



Recording thoughts and impressions helps students to act upon personal revelation.

Photograph by Adrienne Gardner Malan.

“I Write the Things of My Soul”: Drawing Closer to the Savior through Writing

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I count myself one of the number of those who write as they learn and learn as they write.¹ —Augustine

In the scriptures, writing is a command of the Lord. Forms of the word *write* appear nearly a thousand times in the standard works. In the beginning, Adam and Eve and their posterity were commanded to keep a written record appropriately called a “Book of Remembrance,” a book to record their experiences with God (see Moses 6:4–5). I believe the primary purpose of that written record was to help them *remember* all that the Lord had done to bless their lives and also to *remember* what God expected of them.

Forgetfulness is a condition of the mortal state. Yet learning to remember may ultimately determine our eternal reward. In fact, President Spencer W. Kimball suggested that the word *remember* may be the most important word in the dictionary.² President Kimball also said, “I suppose there would never be an apostate, there would never be a crime, if people remembered, really remembered, the things they had covenanted at the water’s edge or at the sacrament table and in the temple. . . . I guess we as humans are prone to forget.”³ President Kimball was convinced that “those who keep a book of remembrance are more likely to keep the Lord in remembrance in their daily lives.”

The Hebrew verb *zakher* (“to remember”), means to be attentive, to act; whereas its antonym, *to forget*, suggests not just innocent passing of a thought from the mind but an intentional failure to act,

akin to apostasy.⁵ To be forgetful means to be heedless, careless, and neglectful. It often reflects a conscious choice for which we will be held accountable. The quality of our memory may well determine our ultimate destiny in eternity, and that writing can serve a divine purpose in shaping that destiny. Note the following examples of how the prophets made use of writing:

Nephi emphasizes, “We labor diligently to *write*, to persuade our children, and also our brethren” (2 Nephi 25:23; emphasis added). Jacob *writes* a few of the things that he considers “most precious” (Jacob 1:2; emphasis added). Peter, knowing of his imminent death, makes provision through writing, that others will be able to have his words after he is gone so they do not forget (see 2 Peter 1:15). Alma, concerned about King Mosiah’s insistence that Alma take the responsibility to judge the people, inquired of the Lord, and after pouring out his whole soul to God, he heard the voice of the Lord. After receiving the word of the Lord, Alma “*wrote them down that he might have them*” (Mosiah 26:33; emphasis added). When we read these accounts, it becomes clear why the Lord would encourage all of us to write. “And now, O man, remember, and perish not” (Mosiah 4:30).

Another purpose of writing modeled by the scriptures is that it enables us to sort through our fears, concerns, and questions to arrive at divinely directed conclusions as to how we ought to feel and act. Jeremiah writes of his struggle with the seeming fruitlessness of his prophetic mission, but when he threatens to turn his back on the work God had given him, he simply cannot because the word of God was “as a burning fire shut up in [his] bones” (Jeremiah 20:7–9). We see this process even more clearly as Nephi struggles to write the things of his soul, including his deep feelings of anguish and discouragement following the death of his father, Lehi. Fortunately for us, he also records how, with the help of God, he lifted himself from that depressing state (see 2 Nephi 4:15–35). Reading such examples of how prophets used their journals to work through difficult times provides a marvelous model for us to follow.

Ultimately, the purpose of writing is to keep a principle, idea, or truth before our eyes and mind until we can get it written on our hearts. An associate once said, “Writing in my notes helps me to write it on my soul.” I thought of Abinadi’s statement to the priests of King Noah, “I perceive that they [the commandments of God] are not written in your hearts” (Mosiah 13:11). In contrast, the Lord promised through Jeremiah, “I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God and they shall be my people” (Jeremiah 31:33).

Emphasis on Writing by Latter-day Prophets

We should teach students that if we don't consider inspiration important enough to write down, not only will we likely forget it but also the Lord may be grieved so that the flow of inspiration diminishes. Elder Henry B. Eyring offers the following counsel:

Could I now give you two practical suggestions? First of all, the Holy Ghost is and must be very sensitive. He can be easily offended. Let me pass along a little advice the Prophet Joseph Smith gave to the leaders of the Church:

“Here is (an) important item. If you assemble from time to time, and proceed to discuss important questions, and pass decisions upon the same, and fail to note them down, by and by you will be driven to straits from which you will not be able to extricate yourselves, because you may be in a situation not to bring your faith to bear with sufficient perfection or power to obtain the desired information; or, perhaps, for neglecting to write these things when God had revealed them, not esteeming them of sufficient worth, the Spirit may withdraw, and God may be angry; and there is, or was, a vast knowledge, of infinite importance, which is now lost” (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p. 73, emphasis added).

I think that means that in your heart, at least, the attitude of writing down even the simplest things that may come from the Spirit would invite the Spirit back again.⁶

Echoing Joseph Smith, Elder Richard G. Scott suggests we keep a private journal to record the impressions that we treasure the most. “Knowledge carefully recorded is knowledge available in time of need. Spiritually sensitive information should be kept in a sacred place that communicates to the Lord how you treasure it. That practice enhances the likelihood of your receiving further light.”⁷

I am convinced that all of us have frequent spiritual promptings and whisperings. Many are not even recognized. Some may be acknowledged, and even treasured for the moment, but later forgotten. Elder Neal A. Maxwell reminded us of this all-too-human tendency: “The prompting that goes unresponded to may not be repeated. Writing down what we have been prompted with is vital. A special thought can also be lost later in the day in the rough and tumble of life. God should not, and may not, choose to repeat the prompting if we assign what was given such a low priority as to put it aside.”⁸

President Lorenzo Snow taught that it is “the grand privilege of every Latter-day Saint . . . to have the manifestations of the Spirit every day of their lives.” Those manifestations need not be dramatic. Rather,

they include the quiet whisperings of encouragement, strength, and peace that lead the man or woman of Christ “in a strait and narrow course . . . and land their immortal souls at the right hand of God” (Helaman 3:29–30). Learning to record the impressions that come will increase our likelihood of obeying those impressions, thereby opening the door to further guidance.¹⁰

Over two decades ago, while doing graduate work in how I might help students become better learners, I was impressed with the body of research suggesting that student writing increased their ability to clarify opinions and beliefs. Additionally, writing on the part of students enhanced their ability to retain the knowledge they had worked so hard to gain. I began to experiment in my classroom with a variety of methods designed to encourage students to pick up a pencil and write. The initial results were encouraging, but I learned that I could not teach convincingly what I did not do in my own life, so I began to couple my personal scripture study and devotional times with writing in my own journals. As I disciplined myself to listen more carefully to the spiritual impressions that came to me while pondering or studying, I learned that it required practice to record those impressions in my own words. Often, I felt frustration because my written account did not seem to do justice to what I was feeling or learning. But over the years, I became more and more proficient, and my ability to help students increased proportionately.

I have learned that the wise use of writing exercises can help teachers enhance the conditions of learner readiness and participation and can “be an effective way to have the Holy Spirit help students make personal application of gospel principles.”¹¹ In 1998, I received a strong prophetic confirmation of what I had been doing when Elder Richard G. Scott delivered his powerful message and clear charge to religious educators entitled “Helping Others to Be Spiritually Led.”¹² In that address, Elder Scott encouraged us to teach our students that “we often leave the most precious personal direction of the Spirit unheard because we do not record and respond to the first promptings that come to us when the Lord chooses to direct us or when impressions come in response to urgent prayer.”¹³ Throughout the talk, Elder Scott repeatedly asked religious educators to do three things for our students:

1. Help students to *recognize* when the voice of God is speaking to them.
2. Encourage them to *write* it down.
3. Encourage them to *apply* it in their lives.

Application in the Classroom

During the first few days of a class, I seek to establish an atmosphere or climate of hopeful expectation by explaining that my desire is that the course will provide many opportunities for students to receive inspiration from the Lord to guide them in their personal decisions and challenges. After briefly outlining my philosophy of writing and inviting them to experiment with it during the semester, I explain that the focus of this class (and of every class I teach) is to help all of us draw closer to the Savior. I explain to students that the seminary or institute classroom is one of the most “inspiration-friendly” settings they will be in all week. But we both have to do our respective parts. “I will give you my best preparation as the teacher, but you have a clearly defined scriptural responsibility as a learner” (see D&C 50:13–22). I also allow time to learn names so that an atmosphere of friendliness, comfort, and security can be established as soon as possible.

On the first day of a class, I give each student a simple sheet of paper entitled “*Thoughts and Impressions.*” It has a place for the student’s name and brief instructions followed by blank lines on the remaining front and back of the sheet. The instructions read:

Sometime during each class period when you feel an impression to do so (do not wait until the bell), write briefly on one or more of the following regarding our class discussion:

1. Something you most want to *remember*.
2. The one thing you feel the Lord would most want you to do as a result of this lesson.
3. A question or concern you have.
4. An insight, new idea, or prompting of your own.

At the end of class, leave this sheet with the teacher, and it will be returned to you next class period.

For the first few days of class, I may take a minute during the class (or at the end) to ask a few students to share what they have written. I do this to remind others to write and also to give them examples from their peers as to the kinds of things to write. Following each class, I spend fifteen to twenty minutes reading their comments, responding to each with a check (✓), a comment, or a detailed response. Occasion-

ally, I will paper clip a copy of a talk or article that may help answer a concern. I select one or more to read at the start of the next class, which serves as a review and reminder of the previous discussion and enables me to reinforce or clarify before moving into the next lesson. The students are always honored to have their written comments shared with the class, although if it is too personal, I *always* get their permission in advance, make a copy, and share it anonymously.

An unexpected benefit of this practice has been to help me learn the names and special needs of my students, resulting in much closer relationships with them. Occasionally, I teach a large class of fifty to a hundred students, and even though I do not succeed in matching all the names with faces, it is evident that the students perceive the teacher as one who knows them and is interested in them. The written dialogue is immensely therapeutic for some students. On occasion, multiple students will comment on an issue or express some confusion, which enables me to revisit the topic again to clarify or reinforce a truth.

Many students have moments of profound, possibly even life-changing, insight. I have asked many of them to transfer what they have written on the thought sheet to their personal journal, for I believe that on occasion they are truly writing while “moved upon by the Holy Ghost” (D&C 68:4), and for them it becomes personal scripture. One of our outstanding student leaders wrote, “I realized today that I have turned from being ‘loving’ to wanting to be ‘lovable.’ I have become selfish, as I have tried to make sure that I am happy. I must return to wanting to make others happy; that’s when I feel the best.”

Several years ago a young man wrote: “I realize the power media has in my life. What I need to do is convince myself that following all of the counsel we discussed today will bring greater satisfaction into my life than my sports channel or Allman Brothers CDs.” I believe the Holy Ghost bore witness to him of some important principles that day, but he had not yet become *convinced*. However, the fact that he not only thought about it but also expressed his question in writing may have caused deeper reflection.

A young woman contemplating marriage wrote, “This discussion of personal revelation has come at a perfect time. Last night I prayed with all my heart to know whether Todd and I should be married. I prayed to know in the same manner I know the church is true. Today it hit me. I have never questioned the truth of the Book of Mormon or the power of the Atonement. I have always just known. In the same

manner, I have always just known Todd is the man I want to be with for eternity. The Lord taught me with peace and comfort, not lightning.”

Students ask numerous and varied questions on their thought sheets. In a Preparation for Marriage class, a college freshman wrote, “I didn’t want to ask in class, but I’m not sure what the term ‘necking’ means. I think I know, but I’d just like to be sure.” Some ask for scripture references they missed, “What is the scripture that you quoted . . . the fool rages and is confident?” or request copies of quotes I used in class. After discussing the importance of honesty in relationships, a young man wrote, “Is it better to break a rule like lying, or break a heart?” (My response: “Ah yes, principles in conflict. Sometimes we break a lesser law to keep a higher law, but remember Ephesians 4:15—always speak the truth in love.”)

In a large class of over sixty students, a recently baptized young man wrote a long note on his thought sheet, of which this is just a portion: “This is the first time I have truly felt the Spirit since my confirmation. The elders that were teaching me, both were transferred, my bishop has made no contact with me. I have felt alone in my pursuits having angered my family because of my decision to convert. So without a friend in the ward, or a bishop’s guidance, I have felt Satan’s touch in my life in the past few weeks. Sorry to be so long-winded, but I was just very excited to feel the Spirit again.” After reading this poignant expression, I arranged to have this student visit in my office where we got better acquainted, and I was subsequently able to integrate him more fully in the class, frequently utilizing his point of view in our discussions.

Another benefit of the thought sheets is receiving immediate feedback on my teaching, such as, “How did you know that was exactly what I needed to hear today? You were an answer to my prayer.” Occasionally, students take exception to something I have taught, which allows me to follow up personally or possibly with the entire class. If I have given an incorrect impression to one, it is likely I have also confused others.

I continually gain insights to my students’ unique needs and challenges. A young lady with brief, sloppily written entries added this note about two months into the class: “It’s hard to write my thoughts while listening to the discussion. I’m sorry about that. I can’t focus on two things. *Writing takes more time now than before my stroke. I have aphasia from the stroke (loss of speech)*” (emphasis added). From that day on, I was able to give her extra help and encouragement. I am repeatedly humbled by the difficult circumstances with which many of our stu-

dents struggle on a day-to-day basis and am inspired by their courage and faith in Christ in the midst of those challenges.

Certain lessons will strike a powerful chord with some students, and they will write extended paragraphs too personal to share with the class as a whole. The very act of writing creates deep and lasting impressions on their hearts and minds. When I share a profound written expression with the class (with permission), many will refer to the student's thought as the most important thing they learned that day. For example, I wrote, "Elysha, I was impressed by your description of how you feel when the Lord is speaking to you. Would you mind if I shared it with the class?" Elysha was flattered to have me use her words to help the entire class, and several other students wrote on their own thought sheets about the importance of what she had shared.

Students respond well to personal challenges given in short written notes on their thought sheets. A young woman wrote something she felt she "ought to do." I simply wrote, "So now that the Spirit has impressed that idea on your mind today, what will you do about it?" In her next reply, she said, "Thanks for what you wrote. That really made me think how much I need to be reminded." She began working on the impression she had received, giving me periodic updates while I offered encouraging responses. Students often describe and resolve their own concerns in a short paragraph or two. To Allyson, I responded, "You have written a wise analysis of the problem and what to do about it. That is the Holy Ghost leading you along."

The students understand that the Holy Spirit will often give immediate personal application to them as we discuss scriptural principles. In class we had discussed Doctrine and Covenants 133:14 and the need to flee "spiritual Babylon." Meredith wrote on her thought sheet, "I must turn my back on debt, which is a result of overspending and indulgence." We had not discussed debt in class, but in my written response, I assured her that she had been inspired by the Lord. Writing her impression down increased the likelihood of remembering and following through on what she felt. I also attached a conference talk by one of the prophets I had recently read, and the talk helped reinforce her commitment.

I recently conducted a survey of student attitudes and usage of the "*Thoughts and Impressions*" sheets, which confirmed my informal feelings that the students enjoyed this classroom writing experience and were benefiting in some very important ways.¹⁴ The majority of students (86 percent) used the thought sheets during the semester. When asked to give an overall evaluation, 84 percent said it was "extremely help-

ful,” and 16 percent felt it was “somewhat helpful.” The questionnaire revealed that the three primary purposes of the thought and impression sheets explained at the beginning of the semester had been realized. Students evaluated those purposes positively as summarized below:

1. *To record spiritual promptings or impressions received during class.* Fifty-three percent responded “frequently,” 47 percent said “occasionally,” and none responded “never.” Some additional comments: “As I paid attention in class and to the Spirit, more promptings came.” “The more I write, the more the impressions come.” Another wrote, “There was too much to write! It was great!”

2. *To help remember and apply the things written during class.* Fifty-four percent responded “extremely helpful,” 46 percent said “somewhat helpful,” and none responded “not very helpful.” Some additional comments: “It has helped to look back and read what promptings I have had.” “If I don’t read them later, I forget my impressions.”

3. *To give students an opportunity to ask questions or receive clarification on principles and issues discussed.* Sixty-one percent responded with “very helpful feedback,” 20 percent said “somewhat helpful,” and 18 percent said they “did not use the sheet for this purpose.” Some additional comments: “I liked receiving a reply of substance rather than one of pretended caring.” “Thank you for taking the time to read my thoughts.” “I like the comments more than the checks!” Students also were overwhelmingly positive in response to questions regarding the sheets helping them to engage more deeply in class discussions and the course of study, feel more personally connected with the teacher, and make greater personal application of principles into their own lives.

In addition to the “*Thoughts and Impressions*” sheet, I also constantly encourage the students to keep a more detailed set of class notes in some format. The Salt Lake University Institute of Religion had printed a simple journal, which we sell to students at cost. Many students find this a convenient way to take notes for their institute classes, filling up several volumes during their years in institute. We frequently discuss the importance of keeping a journal to record favorite scriptural insights or possibly a “What would the Lord have me do?” journal. There are many variations on the examples I have shared that teachers and students can develop on their own.

While I was serving as area director of the Salt Lake Valley East Area, many seminary and institute teachers experimented with various forms of classroom writing. Arvel Hemenway used a form of journal writing with his incarcerated students at a drug rehabilitation center.

Over the years, he became increasingly converted to writing because of its powerful impact on his students. Approaching retirement, he said to me, “I think this is the best thing I have ever done in CES.”

Application in the Classroom

A teacher who has established the credibility of writing in the hearts and minds of students is in a position to encourage them to use the skills they are learning in the classroom in their personal study at home. The likelihood of this happening increases in direct proportion to whether the teacher actually has developed those disciplines, skills, attitudes, and behaviors in his or her own life. You, the teacher, must be a writer, or you will be limited in your ability to inspire your students. Rather than just telling them about a scriptural insight I found in my personal study, I occasionally read from my own journal as an illustration of the process of reading, thinking, recording, and then applying the passage or principle into my personal life. Students will see us not just as teachers but also as fellow pilgrims journeying side by side along the same path.

I explain to my students the value of *personal spiritual disciplines*—prayer and meditation, solitude, fasting, study, and writing the things of their souls. In class, they receive practical experience with hearing, feeling, and writing down the impressions that descend upon their hearts and minds when the Spirit of the Lord is present. Our work is not done, however, until we have inspired our students to recreate a climate for hearing the voice of the Lord at home. We cannot overemphasize the importance of finding times of solitude when we are not being rushed.

Recently, in class, I suggested they try an experiment next time they were driving alone in their car. We had been discussing the constant noise of the world that occupies our physical hearing nearly every waking hour. I asked how many of them listen to CDs, tapes, or the radio when they drive. All raised their hands. My suggestion was simply to turn off the radio and drive in silence for a while, reflecting on their relationship to God, and see if the Lord might have something to say to them. A few days later a young woman recorded the following on her thought sheet: “I tried doing that last week as I drove to school in the morning. I don’t know if He really had anything specific to say to me, but I did have a wonderful experience through focusing all my thoughts on Him that morning. I know that He talks to us through the scriptures, but I also now know that if we are willing to listen closely, He is always ready to whisper to us, even if it’s just a feeling of love and

comfort.”

Most teachers periodically encourage students to spend quality daily time for personal study and worship. Students who develop this discipline will use the remaining time of the day more effectively. By helping them grasp the idea that praying and meditating, reading scripture and other good literature, or listening to inspired music will open the door to personal inspiration that can be more easily understood and remembered by the use of paper and pen, we will have given our students a spiritual discipline that will enrich them throughout their lives. As we become converted to attuning our spiritual ears to hear the word of the Lord and then confidently record those impressions in sacred personal journals, we will increase the likelihood that we will act on them and subsequently receive further instruction. We will become “doers of the word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22).

To reinforce the students efforts at home, I try to provide frequent opportunities in class for students to share (verbally or in writing) some of the experiences they are having at home in scripture study and in recognizing and understanding what the Lord is trying to tell them. I also try to help them develop some kind of system for reviewing and retrieving the impressions that come to them; otherwise, they may simply forget what they have written. Just as we organize information for easier retrieval (Topical Guide, indexes, and so forth), there are ways for students to organize the spiritual impressions that come to them. This generally is done at home, but the teacher is in a great position to suggest ways that this can be accomplished.

Additional Thoughts and Testimony

Paul said to the Romans, “Thou therefore which teachest another, teachest thou not thyself?” (Romans 2:21). Encouraging students to write and helping them learn to recognize how the Holy Ghost guides them have been two of the most rewarding things I have done as a teacher. I am totally committed to this teaching approach, despite the additional time it takes. It is like having two different class sessions. Successful teachers all know the joy felt following an edifying class discussion. I am able to sit down in my office and have another period of edifying interchange with my students—this time in written form. It is a form of private tutoring with each student who chooses to participate.

Not every student will exercise sufficient effort to incorporate writing into his or her means of personal study and growth. Many feel inadequate in reducing their deepest thoughts and feelings into the written word, either because of lack of experience in expressing them-

selves in writing or because of hesitancy to share the deep feelings of their heart with others. However, for those who do, the rewards are immediate and may impact eternity. They will take with them a lifelong skill and attitude of heart that will continue to enrich their lives when they are no longer enrolled in our classes.

How can we measure the value of helping the rising generation experience hearing the voice of the Lord? As our students gain confidence in their ability to express themselves in writing of this type and use their personal journals and other writings as a means of remembering what the Lord has said to them, they will be more likely to *apply* the principles of life. Next to the habit of regular scripture study and prayer, it may be the most important spiritual discipline they will learn in their years of formal religious education. Furthermore, they will likely pass these disciplines, attitudes, and skills on to the next generation. The depth of learning that takes place in the home far surpasses that which occurs in the classroom.

Elder Henry B. Eyring said that the trying times we live in demand that we must do better.¹⁵ We are losing too many youth. If the principles outlined in this article are valid, the questions teachers must answer for themselves include the following: Will this approach make a difference in the lives of my students? Am I able to pay the price necessary to adjust my teaching style? Am I willing to take the extra time it will require to read and respond to what my students write?

Encouraging and teaching our students to write in the classroom and in their personal study at home is not the only method to reach them, but it is one that is based on a firm scriptural foundation and that can provide teachers with another tool to help students hear the voice of God and live their lives consistent with that voice. **RE**

Notes

1. Augustine, as quoted by John Calvin in *Library of Christian Classics*, ed. John Baillie, John T. McNeill, and Henry P. Van Dusen (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press 1960) 22:5.

2. Spencer W. Kimball, "Circles of Exaltation," address to religious educators, June 28, 1968, 8.

3. Spencer W. Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 112.

4. Kimball, *Teachings*, 349.

5. FARMS Update no. 67 (March 1990), based on research by Louis Midgley.

6. Henry B. Eyring, *To Draw Closer to God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 124.

7. Richard G. Scott, "Acquiring Spiritual Knowledge," *Ensign*, November

1993, 86.

8. Neal A. Maxwell, *The Neal A. Maxwell Quote Book*, ed. Cory H. Maxwell (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 171.

9. Lorenzo Snow, in Conference Report, April 1899, 52.

10. See Elder Richard G. Scott's personal example of this process while on an assignment in Mexico, in "Helping Others to Be Spiritually Led," CES Symposium, August 11, 1998, 10–11.

11. *Teaching the Gospel: A Handbook for CES Teachers and Leaders* (Salt Lake City: Church Educational System, 1994), 41.

12. Scott, "Helping Others to Be Spiritually Led," 10–11.

13. Scott, "Helping Others to Be Spiritually Led," 11.

14. Survey by author of eighty students attending New Testament and Preparation for Marriage Classes, spring semester, 2004, Salt Lake University Institute of Religion. This figure represents all students who finished the three classes I taught that semester.

15. Henry B. Eyring, "We Must Raise Our Sights," CES Conference, August 14, 2001.