. Your experience is a primary resource for your theological education; the yearly review of your life story enables you to hear how the timbre and direction of that story has changed in the last twelve months. Your call, discernment, vocation, and ministry are imbedded in your spiritual journey. This process of telling and retelling your story helps those themes come more clearly into your consciousness.

A spiritual autobiography may contain both religious material—significant people or times within the religious community—and everyday material—people and times in your life that have influenced who you are now and how you understand God's presence or absence in your life.

The work you do on your spiritual autobiography is private, “for your eyes only.” This allows you to be free, without concern about how others will interpret either the context or expression.

Preparing a spiritual autobiography each year provides a way to deepen your understanding of both the Christian life and ministry. By virtue of your baptism you were called to ministry, guided and pushed by personal gifts, passions, skills, experiences, and interests.

Once you prepare your spiritual autobiography, you need to decide what you want to share with your seminar group. Martin Buber, a twentieth-century philosopher and Jewish theologian, is reputed to have said that he could never hold a significant conversation with another person until he had heard the other's life story. The purpose of sharing autobiographies is to build trust and understanding within the group and to begin to make connections within your own story. We need the experience of hearing other life stories to know that we are not alone in God's world. By sharing appropriate stories of our lives we form learning communities that can challenge and support us throughout our lives.

**Preparing  
for the  
Seminar**

Your mentor will relate her or his own story and help the group structure the time for sharing of autobiographies. Most groups give each member around thirty minutes to tell his or her story, followed by time for the rest of the group to respond. Spiritual autobiographies are the focus of most of the seminar time for the first few meetings of the year. This is a special time for your group. This component of your group's life will carry you to the next phase of your year together.

This may be the first time to tell your story in this way. It may seem a bit daunting at first. Remember that you should offer what you feel comfortable sharing in the group. This is not an opportunity for "group therapy" or psychologizing, so the group should not engage in raising questions about motives or probe for information beyond what you share. Feel free to say "no" or to say that you do not wish to explore questions that others may raise out of curiosity or concern.

Sharing your "spiritual autobiography" is a way to say, "Here I am," and to join your EFM group as a full participant. Over the years in EFM you will probably find that your spiritual autobiography changes. You may find yourself free to talk about things which were previously guarded. You also may find that your freedom to "be yourself" will grow as your personal story, the life of the group, and the story of God's people relate to each other.