

A PERSONAL REFLECTION PAPER GUIDED BY *THE SACRED ROMANCE*  
*WORKBOOK AND JOURNAL: YOUR PERSONAL GUIDE FOR DRAWING*  
*CLOSER TO THE HEART OF GOD*

As the student read the companion workbook for *The Sacred Romance*, and worked through the questions and exercises presented, she was reminded of reading Teresa De Avila's work, *The Interior Castle*. A relationship with God has a depth that cannot be penetrated quickly or easily. It is a journey, a tour through reality and life. If God's Word is the genetic code of spiritual life, then one's participation in the affairs of living generate one's expression of the Word as an incarnational reality, to the extent that one is in a sanctified relationship led by the Holy Spirit. The concurrence between one's internal life and one's external expression of one's internal life is an indicator of integrity. Peace in life is intrinsically linked to integrity before God and in relationship with others.

Life can be brutal. Hurts are enveloped, suppressed, and buried outside of conscious awareness. Relationships are broken, and wounded memories exert their defensive boundaries in situations that are far removed from the present, but similar enough in content to raise spiritual alarm. Over time, the connection between heart and mind is weakened as the heart is calloused and sublimated beneath learned strategies and patterns of reactivity that distance persons from their pain and provide a measure of safety. The romance of the soul with Creator God is lost as if buried by a mudslide on a downhill slope from birth to death.

The workbook prodded and gently exposed some of the painful events of the student's life that she had long buried. "The Message of the Arrows" helped the student to recognize the

hurts, and the reactions to those hurts, that had become part of the student's life. Even more significant was learning to identify the "vows" that she consequently adopted as a way to avoid future pain. In a sense, vows become idols blocking the creative leading of the Spirit. They trap and hold the vow-maker "in a covenant with the evil one" (44).

The student identified several childhood vows that she needed to address. 1) She had made a vow not to discuss personal feelings, because one is not supposed to have such feelings to begin with, and other persons cannot be trusted with one's heart. If a parent tells a child, "You shouldn't feel that way," then the child must deny his or her feelings to respect the guidance of the parent. Over time, the authentic feelings that are unique to a person may be so denied that the heart is not awake to their presence any longer. It is dulled. The student was aware that she had buried many feelings. 2) The student had also made a vow to herself that she would always have to work longer and harder than males to have any measure of success in life. The effect of this vow was to pit her in competition with others on the basis of gender and the creation of a self-identity that women were created to be lesser beings than men. 3) She had made a vow to only play games in which she excelled, and to play them fiercely and seriously, because of an arrow in her youth defining her as a person who "never wins, but always comes in second" and of little value unless she was first at whatever she attempted.

Revisiting these memories was difficult. Recognizing them as having the impact they do on the student's current life was enlightening and freeing. Some of the scriptural truths the student found that reject the messages emerging from the vows she had made are, first, in relation to the suppression of emotions: "All of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind" (1 Pet 3:8); second, opposing the idea that women are inferior to men: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no

longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ” (Gal 3:28); and, third, to counter the idea that she was of little worth: “The precious children of Zion, worth their weight in fine gold—how they are reckoned as earthen pots, the work of a potter's hands” (Lam 4:2). This exercise may remind one of “cognitive therapy,” a way of reprogramming one’s thoughts to overcome the toxic patterns that make life less than it can be for a person bound by those patterns.

In chapter 4, “A Story Big Enough to Live In,” the author writes, “Without a larger story, we end up trapped in the present, looking for a sense of being alive now, for now is all we have” (61). The student was captivated by this thought. Often she had heard, “live in the present,” and “yesterday is gone, tomorrow is not here yet, and the present is all a person has.” That one could be trapped in the present was an amazing idea. However, if Christ is humanity’s *telos*, and persons are determined not by their pasts, but by their futures, then being trapped in the present would be equivalent to being ruled by the “vows” and untruths ruling one’s life in the present, to the exclusion of a promised future made possible by following Christ. That it is okay to “daydream,” to ponder the promises of God, to linger in hope, to be called an idealist or dreamer was suddenly permissible—even desirable!

When the author poses the question, “Have you ever thought of Christianity as a great and true fairy tale,” the reader was at first shocked at what appeared to be a trivialization of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That the “faith once handed to the saints” could be perceived as a fairy tale seemed to support a disassociation between the reality of the demands of authentic Christian living, and a romanticized version that one might close as one does a novel before turning off the light, and returning to the “real world” before going to bed. The author presses: “Why not?” Why could one not read Christianity as romantic fairy tale, as *Snow White*

and *The Wizard of Oz* and *Hansel and Gretel* all rolled into one? Perhaps Christians take themselves too seriously. Perhaps by allowing one's life to be envisioned as a story, a more objective view can be had by the person who is living it—a view that provides for multiple possibilities, drama, excitement, etc. This is reminiscent of Shakespeare's lines, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players; they have their exits and their entrances, and one man in his time plays many parts" (*As You Like It*, Act 2, scene 7). It is when a person is able to see his or her life as part of the larger story of the redemption of the world through the Gospel of Christ, that the various paths and events in one's life become imbued with meaning. Because the Gospel has direction and purpose, so then does one's life, and the occurrences of life encountered as the chapters of a story are not ends in themselves. The story continues and will have an ending in unity with the purposes of God. Knowing with assurance the ending allows one to remain centered in Christ and in balance while enjoying the story!

Chapter 7, "The Beloved" touched the student's heart. It reminded her of the time of her conversion, when she first felt known and loved as an individual person, by God. It brought back waves of emotion attached to that night that she calls her altar before God. It was a moment of pure encounter with nothing in the way; no, with many things in the way, but having become transparent and of no significance before the fiery love of God. Perhaps this is the moment the author is describing when he writes, "Identity is not something that falls on us out of the sky; identity is bestowed. So the question is, by whom?" The answer is that one's truest identity is found in God's love as the recipient, the focus, the object of God's love. One cannot become the one whom one is created to be until one's heart is open and known by God. To know that one is known is the source of one's identity, comfort, and life. This is what gives purpose and direction to the story. One is not alone, but connected to God and God's purposes, despite failures or

disobedience or anything one does; nothing can remove the truth that one is known by God.

Therefore, one is free to explore life, to learn, to admit failure, to support others without fear of losing self. One's life is safely held in God, and in God's great redemptive "story."

The chapter, "Desert Communion," provided new insights about the value of solitude and withdrawal. Dallas Willard's quoted observation, that such times are not about "weakness, suffering, flight, or failure, but about great strength, joy, and effectiveness," invites the reader to reevaluate desert times in his or her life (169-70), considering them as a gift, not as punishment or as the result of disobedience. That God would lead a person into the desert for the purpose of a "perfecting experience" is counter-intuitive. Instead, Christians embrace mountain-top moments, or feelings of ecstasy, as assurances that they are close to God. "Desert Communion" assures the reader that the views in the valley are just as meaningful as the views from the mountaintop. Desert times are similar to fasting, with similar benefits. Apart from materialism and harried life, one is better able to experience God in the silence of one's heart.

The reader will not want to move through *The Sacred Romance Workbook* as if it were a novel or textbook. Instead, it is to be savored, with ample time for reflection and journaling. Because reading it was a school assignment among many others required, the student regretted not being able to linger over the pages, feasting on the insights and committing them to heart and memory. For this reason, *The Sacred Romance Workbook* will be one that remains out on her desk and not relegated to the bookshelf, until it receives the time and attention it deserves. This is the first "guided journal" the student has encountered; it will make a wonderful devotional, particularly since it allows reflection and spiritual work to be done individually, and not as part of a group.