

How to “Journal” Your Mission Trip

I’ve spent weeks (*perhaps months*) preparing my heart and mind for this trip; I’ve packed everything I need (*as well as everything four or five others might need – you know, “just in case”*); and I’ve got my ticket and passport in hand. I’m on the plane and within hours I’ll be arriving at my final destination – Russia. It’s taken me 16 to 23 hours to get here (*and I’ve lost almost a whole day in the process*) and several things have already happened that I don’t want to forget. I’ve arrived, gotten through customs (*what friendly people these Russians are!!*), gotten on the bus, gotten my money exchanged, gotten to eat my first meal in Russia, and, finally, gotten out of the bathtub (*if you happen to have one luscious American body that will fit into it*) and into my jammies and am ready for bed. Oh, yeah, I need to take a few minutes to read my Bible (“*Thank You, Lord, for allowing us to arrive safely.*”) and write about my day. I begin to write about the people (*what Joe Bob from Plano said to Suzy from West Monroe*), the sights, the sounds, my reflections on sights, sounds, **EVERYTHING!** 45 minutes have passed. Now, I’m ready for bed – for a good night’s sleep so I can face my first full day in Russia.

Do you get the idea that there’s just too much to write about – too many things to remember – too many thoughts that can’t be left behind? Well, you’re not alone, and by the time that first full day is over and you’ve spent 30-45 minutes “journaling” at the end of the day, you know that there’s no way you’ll be able to keep this up every night – there’s just no way that you’ll have the time or energy to write it ALL down. Well, of course you won’t – no one could meet those expectations, and that’s the spot I found myself in on my first trip to Russia (April04). Everyone had said, “Don’t forget to write things down, you know we at the church will want to hear all about your ministry.” How was I ever going to do the job required of me while on site, plus be able to write it all down so that I could remember it for those back home?

It wasn’t until about the fourth day of that first trip to St. Petersburg that I really got the hang of this “journaling” thing. I realized that it was kind of like Psych 101 in college – you can’t write down **EVERYTHING** the professor says – your hand will wither and fall off; instead, write the basics, do an outline, write what I call “memory joggers.” So, here’s what I do:

1. **Take a journal book** – mine is green with vines on it with “I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser” written on it, and I only use it for mission trips (*there are now three different trips outlined in this one – two to Russia and one to New Orleans*).
2. At the end of the day, after I’ve read my Bible and prepared my heart for bed, I **take 10 minutes to write down the words or phrases that will recall events of the day** (*10 minutes is the maximum – I’ve gotten to where I can do it in about 5*). I begin my reminiscence with the beginning of the day and chronicle it all from start to finish. For example:

Sat., 4/17.

2:15 p – arrived; no luggage; John, Sergi, Valery; bus; exchange money; hotel

6p – dinner; Masha, Tonya, Sergi with us

10p – Valery @ airport - Vladimir - Maxim’s church; customs; bags.

1a – bed, finally, day over!

What memory does this recall later? Well, on the Saturday that we arrived in St. Petersburg, several of us had our bags held by customs and we had to go back out to the airport that night at 10:00 p.m. to retrieve them – we left the hotel and arrived out at the airport at about 11:00. Valery, our translator at dinner, went with us, and he and I spent the hour ride to the

airport (*as well as back to his house afterward*) getting to know each other. When we arrived at the airport, Valery turned to John and said, “John, I see someone I know working security, let me go talk to him about the problem with the bags.” We found out later that the man that Valery knew was Vladimir, a member of Maxim Baranov’s church (*the church we were to attend on Sunday*), and Vladimir helped us get the fee lowered, saw us back onto the van, and wished us a hearty farewell and good luck for our week.

Was this a God thing? You betcha! Was it a wonderful memory? You betcha! Did I write out every word like I just typed it for you here? NO WAY! I don’t do writer’s cramp, especially when I have just spent the day in Russia – the people, the names, the EVERYTHING! So, I write it in short, descriptive words, because if I’ve got the names, the date, and one or two key words to help jog that memory, I’ve got a journal entry that will get me home to that time when I can sit down at the computer and begin to write it all out in detail (*with wonderful editing features to boot!*). So, write it ALL down, just do it in your form of shorthand.

We were told at a workshop one year (*I’m a school teacher and these things I generally find to be useless*) a wonderful scientific fact: our brain has memory features already built in, we just have to know how to recall them from that memory bank, and there are two key things to remember:

(1) **Blue is the memory color** – write in blue ink – oh, and write big, especially for those of us who have seen the half-century mark;

(2) Memories are recalled from **words or phrases that trigger the full memory** to be replayed (like a video) in our mind.

Grab a journal (*mine also has rings on the side so that it lays open easily – I hate those books that are seam-bound down the side – probably because I’m left-handed and can’t get my hand into the book enough to write along the left margin*) and write. Then, when you get home, take that journal, sit down at the computer, and write **EVERYTHING!!** All your thoughts, all your experiences – every single person, place, and thing will come flowing out when you sit down at that keyboard. You’ll have a blast remembering it all – I also shed a few tears. Then, share it with someone – if you share it with someone who went on the trip with you, they might add some extras you might have failed to recall. The key is to share it – use it to do an outline for your presentation at church – your church family wants to hear all about it – and through your experiences, you will entreat the heart of someone else to GO, TELL!!

Oh, one other valuable lesson I learned was at Hospital 15 in October, 2004 – as I went around the room taking pictures of all the kids working on their projects, I drew a grid of the tables in the room, went around, asked each one’s name, and then wrote the names on the grid. This was invaluable later on – you might want to try it at Orphanage 14 on your group picture, because even though you think to yourself, “I will never forget these kids,” time passes and you do, but if you started out prepared, and wrote the names down, then even years later you’ve got the information you need.

Hopefully these hints will come in handy when John asks you to write an article for the newsletter some time in the future – and the time will come, and he will ask, so be prepared!

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