

The bright details of a life with a spiritual side

Diane Scharper | May. 12, 2010

THE JOURNAL KEEPER: A MEMOIR

By Phyllis Theroux

Published by Atlantic Monthly Press, \$24

When *The Journal Keeper* begins, Phyllis Theroux is 61; her 82-year-old mother, who lives with her, is nearly blind and preparing for her death. Her preparations are not as morbid as one might expect. She's frank. She's unabashedly spiritual. Sometimes, she's profound: "You may not believe this," she says, "but after I'm gone I'll be even closer to you than I am now. All the barriers will be dissolved."

Theroux says that she painted her mother's life in this book's margins. But her mother is such a captivating personality that thankfully she can't be contained by margins. Her insights, wit and openness are expansive, like poetry.

The same could be said of Theroux's latest volume, which, despite its subtitle, is less a memoir than it is a daybook. It contains nuggets -- mostly gold nuggets -- of philosophy, theology and psychology. Theroux shares her own hard-won life lessons, remnants of conversation, as well as insights gleaned from other writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Czeslaw Milosz and Rollo May.

Arranged chronologically from 2000 to 2006, the book loosely covers Theroux's daily life. A divorced, best-selling writer, she lives in an upper-middle-class Virginia neighborhood surrounded by friendly neighbors. Her three children are grown. Her writing career is on solid ground; her finances are on less solid ground.

Although the text does not have a story line, it does have several unifying motifs. These include Theroux's need for others, primarily her mother, and after her mother dies, for a life's companion; her sense of self, especially in relation to the spiritual; and the writing life, as both a business and a creative process.



Theroux acknowledges her faith in a higher power, which, she says,

guides her "pen across the page." She prays. She attends Mass; she's moved to tears by a sermon. She muses on the Gospel in which Jesus chides his disciples who do not recognize him as one and the same with the Father. That she manages to insert these religious beliefs into a secular book about the routines of a writer's daily life

during an age when it's impolite to mention religion (except to bash the Roman Catholic church) isn't just satisfying. It's exhilarating.

But Theroux's willingness to reveal her spiritual side is only part of the pleasure of the book. The rest lies in her openness to discuss the problems she faces: from her mother's final years, to her own difficult dealings with aging, to the creative process that doesn't always proceed according to the creator's wishes, and finally to her decision to remarry.

Theroux suffers the dry spells and self-doubts that plague most writers. This seems surprising given her status as the author of seven books -- to say nothing of her frequent columns for *The New York Times*. She frankly discusses her money worries as well as her concerns about her upcoming book, *Giovanni's Light*. Is this even a book? she asks herself. If so, is it children's book? Or is it an adult book with children in it?

She admits that she's afraid of her book dying and is palpably upset when a friend criticizes her work. Sometimes she works on her book but isn't able to move forward because she can't stop fiddling with it. Other times, she reads her efforts with fresh eyes, "only to discover it wasn't what I thought it was." It took away the small platform of self-worth I had been standing on.

Although Theroux first began keeping a journal in the 1960s when her failed marriage left her with three small children to raise and a writing career to launch, this book makes only a passing reference to those difficult days. It says little about her grown children. It also reveals little about Theroux's personal relationship with the man she will marry at book's end. Theroux says she's censored these pages -- writing that some things are too intimate to be included.

This book is not Anaïs Nin's diary revisited. It is reminiscent of journals by Anne Morrow Lindbergh and Anne Truitt -- authors whose influence Theroux acknowledges. Readers looking for a tell-all memoir or a salacious between-the-sheets exposé won't find it here. But those wanting insights, witticisms, captivating metaphors, engaging anecdotes -- expressed honestly and with bright details -- will find all of this and more.

[Diane Scharper is coeditor, with her son, Philip Scharper Jr., of *Reading Lips*. She teaches English at Towson University in Maryland.]

Source URL (retrieved on 05/25/2017 - 00:17): <https://www.ncronline.org/books/2012/09/bright-details-life-spiritual-side>