Between the Words:
Reading and Writing the Unknown

The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning

Volume 6 • Winter 2000-2001
The Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning

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The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning

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The *Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning, JAEPL*, meets this need. It provides a forum to encourage research, theory, and classroom practices involving expanded concepts of language. It contributes to a sense of community in which scholars and educators from pre-school through the university exchange points of view and cutting-edge approaches to teaching and learning. *JAEPL* is especially interested in helping those teachers who experiment with new strategies for learning to share their practices and confirm their validity through publication in professional journals.

Topics of interest include but are not limited to: intuition, inspiration, insight, imagery, meditation, silence, archetypes, emotion, attitudes, values, spirituality, motivation, body wisdom and felt sense, and healing. Articles may be practical, research-oriented, theoretical, bibliographic, professional, and/or exploratory/personal.

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Send submissions, address changes, and single copy requests to Linda T. Calendrillo, Co-Editor, *JAEPL*, Department of English, 1 Big Red Way, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY 42104. e-mail: linda.calendrillo@wku.edu

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Editors’ Message

A defining characteristic of Rembrandt van Rijn’s work, one that contributed to his eventual fall from popularity in the mid 1600s, was his masterly use of chiaroscuro. Referring to the play of light and shadow, chiaroscuro, an Italian term derived from chiaro, meaning light, and oscuro, meaning dark, was first used by Renaissance artists to make figures appear three-dimensional. Rembrandt seized on chiaroscuro, using it to create a penumbra, a shadowy pictorial space that appeared as a boundless, living medium, constantly fluctuating, emphasizing voids as well as solids (Slive). Out of his genius, Rembrandt created atmospheres that half conceal, half disclose the tangible and the intangible, offering a glimpse of the region where the soul may be caught (Wallace).

Rembrandt’s paintings place the “truth” of artistic vision not in the light and not in the shadow but between the play of light and shadow. The essays in this volume similarly position “truth”—constantly fluctuating, constantly emphasizing voids as well as solids—between the play of light and shadow, or, in the case of writing and reading, between the words, in the shadow of the words. In the gaps, in the silences between words lies the mystery of the unknown, the unknowable, what many essays in this volume call the “ineffable,” the region where the soul may be caught. Each essay in various ways points us to the necessity of dwelling within the shadow between the words, for it is only here that we discover different ways of knowing and being. “[S]torytellers,” historian of science Morris Berman tells us, “make [the] assumption [that] human beings are not rational, that they cannot be understood in terms of ‘objective’ analysis, and that their deepest and most significant experiences are lived on a level that is largely invisible, a shadowy region where the mind and body move in and out of each other in an infinite number of elusive combinations, and that can only be evoked through allusion, feeling, tone, rhetoric, and ‘resonance’” (118-19). Such a “shadowy region” is the realm that this edition inhabits.

We open with “New Locations for Discursive Agency: The Story of Anandamai Ma” by Mary Ann Cain. Cain uses graphological chiaroscuro to position us between the real and the unreal, enabling us to relocate our understanding of agency. Cain offers three layered “perspectives”—academic, personal narrative, semi-fictional—reflected in the three different typefaces of the article to highlight that different ways of knowing and different kinds of agentive action come between the words. Mark Smith, in “The Widening Gyre: Images as Central to the Global Village” moves us from the heat and mystery of India to the image-driven realm of our technological culture. He sites us between the word and image, arguing that the rising currency of the image resurrects a literacy reminiscent of pre-Socratic classicism, one that requires of us different ways of thinking of ourselves as members of a global village.

Lynn Briggs, Fred Schunter, and Ray Melvin shift the play of light and shadow to the Writing Center in their essay “In the Name of the Spirit.” Plunging us into the dynamics of Respondent and writer, the authors name the “epiphanies” writers experience there as “spiritual,” moments when writers (and Respondents) are able to make meanings of lives, as well as of texts. New ways of knowing are
also the focus of Gwen Gorzelsky’s “Writing Awareness,” but Gorzelsky approaches enlightenment from the perspective of embodied, metaphoric ethnography, an approach to self and other-awareness that embraces a corporeal as well as an intellectual figuration of knowing.

In “A Medical Humanities Course” Kathleen Welch positions us within a classroom designed for medical students who are too frequently pulled into the “impersonality” of medical discourse. Welch shows us how siting medical students between the words of their medical community and the words of narratives and poems related to the practice of medicine offers these students a space to “pause” and validate the emotional dimensions of their clinical experiences.

Phyllis Whitin, in “Inventing Metaphors to Understand the Genre of Poetry” turns our attention to the elementary school classroom and the power of the “in-betweeness” that constitutes metaphor, a linguistic trope that shuttles us between image and word, opening up rather than resolving meaning. Whitin immerses us in her young students’ enthusiastic efforts to conceptualize the nature of poetry by using the stuff of poetry—metaphor. Finally, in his figuration of Memory, or Mnemosyne, the mythical Titan who is the mother of the nine muses, William Johnson invites us into “Remembering Things We’ve Never Done: Memory’s Daughters and the Literary Experience.” Memory and literature, either through writing or reading, cast us into what Johnson calls a liminal space, a space between reality and unreality, one that offers to us the hope of psychic integration and wholeness.

Rembrandt, that master of the human character who sought to evoke soul within the shadows on his canvas, knew well that life and reality exist within and through chiaroscuro. “Between the idea/And the reality/Between the motion/And the act/Falls the Shadow,” T. S. Eliot reminds us, and it is here that human beings understand themselves and each other. These essays seek to create their own chiaroscuro and place us between the words where we might also read and write the unknown.

Works Cited


New Locations for Discursive Agency: The Story of Anandamai Ma

Mary Ann Cain

An Indian woman known as Anandamai Ma roamed the villages, towns, and cities of north India for most of the 20th century and was considered by her many followers to be an *avatar*: a divine incarnation in human form. Thousands were attracted to her not simply for her miracles, wisdom, or intellectual brilliance, but because of the sheer power of her presence, what is known in the Hindu tradition as *darshan*. Kamala Nehru, wife of the first Indian prime minister, and her daughter, Indira Gandhi, were among the more visible devotees. Although most of her followers came from her home state of Bengal, many westerners from around the world also found their way to her side. Her devotees continue to maintain ashrams in the United States, Australia, France, and elsewhere even after her death in 1982. One devotee included the son of a wealthy corporate magnate from Oklahoma whose transcriptions and translations of Anandamai Ma’s teachings, as well as other books, videos, and documents about her, are archived in Harvard University’s Andover Library. For a woman who was largely uneducated, owned few personal possessions, spoke only Indian languages, had no home, no children, and, for most of her life, no husband, this kind of widespread reverence is remarkable. Compared to other Indian contemporaries such as Vivekananda and Paramhansa Yogananda, who made it their mission to link eastern and western spiritual traditions, Anandamai Ma made this link without any ambitions or explicit mission in mind, thus making her influence upon western consciousness all the more remarkable.

Various accounts of her life written by devotees, both Indian and Western, illustrate the paradoxical relationship between her human form and her divine Self, re-presenting her individual agency in a way that significantly complicates Western understandings of that concept. Such a complication is particularly significant within the context of postmodernism and the seeming paralysis of agency it has projected into many areas of scholarship, including literacy studies. While postmodern scholarship has undertaken rigorous critiques of the systems of power by which subjects of literacy, namely those who don’t possess it, are shaped and excluded, the question of how to stop reproducing the historically violent and oppressive effects of those exclusions continues.

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This paper aims to relocate our relationship to modes of knowledge that fall outside of Western rationalism and conceptual thought and thus relocate our understanding of agency, while simultaneously working against the discourses that constrain such re-locations. Anandamai Ma represents a different mode of knowledge, one that both embodies and yet challenges distinctions between the real and imaginary through her paradoxical agency as both a human and divine subject. Thus, her story is useful in not only locating spaces in between western and eastern discourses of agency, but also in creating new discourses through which we may finally listen to what is otherwise cast as imaginary or “unreal” within the hierarchies of our current conceptual mappings.

I have written this paper in the form of a metadiscursive performance of the perceived reciprocity between these different modes of knowledge, modes that, within the framework of western rationalism, are often cast within a gendered hierarchy of “real” and “mythical” or “imaginary.” Feminist geographer Gillian Rose has characterized this distinction between real and non-real space in geography as “a performance of power, and of masculinist power in particular”(58). Like Rose’s work, my paper will perform a feminist deconstruction of that distinction by disturbing the “monotone” of the academic voice, “that monotone that’s also a monologue” (Rose 61). The paper appears as three distinct discourses, as represented by three different type fonts. Because of the two-dimensional limits of printed text, these discourses appear as linear rather than in the three-dimensional space of layered text. The reader thus must imagine each discourse appearing simultaneously in a shared spatial relationship to the others rather than situated only linearly on the page.

The first discourse is written in the genre of a personal reflective essay in which I consider my relationship to my research “subject,” Anandamai Ma, and the discursive space I claim as the narrator and interpreter of her story. The second discourse is written in the genre of scholarly discourse, discussing the apparent contradictions that function paradoxically within the stories of Anandamai Ma’s life, in particular accounts of her physical body, and analyzes them through Luce Irigaray’s framework of the imaginary. The third and final discourse is written as a third-person account of a Western traveler to Varanasi, India, one of the many sites of ashrams and temples throughout India dedicated to Anandamai Ma. Each of the sections in this second discourse is written in the form of a microfiction, a form that concentrates on a particular shift or turn in the perception of a subject.

By layering these discourses and shifting between genres and voices, I wish to enact a dialogue between the “real” and “unreal” discourses which embody different modes of knowing, borrowing from Rose’s discussion of Irigaray’s use of the imaginary. According to Rose,

Irigaray resists what she sees as the closure of the conceptual by insisting upon the dialogic nature of her texts—her diverse modes of engagement with her reader—so her work itself is imaginary, explicitly relational [. . .]. [Thus] Irigaray uses the term ‘imaginary’ to refuse the distinction between concept and practice. (65)
In its refusal to adhere to a monologue, in its shifting genres and layered form, the body of this text, just like the body of Anandamai Ma, contains spaces from which to listen “otherwise,” spaces necessary for the development of discourses that do not reproduce violence and oppression in relation to their subjects.

Who are You? How about You?

“Who are you? is probably the most relevant question to ask of a text [ . . . ]. The answer would be: How about you?” Can we find common ground? talk? love? create something together? What is there around us and between us that allows this?” (Irigaray qtd. in Rose 61)

For six sweltering weeks in the summer of 1994, I research the life of Anandamai Ma in Varanasi, India. Varanasi is a Hindu holy city, much in the way that Jerusalem functions for Jews and Christians. It is a pilgrimage site of major significance, unlike any other place in India. According to its residents, it is the oldest, continuously inhabited city in the world. It is also in the second poorest state in the country, and so the pilgrimage trade is a significant part of the local economy, as it has been for centuries. Few outsiders come with any other interests in mind, and the merchants, vendors, and other touts roaming the bathing ghats along the sacred Ganges River are well aware of this.

Most of the Westerners who come are tourists or scholars. I place myself in the latter category, since I am here on a grant. Scholar, not tourist, although personal pleasures such as a boat ride on the Ganges or shopping the bazaar for gifts, or wandering the crowded, winding streets are part of this first trip to India. But definitely not a pilgrim.

Yet when I begin to inquire about Anandamai Ma, two assumptions shape the attitudes of my informants: either I am a devotee of Ma or a political advocate hoping to expose the corruption and exploitation of ashrams (such as the one built here in Ma’s name). Neither of these assumptions include my own. Instead, I tell myself that I want to locate Anandamai Ma within that in-between place between the “real” and “unreal,” between her divinity as simply a metaphor to something closer to, but not necessarily the same as, the “reality” behind that metaphor.

I quickly discover that my research doesn’t make much sense to anyone who can help me because I don’t make sense. Who are you? they ask. Everyone wants to know, from the stone carver I sit with every morning at the bathing ghat, to professors at Banaras Hindu University, hotel clerks, tea sellers, and college students on break. I’m a woman, but where’s my husband, and don’t I have any children? I’m an English professor who teaches writing, but I want to write about a Hindu saint? I’m a feminist, but I am respectful towards ashrams? That question, Who are you?, becomes harder and harder to answer until at last I begin to think I don’t really know myself who, in this context, I am or even am supposed to be.
Representing the Unrepresentable: Relocating Paradox

Irigaray has written that the key to demolishing the binary contradictions that structure our systems of knowledge is to seek other, impossible truths outside of those contradictions; what cannot be represented, what is silent, what cannot be known directly through the conceptual. Her own writing enacts a performance of resistance to the conceptual as well as a challenge to the genres that support it. The paradox she presents us is how to represent the unrepresentable—in this case, the knowledge that exists beyond the conceptual, in the dialogic space between what is “real” and “unreal” within current conceptual frameworks.

Within the context of the paradoxical, power is not simply an effect of competing conceptual systems in a struggle for dominance, as postmodern theory tends to claim. Instead, power is the result of a dialogue between modes of knowledge, which find their representation in socio-symbolic forms such as paradox. Born into the Hindu tradition, Anandamai Ma herself is an embodiment of paradoxical agency. Stories surrounding Anandamai Ma’s life illustrate the paradoxical nature of her agency and as a result, shift the ground of the postmodern crisis from one of endless contradiction and negation to one of apparent contradictions which are ultimately dialogically connected through forms of paradox.

The space for re-forming agency, then, begins within conceptual contradictions between “real” and “unreal” modes of knowledge. Within a dialogical framework, the apparent contradictions between these forms of knowledge generate spaces in which a dialogical relationship might find form. Such spaces are what Irigaray calls the imaginary. Rose explains this term as “a series of refusals of dichotomies [. . .] between the social and the symbolic, or the real and the imagined, or the real and the textual, or between the bodily and the cultural, or between agency and structure” (Rose 66). The spaces between conceptual representation thus complicate the concepts that have generated the contradiction.

Renunciation

In Varanasi, India, the summer heat is so intense that she cannot lift herself from the floor where she has been sprawled, washcloth across her forehead, for hours. The flat she is renting has windows, but the air outside is even more stifling than within, so the windows remain closed during the day. Overhead fans bring no relief because the daily power outage, lasting up to eight hours a day, is in effect. Instead, the fans hang motionless overhead like dead dragonflies, stiff and unmoving.

Every day the landlord stops by to reassure her that the air conditioner is on its way. “Tomorrow,” he says, and with each tomorrow, the heat lays her flat on her back on the floor, eking out whatever coolness the stone surface will relinquish. Every evening he comes by and says the same thing, and every evening, weak and tired from the heat, diarrhea, dehydration, and most of all, frustration, she believes him. She has no strength to move out and live somewhere else. She has no strength to move at all.

Every day, the large, airy house that he has built as his family’s future dwelling seems more and more like a prison to her. A prisoner of the heat, she
finds herself subject to the whims of this warden-landlord upon whom she depends for her freedom. A prisoner of her body, unable to drink even a sip of tap water without risking illness, disease, and death, she is a product of modern "progress." Yet she cannot raise herself from the floor to get what she needs: cool air, pure water, power that works 24 hours a day.

This body is not hers. It belongs to its creators. She is sickened by its dependence upon what she cannot control.

Writing the Other

Bernhard Waldenfels writes that our efforts to represent the Other “should be understood not as something at which our saying and doing aims, but as something from which it starts” (43). In other words, we begin with what we don’t know, what is not clear, and what is not part of our conceptual knowledge. We begin from a space of unknowing.

Like Elizabeth Hallstrom, the author of an unpublished dissertation about Anandamayi Ma, I, too, first encountered Ma quite by accident, without knowing who she was or how she had lived. Hallstrom writes,

One crisp fall morning in October 1987, while studying in the Andover Library at Harvard Divinity School, I went to look for something in a small room used to catalogue rare books. On a table in the middle of the room I saw [an] enormous stack of books, photos, tapes and films. On the front of one of the books I saw an extraordinary picture, a picture of a hauntingly beautiful woman. I was drawn to open the book, only to discover that this woman was the famous Hindu saint, Anandamayi Ma, whom I had heard about on my trip to India in 1978. (2)

My encounters with Anandamai Ma began with a similar chance encounter. I first happened upon a photo of her, a striking young woman, about 1984. Without any knowledge of who she was or her significance to others, I became intrigued by her portrayal in the classic Autobiography of a Yogi by Paramahansa Yogananda. Yogananda was a contemporary of Ma and a fellow Bengali who, like Ma, is also considered an avatar by his devotees. Ma is only one of two or three women “saints” he chronicles in his travels throughout India. As I found out in later readings, Ma is part of a long tradition of Hindu women regarded as living deities, but it is a tradition shrouded in much mystery and certainly not, until the last 20 or so years, one familiar to most Westerners.

It is her face, full of smiling mischief, her hands posed demurely on the shoulder of Yogananda, and the joyful play reflected in his face, that I remember, for no apparent reason, years later when I return to studies of yoga and meditation. Then, I realize why I remember her: women are missing in lineages of male yogis, and, thus, seem to be excluded from yoga’s history. Her face haunts me even as I cling that much harder to my skepticism towards the existence of modern-day deities.
Anandamai Ma and “This Body”

For all 87 years of her life, Anandamai Ma called herself “an unlettered little girl” and signed her name with a “mere dot, maintaining that ‘in it contained everything’” (Hallstrom 2). More typically she referred to herself as “this body” and little else.

Only marginally educated, Anandamai Ma seldom wrote. The task was left to her devotees to represent her life and words in writing. None of them has ever written or spoken about any occasion in which she refers to herself in the first person or identifies her body as “hers.” Instead, her consistent use of the third person symbolizes her refusal to identify herself with her body.

Several interpretive frameworks address this refusal. One framework places Anandamai Ma within ancient Hindu traditions surrounding sannyas, the rites of renunciation through which an individual relinquishes his or her personal self in order to merge with the greater Self of the Creator. Another framework places Ma’s refusal to identify with her body within the cultural production of gender in Indian society, in particular the rural Bengal village life into which Ma was born. Women of that time and place, notes Elizabeth Hallstrom, “[learn] about this ideal of the selfless, obedient wife who worships her husband as her god and happily bears him sons [. . .] from listening to classical [Hindu] stories and by watching and later performing rites handed down from woman to woman” (127). When such women cannot bear children, and thus achieve the ideal of selflessness as both wife and mother, an “alternative, socially condoned focus [is to] tak[e] a guru and engag[e] in full-time religious activities” (Fruzzetti qtd. in Hallstrom 126). Thus women are taught from early on to merge their identities with husband and children, a renunciation of self in favor of the larger Self as represented by her family. A third framework comes from an identity specifically assigned by her devotees—that of an avatara, or realized soul, incarnated in human form out of compassion for the unenlightened. An avatara represents the ideal of sannyas, what the sannyasi aspires to become in future incarnations. An avatara comes into the world fully realized, with no need to strive for the perfection sought by sannyasis.

All accounts of Anandamai Ma’s life, however, are either silent or contradictory on whether she identified herself within any of these categories of identity. She did not specifically claim to be a sannyasi, and, in fact, never received formal initiation, although “her burial was performed according to strict scriptural injunctions, presided over by some of India’s most renowned Brahmin priests” (Hallstrom 1-2). Also, as noted earlier, she apparently told many devotees that she had initiated herself as a young girl, a highly unconventional practice.

Neither does Ma claim to be a woman. She does identify herself as a “little girl,” but that would exempt her from forms of renunciation that Indian women of her time and place vowed upon marriage. Although she was married at age 13 to a man much older than she and spent approximately the first ten years of her life living alone with his family while he worked in another region of India to support her, she never claimed the title of “wife” for herself. Instead, she gradually relinquished, and ultimately reversed the role of caretaking; until his death
her husband cared for her needs. By that point, she had initiated him, and he had accepted her as his guru as well as the Devi (goddess) incarnate.

Finally, Ma never identified herself as any particular Deity, although devotees routinely worshipped her as Krishna, Durga, Kali, and Shiva, to name a few of the Hindu deities with whom she was associated. Rarely, then, did Ma identify herself as anything other than “this little girl” and “this body” or the dot of her signature. It’s possible that her devotees, who are her only biographers to date, chose not to include that information, but given the volumes written about Ma, it’s unlikely that such a detail would have escaped their notice. It could mean that they ignored such an utterance as anomaly, or suppressed it as something that undermined their own beliefs. Yet that seems unlikely, given how closely they attended to her every word, eager for her to tell them in no uncertain terms “who she is.”

Devotion

Food, once a joyful obsession, is now a burden to her, and eating is a trial. It is too hot during the day to go out to a restaurant or grocery store. Even if she had an appetite, she has little strength to satisfy it. The only water she can drink she must boil herself, since even the bottled water is not trustworthy. The bottles she throws out across the lane, on a vacant lot frequented by pigs, are, she notices, gone by the next visit. Opportunists are said to take the empty bottles, refill them with tap water, and sell them to tourists as “pure.” She has no thirst, yet she knows she must drink or risk serious consequences. Only in illness has her body ever refused nourishment before, and now it seems there is no end in sight for this current “illness,” no end to the struggle to devote herself to her own care.

No Understanding Without Devotion

By chance, I find a few books in a California bookstore published by her Calcutta Ashram, but they are the diaries of one devotee, Gurupriya Devi, who cared for Ma almost her entire life. Written with a slavish dedication to recording events but with little or no commentary, they include little by which to locate the narrator or the purpose of the narrative except brief devotional interludes. With only a third-grade equivalent education, Ma did not write anything of substance herself, nor did she ask that her spoken words be recorded, since she was indifferent to the preservation of anything produced in her name, including the ashrams, schools, and hospitals scattered all over northern India. Her devotees took it upon themselves to record her life and teachings, and to translate them into other languages. As a result, almost everything written about her is written, in part, as an act of devotion.

To further complicate my emerging inquiry, the authors of these texts insist that one cannot achieve an understanding of Ma without similar devotion. From Alexander Lipski, an American scholar who wrote about his encounter with Ma in the 1965, to Bithika Mukerji, an Indian scholar who
has devoted her life to writing three biographical volumes of Ma’s life, to name two more of her biographers, all accept her as a Divine Incarnation. They are careful to note, however, that Ma does not name herself in this way.

Her identification as a deity is solely the product of her devotees. Yet these same devotees recall many occasions in which Ma instructed them to dress her in the guise of a specific deity to celebrate a particular holiday or spiritual occasion. Thus, even though the devotees name her as a certain deity, they are doing so in response to actions that, to them, reveal Ma’s tacit instruction as to the nature of her true Self.

Locating the Spaces Between Human and Divine Agency

Because Ma did occupy a human body, was born, grew up, suffered illness and ultimately death, it would seem she experienced the same physical limitations as any human being and thus rightly could be identified as one. While she did not identify with the body, she was nonetheless subject to its weaknesses and failings. Such episodes are painstakingly recorded in the diaries of Ma’s closest devotee, Gurupriya Devi.

Gurupriya Devi, or Didi (sister), as she was known by those around her, published several volumes in which she faithfully recorded the daily events of Ma’s life, including details of Ma’s eating, grooming, and sleeping, as well as her travels, companions, and, on occasion, her words of advice, caution, praise, and devotion to those she encountered. Didi recorded countless occasions on which Ma is sustained by only a few grains of rice (sometimes painstakingly selected and placed directly into her mouth by Didi) and a few sips of water, for weeks at a time, with no ill effects.

Yet at other times, when Ma received the most attentive care and careful diet, when her needs were well attended, she succumbed to seemingly inexplicable illness. In the following passage, Didi questions Ma about this apparent contradiction between her physical health and material well being, at a time when Ma, now 41 years old, is having difficulty walking:

During conversation this evening I told Ma, “I have seen you live without eating food for many days. You haven’t even drunk water some days and yet your body was keeping well. Now with even the slightest exertion your body seems to behave strangely.” Ma said, “At that time the condition was different. The kind of bhava (spiritual mood) that existed during childhood is prevailing again now. At that time [my] Ma would call me and feed me. I had no mood to eat at any time. You people [her devotees] have witnessed the bhavas that existed in between. The reason why the body kept healthy even without food was that at that time [various yogas] were being manifested within this body [. . .].” I said, “After the illness at Siddheshwari your health has been deteriorating. After that illness even painstaking service has not been able to set your health right.” Ma said, “I do not stop anyone. But this is innate nature. On finding opposition to its bhava such a form appeared.” (145)
Although her body did experience illness, discomfort, pain, and aging, Ma explains this not as the seemingly inevitable progress of human development and decline, but instead as the ebb and flow of particular *bhavas*, or spiritual moods, that visit her in childhood then return in middle age. How well or poorly her body is treated by herself or others, then, ultimately has little direct effect upon its health. In fact, as Ma points out to Didi in the quote above, when the service of others interferes with the *bhavas*, it creates the ill health those around her seek to prevent.

Ma’s paradoxical relationship between the well-being of her body and its care presents an apparent contradiction to Western rationalist narratives of causality and time. The health of her body is not, according to her, causally related to material effects. While her body does, in fact, manifest signs of aging, first in childhood and then in middle age, this progress is explained as a *bhava*, or spiritual mood. The apparent progress of her life from birth to death is only an apparent truth that is superceded by the deeper reality of Ma’s being, namely that she is not bound to human constructs of causality and linear time. For Ma, such concepts are human imaginaries that blur the deeper truth that she, as an expression of the Infinite, embodies.

To represent her agency as anything other than “human” would locate it outside the conceptual, within discourses of myth and the “unreal.” Yet to imagine her agency solely within the “unreal” is to silence its power within a dialogic relationship *between* the conceptual contradictions of human and divine agency that she embodies.

**Worship**

She is standing on the bathing ghat named after Anandamai Ma, looking down upon the Ganges, when a swarm of ragged children closes in on her. The stairs that descend to the water are narrow and steep, and her footing, already uncertain, feels even more unstable as the children grab at her backpack, sunglasses, camera, and rings.

“Baksheesh, Baksheesh!” they cry out, their curious, insistent fingers tracing whatever seems most Western, and thus valuable, to them. She assumes they want money, but then their hands suggest more.

Afraid she might fall, she waves them off, then struggles towards a ledge that juts out from the temple landing. As she sits, the children, ranging from toddler to adolescent, close in again. Again, their hands are grabbing and grasping, like the monkeys in Durga temple, she thinks, some of them rabid, that attack worshippers, then flee like bandits. Except, the intention of these children, if they have a single intention, seems unclear. Instead, like so many scenes she has been subject to so far, they seem driven by a storm of contradictory impulses, tender and fierce, curious and aloof, generous and selfish.

She reaches into her backpack, careful not to let the straps drop from her arms, to prevent a quick theft. Inside is a plastic ziplock bag stuffed with Bazooka bubble gum that she brought from the States for just such an occasion. Into each child’s hand she places a pink-wrapped rectangle printed with Bazooka Joe’s cartoon image then unwraps one and puts it in her mouth.
They stare at her a long, long time as she blows one bubble after another, as if they have never, in their wildest dreams, imagined such a thing.

Whoever You Think I Am

Finally, I just give in to other people’s assumptions. On one hand, it seems deceitful and thus unethical; how can I maintain my integrity as a researcher unless my informants know my “true” identity? I am not a devotee of Ma, nor am I interested in following the example of so many others by writing a devotional work. Nor am I a political activist dedicated to the exposure of ashram exploiters of women. Yet the more people ask me, especially those who had known Ma first hand, the more I find myself agreeing that I think Ma is whoever they think she is.

Elizabeth Hallstrom recounts a similar quandary as she becomes acquainted with Bithika Mukerji, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at Banaras Hindu University and long-time devotee of Ma. Hallstrom writes,

I said, “Well, I am very excited to be doing this study on Ma. You know, I have been interested in women saints for a long time.” A look of alarm and even horror came over Bithika’s face. “My dear Lisa,” Bithika said emphatically, “Ma was neither a woman or [sic] a saint!” (4)

White lies? Half-truths? Opportunistic ambition? Or am I simply too overwhelmed by the heat, the noise, the crush of people and constant activity of this strange, difficult place, to think straight? It seems as if the only way to get “inside” of anything—inside the ashram, inside the heads and hearts of those around Ma, inside the minds of critics, is to act as if I share a similar devotion and/or resistance.

I take to meditating every weekday morning in the Gopal temple, the main shrine devoted to Ma at the Varanasi ashram, hoping someone will notice and take pity on me. My meditation practice is, like many Westerners, not specifically religious—no icons or deities involved. Nonetheless, I sit on the floor and stare at an elaborate idol of Anandamai Ma in which she is depicted as young, middle-aged, and old, all in the same figure.

Unfortunately, the only person who ever seems to notice me is the temple guard, who speaks only a little English. He kindly turns on overhead fans while I sit in the temple after spending a couple of hours on the ghat writing and talking to anyone who may have met Ma.

Unsatisfied, I later attempt a more direct “invasion.” After I interview the manager of the Varanasi ashram, Pandu Da, I ask if I might meditate in the second-floor, Annapurna Temple, hoping to glimpse a bit more of the ashram activities, and at the very least, experience the inner walls of the place, not to mention find a quiet place for my practice. Graciously, Pandu Da extends the invitation to one he believes is a true seeker of Ma’s grace. He tells me I can come and go as I like. After that I find the doors of the ashram are, quite literally, open whenever I come.
Refusal as a Holding of Space

If we consider the following logical assertions about Anandamai Ma and her body within a dialogical, rather than contradictory, framework, they yield more than a simple negation of each other: Ma is human because she has a body; Ma is not human because she has a body; and Ma is human and not human because she has a body. That is, these apparent contradictions also invite the imaginary. In this way the imaginary creates a space between concepts so that we can consider them in a reciprocal, not simply contradictory, relationship.

For example, the implied linkage between “human” and “body” is “refused” by the imaginary, thus complicating that relationship. Biologist Lewis Thomas has similarly complicated this question of what is “human”:

A good case can be made for our nonexistence as entities [. . .]. We are shared, rented, occupied. At the interior of our cells, driving them [. . .] are the mitochondria, and in a strict sense, they are not ours. [. . .] I like to think that they work in my interest, that each breath they draw for me, but perhaps it is they who walk through the local park in the early morning, sensing my senses, listening to my music, thinking my thoughts. (2-3)

Thus, having a body is not necessarily what makes us “human.” In this sense we are all Human and Other. Anandamai Ma’s lack of identification with her body, then, can be understood as a reflection on our own paradoxical relationship with our bodies in which the concepts by which we define the limits of our bodies do not absolutely govern their operations.

The imaginary, then, exposes how our concepts mask this Other truth in a “performance of [masculinist] power” (Rose 58) that seeks to regulate the body as masculine. In this way the assumed “real” relationship of human and body, reiterated as a matter of common sense, begins to break down when we consider the implied contradictions within those reiterations, specifically those that define what is human. Having a body does and does not signify human. Not all bodies are human, and yet humans must have bodies to be human. Here the stability of the concept human breaks down within this dialogue, suggesting that human is, is not, and is more than having a body. Thus, the relationship between the concepts “human” and “body” are complicated by conditions that cannot, in any absolute way, be accounted for, represented only by the imaginary’s “refusal.” In this way the imaginary maintains a space for a dialogue about what other kinds of relationships between human and body are possible, one that may now include the possibility of a third concept, what cannot be conceptualized, as part of the dialogue.

Realization

One day a woman in a white cotton sari and black rimmed glasses enters the temple from a side door nearest the altar. She approaches a lone worshipper seated on the floor. Silently she pours sugar puffs into the worshipper’s hands.
The worshipper recognizes these as prasad, food blessed during the daily prayers to the deity. She smiles by way of thanks and looks at the sweets. A few ants crawl out of the puffs. She is repulsed yet fascinated by the images moving between her hands.

Waiting until the sannyasini leaves, she then shakes the ants out of the sugar puffs so as not to cause the insects harm.

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The Widening Gyre: Images as Central to the Global Village

Mark Smith

Although Marshall McLuhan conceptualized the “global village” in 1968 to describe the electronic media’s pervasiveness, the recent and explosive proliferation of communication technologies has revived the discussion and broadened the term’s implications. In the era of the Kennedy assassination and, later, the Vietnam War, McLuhan and his peers deliberated over the emerging paradigm shift represented by television’s worldwide communications labyrinth. However, the advent of the internet and World-Wide Web has introduced a genuinely interactive paradigm, a network of MOOs, MUDs, and other reciprocal tools that suggest a Gutenberg-type paradigm shift. High-definition television and satellite uplinks further both the speed and the quality of communications, diminish the space-time-quality problems that have traditionally characterized global communications. Sven Birkerts observes: “The numbers of distance and time no longer mean what they used to. Every place, once unique, itself, is strangely shot through with radiations from every other place. ‘There’ was then; ‘here’ is now” (313).

Raymond Gozzi elaborates on the “global village”:

The phrase global village is used as a metaphor, but it is something else also. A global village is an oxymoron—two words which taken separately would contradict each other. “Global” implies a planet-wide network, encompassing thousands of miles and billions of people. “Village” implies small, face-to-face communities. (66)

The global village is one of the most pervasive outgrowths of the information revolution. Gozzi concedes that a global village does not now exist (67), but we are certainly closer to such an ideal than when McLuhan envisioned it. Indeed, as technology increases in ubiquity and sophistication, so do the possibilities of a genuine global village.

As political, technological, and market forces percolate—shaping and reshaping, fragmenting and coalescing relationships among global communities—the image is emerging as the lingua franca of electronic communication, much as the morpheme is to speech and the grapheme is to print. Interestingly, the primacy of images to the information revolution also reflects and extends the clas-
sical model of community—this time, a global community, or, in Yeats’ words, a widening gyre.\(^1\) Technology’s ability to create, manipulate, and distribute images simply augments the pre-literate paradigm around which oral communities rallied. As such, electronic images evince many of the characteristics of the speaker-centered, communal rhetoric of classicism. Furthermore, these classical traits carry profound implications for the teaching of writing and language.

Historically, pre-alphabetic cultures used symbols both individually and sequentially to convey tribal narratives and general information. Even among later cultures with standardized writing systems, images were instrumental in reinforcing both the individual and communal social structure of oral cultures, providing the gathering and identification points for communities. (Indeed, the term *signum*, from which we get the word *sign*, originally designated a standard used by the Roman army for identification [Ong 76].) Because the spoken word is temporary and fluid, an identity could be forged alongside the symbol. A visual image was, therefore, important for preserving and reinforcing a community via a lineage (coat of arms), a theology (religious icons), or a legend (statue). Symbols reflected the exteriority of the classical psyche, the external origins of sound and orality—as opposed to the silent, internal, and alienating characteristics of print.

In his address to the 1998 Rhetoric Society of America Conference, George Kennedy maintains that modern communication technologies have not nullified the precepts of classical rhetoric: “It is not clear to me that modern technology has altered the basic structures or techniques of rhetoric, whether theoretical or applied. It has not, you might say, rewired our rhetorical hardware” (57). In short, technology has merely reshuffled the rhetorical arts, revitalizing some and minimizing others. In the Information Age, images have reemerged in a neo-oral epistemology in which their functions both reflect and contrast with those of preliterate times.\(^2\) Images are now used primarily as shorthand methods of representing information, and they are useful for the news media and commercial interests. The copious use of images to relay information is largely pragmatic: in a stimulus-saturated society, architects of electronic communication must depend to an increasing degree on symbols to represent information that once might have been conveyed through print. As Alvin Toffler predicted some three decades ago, “In

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\(^1\) I find the “widening gyre” a suitable metaphor for the forces shaping the global village because, as I read Yeats’ “The Second Coming,” the gyre represents a dynamic, expanding force that both embraces and disseminates humanity, much as the internet does today.

\(^2\) Walter Ong’s discussions of “secondary orality” are useful in depicting the similarities between electronic and oral epistemologies. Although Ong ceased publishing some years ago, emergent information technologies have further exemplified his theories. He addresses the topic at numerous points throughout his works; a serviceable summary appears in *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*:

[Secondary orality] has striking resemblances to the old in its participatory mystique, its fostering of a communal sense, its concentration on the present moment, and even in its use of formulas. But it is essentially a more deliberate and self-conscious orality, based permanently on the use of writing and print, which are essentially for the manufacture and operation of equipment and for its use as well. (136)
an effort to transmit even richer image-producing messages at an even faster rate, communications people, artists, and others consciously work to make each instant of exposure to the mass media carry a heavier informational and emotional freight” (149).

Furthermore, the logistics of the internet facilitate and strengthen images’ unique properties: “telecommunications all but eliminates the concepts of distance and location [. . .] resulting in a discourse that is decontextualized and often of little direct relevance to [contemporary] populations” (Strate 64). This diminution of temporal and spatial restrictions and the accentuation of the immediate, the gut reaction, places the viewer/hearer in the center of the action. In the Aristotelian context, pathos discourages analysis, fostering an immediacy that endures long enough to inspire one to action (or simply to purchase a product). Frozen in time and space, the image suggests a snapshot, the sum of a text. Advertising provides copious examples: Nike, for instance, has reduced its trademark to a simple check, underscored with a cryptic “Just Do It,” while McDonald’s has abridged its trademark to the unannotated golden arches. The goal of such presentations is to leap both syllogistic reasoning and geographical/cultural constraints and to affect the individual who is integrated into the global community. According to Roy F. Fox,

professional image makers milk perception for emotion. They care little about logic, proof, or argument and instead focus exclusively on values, attitudes, feelings, sensations, passions, and sentiments. And the golden key that unlocks each of these chambers is emotion. (77)

Others study the new electronic images as reflective of the classical arts. Richard Lanham discusses the computer’s facility to model reality—what he terms the “dramatizing of experience”—which represents a revival of declamation. Both declamation and computer modeling create archetypes of knowledge, one oral and aural, the other visual. Lanham says that

[t]he world of electronic text has reinstated this centrality of modeled reality. The computer has adopted once again, as the fundamental educational principle, the dramatizing of experience [. . .]. Today we model everything digitally, and usually visually, before we build it, manufacture it, or embrace it as policy or sales program. (47)

As such, the modern technologist emulates the rhetor, constructing a visual representation just as the skilled classical declaimor recreated an event, his success determined in part by his performance’s mirroring reality. Similarly, technology allows for the increasingly authentic and seamless portrayal of reality as seen in applications of virtual reality and computer-aided drafting, what Lanham calls “visual topoi” (76).

Moreover, Kathleen Welch suggests that oral epistemologies resurrect the art of delivery, the fifth canon of rhetoric. Welch asserts that electronic discourse
erases, or appears to erase, the “lag time” that is inherent in written or printed texts:

Disembodied communication [literacy] has been reembodied through visual mechanisms such as video monitors and film screens. This technology gives the fifth canon of delivery [medium] the urgency of simultaneous communication. The lag time of print seems to disappear. (153, my emphasis)

This literal collapsing of time and space combines the portability of printed characters and graphics with the immediacy of the spoken word. As history has proven, the success of any new technology—from the steam engine to the integrated circuit—depends upon a suitable marketing scenario. In this case, we can now accommodate the mass production and worldwide distribution of images.

Complementing immediacy of images is the media’s use of repetition (conduplicatio) to decontextualize an image, broadening its appeal to a global market. Susanne K. Langer depicts the static symbols that emerge when acts become gestures—that is, when a human action becomes abstracted through repetition—and “they are no longer subject to spontaneous variation, but bound to an often meticulously exact repetition, which gradually makes their forms as familiar as words or tunes” (Philosophy 152-53). We can envision Langer’s gestures as repeated images that have separated from their antecedents, becoming what Stewart Ewen calls “provocative surfaces [which speak] to the eye’s mind, overshadowing matters of quality or substance” (224). Langer also refers to an intrinsic compulsion to identify personal contexts through a “conceptual frame [of] a world much larger than the environment we sensuously perceive . . . ” (Philosophical 129).

One might find contemporary exemplifications of Welch’s delivery and Ewen’s “provocative surfaces” in any number of contexts, but I am particularly reminded of professional wrestling, a public spectacle whose survival depends on readily defining and reiterating images to establish community. Borrowing more from heavy-metal rock than from athletics, the wrestlers’ face paint and provocative pseudonyms support a youthful subculture, complete with performer/audience cues and responses. Audiences, their disbelief suspended, engage in self-conscious and deliberate hysteria.

But the most compelling characteristics of this spectacle involve performance and gesture to sustain the ritual between the performers and audience. Although competitive sports—especially professional sports—have become increasingly ritualistic, with fans emulating the world’s Michael Jordans and Dennis Rodmans, sustained adoration ultimately depends upon an athlete’s statistical success. However, because professional wrestling is largely contrived, athletic ability is tertiary to performance, specifically, the ritual between the wrestler and the audience. This ritual often begins with an outrage at a slight or dismissal from a rival. The outrage is cultivated in the public arena over time, with the matter finally settled in the ring. The true appeal, however, comes from the ability to identify with a favorite character, to engage in a familiar routine of cues and responses in which the audience projects its collective identity into a face, a sur-
face. The matches themselves are pure performance grounded in feigned spontaneity. Lanham describes such interaction as characteristic of secondary orality: “The ritualistically silent audience of the nineteenth century was an audience of ‘readers’ observing a print convention. The rowdy and involved audience [. . .] is an audience from what Father Ong would call ‘secondary orality.’ The electronic audience is radically interactive” (76).

In addition to supporting Langer’s concepts of surface and ritual, the allure of public spectacles represents the reconfiguring of the self that is at the forefront of electronic and symbolic culture. While Kenneth J. Gergen describes this “self” as something postmodern, I am also reminded of Cicero’s citizen-orator, communicators whose education prepared them for the public sphere. Various nomenclatures describe this global citizen: Gergen offers the term “multiphrenia” to describe the multi-faceted self that is a construct of external entities (50). New technologies both engender and satisfy the need for self construction:

In an important sense, as social saturation proceeds we become pastiches, imitative assemblages of each other. In memory we carry others’ patterns of being with us. If the conditions are favorable, we can place these patterns into action. Each of us becomes the other, a representative, or a replacement [. . .]. [A]s the century has progressed selves have become increasingly populated with the character of others [. . .]. [W]ith social saturation, each of us comes to harbor a vast population of hidden potentials—to be a blues singer, a gypsy, an aristocrat, a criminal. (71)

From a sociological perspective, electronic communications networks and the ensuing revival of the public spectacle (rhetorical performance) have eroded localized identities and value systems—from the loss of the agrarian identity to the diminishment of the traditional family—and have opened a void that has nurtured the proliferation of electronic symbols. The ascendancy of the scripted television lifestyle over the traditional inherited narratives of family and geographic community avails symbols as a suitable source of personal identities. The notions of pluralistic cultures and integrated selves have been discussed copiously as to their influences on political and literary affairs.

That said, we can understand that the electronic symbol is particularly pertinent to the multiphrenia of the contemporary global culture. While advertising has long employed and exploited images to establish their interests in the public psyche, the internet now furnishes transferable and moveable symbols that can be arranged on a personal home page (the repository of the electronic self) or otherwise situated to establish an identity. Furthermore, electronic artifices expedite the construction of a self in a global context. If television pioneered a means of accessing global intelligence, the internet now facilitates both distribution of and interaction with an integrated self, the face of which is subject entirely to the whims of the builder. It is, thus, the ideal vehicle for performance on the global stage.

A microcosm of the possibilities of a global village can be found in developing countries where capitalism coexists with a solidly traditional culture, resulting in juxtaposition of a highly literate, technically-adept community alongside
one largely grounded in orality. In her study of the media in Iran, Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi points out that “in Iran, as elsewhere, nonliterates clearly coexist with literates in a typographically complex environment of street signs, advertisements, newspapers and magazines, bus tickets and political leaflets, letters, legal documents, and books” (142). Such a culture has access to television and computers, exposing the populace to symbols. Sreberny-Mohammadi complements her argument by pointing to James W. Chesebor’s position that easy access to such technology has smoothed the cleft between primary orality to electronic literacy, skipping the intermediary typographic literacy. She posits that “it certainly appears from the immense popularity of television across the developing world that the grammar of television is a comparatively easy one to learn, certainly easier than the grammar of print” (144). As such, cultures which had formerly lain on the periphery of the global mainstream are now situated within the global village through the world-wide “grammar” as conveyed through symbols.

As Sreberny-Mohammadi’s observations suggest, the emergence of an image-based, global culture augurs changes in the way language and writing are perceived and taught. As one considers the post-literate epistemology depicted in this discussion, one may be reminded of some of the characteristics of classical rhetoric. Indeed, as electronic communications enters a new generation with internet technologies, the insight of classical rhetoricians will again become increasingly relevant. The reemergence of interest in classical rhetoric—most notably marked thirty years ago by Edward P. J. Corbett’s *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*—has, to a great extent, paralleled and reflected the proliferation of electronic media. Corbett obviously recognized the utility of classical precepts in an increasingly pluralistic and complex context heavily influenced by unbridled, technologically enhanced stimuli. In the most recent edition of the book, Corbett added an analysis of the text and images in a typewriter advertisement, illustrative of classical rhetoric’s pervasiveness in modern advertising. Although Corbett’s discussion is not primarily about the images, the fact that he included such a discussion in a revised edition of a landmark textbook is indicative of the indelible relationship between electronic images and classical rhetoric. As teachers of writing consider the challenges of teaching in an electronically-determined context, they may consider the complexities of classical rhetoric. Just as classical orators thought and composed in a non-print context, so does contemporary communication have less to do with the printed word than with symbols and hypertext.

Technology is moving modern rhetoric into a grammar of non-alphabetic symbols. The beginnings of a print-based epistemology began in the nineteenth century with the diminishment of classical, Latin-based education. This, coupled with the emanation of technical and vocational interests, helped foster a typographic, print-based epistemology. However, the advent of electronic communication—beginning with the television and moving through the personal computer and to the internet and individual satellite communication—has, in some respects, moved rhetoric full circle.

Although McLuhan’s global village has yet to evolve into its fullest and most complete incarnation, we find ourselves almost daily salvoed with the images that will, ultimately, transcend geographic and cultural boundaries. As we grapple
with the political, technological, and educational implications of the new modes of expression, we will also find ourselves participating in the communal experiences enjoyed by those for whom orality has been the norm. In our case, however, we will find ourselves ensconced within the widening gyre, one in which temporal and spatial restrictions are virtually eliminated, where the rich possibilities of instantaneous, shared communication compel us to capitalize on the egalitarian potentials of wisely used technology.

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In the Name of the Spirit

Lynn Briggs, Fred Schunter, and Ray Melvin

Listening is our work at the Writers’ Center, and, though it may seem a passive sort of vocation, the act Mary Rose O’Reilley calls “listen[ing]someone into existence” (21) can be stressful and tiring. The heavy accents and tangled syntax of the many international students who use the center can make listening to their papers even more demanding. Incredible focus is required, total attention a must. Some Responders have chosen to make work in the center their primary employment, and they work many hours each week, so they see student after student for 50 minutes each. It is in this context that Fred met Yin at 6:00 on a winter evening.1 Yin was fifth in a series of international students that day; she was a post-baccalaureate student getting some prerequisites finished so that she could enter the MBA program. She was the most advanced student of the day, but by that time it hardly mattered. Fred was so exhausted he couldn’t muster the energy to go downstairs and get coffee. In this state of mind, wondering how he would ever get through the session, Fred began listening to Yin.

Expecting an essay, he was surprised when Yin pulled out what appeared to be a multi-page business document. In one of her business classes, Yin was assigned to a 3-student group charged with developing a marketing plan for a small business of their choice. The other two members of the group were young men who had grown up together in the apple orchards of southern Washington. Yin dutifully came to the Writers’ Center to “clean up” the paper at the request of the other group members. As Yin read through the first page, she sighed and hesitated as if she lacked confidence in the quality of the concepts within the proposal. She noticeably checked her frustration as she started to make a statement critiquing the paper, then backing off. Fred, whose undergraduate degree was in business and who had spent a decade in the business world before returning to academe, began to concentrate on the proposal from a business standpoint and to question its viability. Yin replied to his questions and finally allowed some of her frustration to surface. Her dissatisfaction with the proposal was apparent. Yet, Yin confided, as a female international student in a group with American

1 All stories are true and are taken from Responder anecdotes shared at meetings. Whenever we have permission, we use real names of those involved; otherwise, we have provided pseudonyms.
men who were lifelong friends, it was her job to be subordinate and to help make their ideas successful.

As Yin continued to read, Fred began to direct the session toward an examination of her thoughts concerning the assignment. At his prodding, she confidently critiqued her partners’ ideas and then shared her version of a successful marketing plan. Fred was impressed with her business knowledge and ability to take classroom learning and apply it to the consumer market of an economy with which she was not familiar. With encouragement, Yin continued to share the ideas that she had bottled up. She had mountains of notes spread all over the table, she was talking rapidly, and she sat straight in the chair. She looked and sounded like a different person from the one who sat hunched and mumbling at the beginning of the session. As Yin smiled and said “Thank you for understanding,” Fred noticed that three hours had passed since the discussion began. It seems that Yin was not the only one energized by the session.

Yin’s transformation could easily be cast as “political” by composition scholars. After all, she went from feeling oppressed by dominating systems which placed her, no matter her intellect and because of her gender, in a subordinate position, to feeling confident enough in her knowledge to engage a teacher-figure as an equal and to keep him working overtime. But taking a political view of this dynamic represents some as heroes and some as villains. Asian culture and the good old boys from the orchards become the oppressors, and Yin, through Fred’s liberatory pedagogy, becomes a hero, an example to other women who have been deprived of their voices.

However, we have chosen to view Yin’s transformation as “spiritual” rather than only “political” because we believe a broader analysis can be more generative. We see Yin’s (and Fred’s) experience as spiritual because she became able to reintegrate elements of her “self,” because she was able to connect with another and receive “understanding,” and because, after her session, we think her universe temporarily made more sense although it wasn’t necessarily easier to live in. After this session in which Yin recognized that she had much to offer as a student, writer, and thinker, she had some difficult decisions to make with regard to her relationship with her group members, but she also recognized her ability to decide.

The spiritual pursuit has always responded to the question, “What is the meaning of life” (Frankl 153). Rarely, though, does the question come in such a large frame. Usually, people ask that question in smaller ways. Writers like Yin ask it in the center. They ask, “What is the meaning of this frustrating assignment” or “What is the meaning of this incomprehensible course” or “What is the meaning of this disappointing grade.” By helping writers make sense of the particular pain their literacy practices evoke, we can help them momentarily make sense of life and help them temporarily hypothesize about its meaning.

Though we will assert in this essay that our goals in the center haven’t always been this cosmic, even at its most microcosmic our center has focused on writers and their relationship to the various communities in which they live instead of on the writers’ texts alone. These goals have been validated by department chairs, deans, and the vice-provost, to whom the tenured center director reports. The goals engage Writers’ Center professional Responders (most of whom
have graduate coursework, if not degrees) in work designed to help writers understand their roles in various academic discourse communities, increase their participation in those communities, and develop self-assessment strategies regarding their participation. These reflective and community-based goals have broadened to include larger goals, such as helping writers to see in their writing processes a glimpse of a meaning of life. Working from the perspective that a Writers’ Center session may help participants see a bright flash of life’s meaning has led us to add spiritual elements to our center goals. Naming events “spiritual” is essential to seeing them as such, and seeing them as such offers advantages. It helps connect learning/education/pedagogy with the larger pursuit of “the meaning of life.”

This integration of the pursuit of the meaning of life in education is a theme of Jane Tompkins’s *A Life in School*. Tompkins writes of school’s lack of integration with students’ lives: “our educational system does not focus on the inner lives of students or help them to acquire the self-understanding that is the basis of a satisfying life” (xii). Rather, she hopes for a system that has “a commitment to the sacredness of life” (xiii) through methods that “would never fail to take into account that students and teachers have bodies that are mortal, hearts that can be broken, and spirits that need to be fed” (xiii). We do not claim that the only path to an epiphany like Yin’s is by naming an experience “spiritual,” but rather that naming Yin’s experience as “spiritual” can serve as a reminder of how Fred and Yin connected in a way that transcended the usual academic interaction.

Our center sees many students whose hearts have been broken by academic life. We are located at a regional comprehensive university where most students are the first generation at college, where many are from rural areas or are place-bound, where over two-thirds qualify for and receive financial aid for the $900.00 per quarter tuition fee. Our students are fighting a valiant fight, mostly, they say, for better economic conditions, but sometimes, they’ll admit, for the ineffable piece that is missing from their lives. In the Writers’ Center, they often wish that we would just edit or tell them what to do; they hope for directions like “make your thesis stronger like this” or “add more support to these two paragraphs.” In the rare event that we do give such directive advice, we embed it in a discussion of audience and purpose, hoping, at least, to help writers become more independent by introducing them to heuristics they can use to make decisions on their own, hoping, at most, to help them make more sense of life. And, in about 10 to 20% of the sessions we have, we think we achieve the greater goal.

Usually, the achievement of the greater goal begins with an “aha” of rhetorical proportions. The epiphanies we see are of various kinds, sometimes resulting in the solution to a problem, but more often raising additional questions. For example, Terry’s “aha” came when she realized that the rebuffs she had received on the drafts of her thesis were occurring not because she didn’t have anything of use to say (a fate which she deeply feared and which kept her from writing for a long time), but because her narrative approach was challenging the values of the academy. Terry, a former center Responder, had a session with both Ray and Gail in which she bemoaned the fact that her adviser didn’t think that she should use narrative as the dominant discourse form in her thesis. Gail’s response was that though she understood the thesis expectations (Gail also works in the Graduate
Studies Office), the manner in which Terry had written “worked for [Gail].” After Terry had heard both Gail’s and Ray’s expressions of appreciation of the chapter draft, she was then able to hear Ray’s question “What do you risk when you write it like this?” As Terry started to answer, Ray saw disappointment cloud her face. His question made her realize that it was she who had to make a difficult choice about her thesis, and that the choice was not just between being a compliant or a resistant student, between using a traditional or a non-traditional style, but it was also tangled in decisions and understandings about her life in academe and in her field.

Terry’s “aha” was her realization that the dilemma wasn’t nearly as contained or containable as whether to use narrative. Instead, she became aware of the “hidden wholeness” of her plight (Palmer 27). She became aware of how her rhetorical decisions tied her to (or distanced her from) intellectual and ethical traditions. Though Terry did not particularly like what she learned, her epiphany was one in which she made more universal sense of her situation. After her epiphany, Terry realized that her battle wasn’t with her adviser, but within herself. She would have to decide whether to tow the line or make waves. Terry’s situation, like Yin’s, might normally be analyzed largely in political terms. Terry was resisting the hegemony of the patriarchy of the academy in her narrative format. However, we have come to believe that if we only look at such situations through the political lens we can miss the redemptive dimension of a troubling realization.

We see Yin’s and Terry’s “aha” and the “ahas” of many others as both political and spiritual events. “Simply, spiritual understandings […] make life meaningful. Spiritual experiences are those experiences that connect [people] to themselves, to others, and to larger forces in the universe” (Briggs 88). Regina Foehr and Susan Schiller expand upon what it is like to discover spiritual meaning, saying “We find it [spiritual understanding] paradoxical – noncognitive but deeply known, inexplicable yet deeply felt, inexpressible in language yet familiar and trusted. It surprises us, it assures us, it transforms us; it makes us want to know more” (ix). Like Foehr and Schiller, who see spirituality as something not only available but also present in everyday life, Jay Conger describes “spirituality” as “very much of this world” (9). He goes on to say that “For many of us it is grounded in living feelings. Presumably, most of us have access to such feelings, though quite probably not on command” (9).

Those of us who have tried to use the term “spirit” to describe the goals or results of academic work hardly need reminding of resistance to the term and idea of spirituality in the university. Even our more open-minded colleagues can have trouble with the idea – one such colleague said to us “I just can’t get past the word – it’s contrary to the premise of the university – we’re about rationality here.” Joseph Holland agrees with this assessment, saying that “Perhaps we sometimes resist the Spirit precisely because we live so much in the ethos of professionalism, because we are so oriented to professionalized rational control – in other words, our control” (50). To O’Reilley, such resistance is not futile, but healthy:

We may, of course, resist the passions of spirit. Indeed, I think that
resistance is itself a spiritual process, a way of pacing ourselves so that growth and healing occur in all the structures of the human organism concurrently. It is natural to resist, and it is natural at a certain point to stop resisting [. . .]. (5)

And, certainly, two years ago we would have resisted the notion that any part of our work in the Writers’ Center should involve spiritual connections/issuies/growth for writers and staff. Like many people, we would have conflated notions of spirituality with those of religion – which is treacherous political territory. But Matthew Fox challenges the connection between spirituality and religion, saying “what does Spirit have to do with separation of church and state when it is seldom a part of either[. . .]. Those who imagine that Spirit is somehow owned by the churches have probably not been to church lately” (172).

Two years ago, we would have said that our Writers’ Center work was about helping writers make as much written sense as possible within the confines of the discourse situation. We would have described the center as a place where students could explore, without risk, what they really wanted to say, and would be helped to see any differences between what they wanted to say and what they were allowed to say in a particular corner of the academic discourse community. We might have even described experiences like Yin’s or Terry’s in which writers had epiphanies about their ideas or about their position in the university discourse community, but we wouldn’t have claimed their exclamations of “I get it!” as spiritual. But then Ray brought us a chapter from Viktor Frankl’s final work, Man’s Search for Ultimate Meaning, and we read and discussed it in a center staff meeting. In this chapter, Frankl argues that his fellow psychiatrists should include spirituality in psychiatry. Frankl’s definitions of how meaning is made in life, “creating a work; [. . .] encountering someone [. . .] changing ourselves”(142) paralleled our work in the center, in which writers bring works they have created to encounters with Responders in order to change themselves as writers.

After reading Frankl’s chapter we began to tell each other stories about response sessions in which writers exuded palpable energy about a piece of writing they had completed, about moments when the writer-Responder relationship “clicked” deeply and unexpectedly, or about sessions in which they or a writer experienced an “aha” moment and knew that they were changed. After reading Frankl’s text, we started to think of our work in his spiritual terms. His words helped us synthesize and articulate a core of our work that we had known but until then been unable to utter.

Now, having been initiated into a conversation about professional practice in which the spiritual is named without reservation, we are able to see our work as such. We can now see the revelation that Yin had as spiritual, for, as she allowed herself to be “listen[ed] into existence” by Fred, she had a surprising revelation about her place in her group, academic culture, the university, and maybe, for just a moment, the universe.

Students have such realizations frequently in our classes or writing centers when they come to understand something like the concept of a discourse community. As this concept becomes clear, writers like Terry understand that, perhaps,
what they want to say can’t be said in a particular forum not because it is not worth uttering, but because an audience isn’t ready to receive it. The “aha” perspective gained – the shift from “what I have to say isn’t valued or valuable” to “this is the wrong venue for that kind of utterance” – is empowering. The realization that there are different discourse communities can help writers seek out others with whom they can connect; it can help them sort out where they want to be in the university and the universe. When the idea of a discourse community “clicks” with a student, it can do what Foehr and Schiller describe:

It teaches people to trust their own abilities and creative processes – to move beyond their apprehension and self-doubts. The processes that access this inner/transcendent power build self-confidence, create hope, and make one feel more connected to others and the world by engaging the mind and the spirit. (ix)

Accessing that inner/transcendent power is becoming less and less a task of churches or temples, and more in the realm of everyday life, according to Conger, who argues that the contemporary movement towards a separation of religion and spirituality emphasizes the importance of fulfilling spiritual needs outside of religious institutions. He states, “As the direct impact of religion in our lives lessens, many of us are turning to other arenas or means by which we can nourish our spirituality” (14). The center has become a realm in which we try to nourish our spirituality on a daily basis.

As a result of this realization and commitment, we have developed a series of strategies that we use to operationalize our spiritual goals:

- **Presence**: We realize that in order to work with a whole writer (including her spirit) we must be entirely present, and we must be “centered” in the session. We need to turn away from worry, let the periphery become silent, and allow the lyrical in the moment to surface.

  Joy works with Michelle regularly, and before every session she has to remind herself to focus. Michelle is an ESL student who is also deaf and so brings her translator with her. Language, then, moves from Korean, to Korean sign language, to ASL, to spoken English in their sessions. There is much static, much that could interfere with presence, much that could distract. Joy is a warm and caring person, and she works hard to make sure that everyone feels included, so it takes a great commitment to being present to Michelle, for Joy consciously to ignore Michelle’s sign-language interpreter during the sessions. Joy realized that she could not be totally present with Michelle if she was negotiating a three-way conversation and looking – even occasionally – at her interpreter. So, she made a conscious decision to ignore the interpreter as a person (a very difficult task for Joy, who characterizes herself as the center’s “Mom”). Against her own nature, she came up with the metaphor of “headphones” to illustrate the way she needed to think of her in-session relationship with Michelle’s interpreter. Joy made an ironic commitment, which was painful, because it meant temporarily ignoring a person’s humanity, so that she could be totally present for Michelle and Michelle alone. Michelle has since requested this type of interaction (through her interpreter) with other Responders.
• **Mystery:** We have carefully resisted developing files with usual course writing assignments or talking to instructors to get information about assignments. We want to ponder the meaning of the writing tasks and the goals that can be achieved at the same time the writer ponders them. We want to be able to explore the possibilities honestly.

Celia is an intern in the center who also teaches ENGL 201. She had a session with a student from another instructor’s section of 201. Instead of assuming that she knew the goals and approach that the other instructor wanted, she wallowed around in the assignment with the writer, living with uncertainty, biting her tongue when she was tempted to describe to the student how she would want it done. In the end, she was pleased that she had let mystery prevail, for it turned out that the other instructor took a significantly different approach – an insight she would not have gained had she jumped into the session as the one who solves the mystery. Not only did Celia’s willingness to live with mystery result in the writer having authority in the session, and needing to explore his understandings of the assignment and its purposes, but Celia discovered another approach to an assignment, and, more importantly, that other approaches were quite possible.

• **Story:** We share narratives of our own writing experiences, and of our quests and questions as students, writers, and people. We let writers in on the tales of our making sense of tough assignments, troubling feedback, or gratifying results.

Ray has worked with Jody in the center for three years. Early in their relationship, Jody confided that she’d been diagnosed as having bipolar disorder. She related tales about the difficulty of pursuing an education with this type of mental illness. Rather than take on a therapeutic role and sit across from her listening to her stories as if they were alien, Ray took a position beside her, and shared his experiences as a depression-prone poet. Instead of just swapping labels, the stories they shared were about the lived experience of psychological disorientation in the academy. The stories built trust, but have, through the years, served to weave Ray and Jodi together. Jody came to the center to share her written stories, but ended up writing one, with Ray, about how people can find compatible souls at the university.

• **Celebration:** We acknowledge the “aha” moments and clearly note the significance of any epiphanies. We share stories of our own and other writers’ epiphanies and welcome writers’ new understandings.

Ray had a session with Dennis, who had returned a day after his first session with Gail. Dennis came in to talk about his revision, but spent much of the session describing what happened when he worked with Gail. Dennis began by saying “that session yesterday was really a learning experience.” Ray heard Dennis describe how, because Gail had asked him questions about what he meant to say and how that fit with what he was asked to say, he realized that he hadn’t done the assignment at all. Ray praised Dennis’s willingness to see how he had missed the assignment and to turn what must have been a disappointing moment, realizing that he had not done an adequate job on the assignment, to a victory. Ray was glowing about the session a day later and told Gail Dennis’s story to further the celebration of Dennis’s courage and insight.
- **Pointing Outward:** We help writers generalize the “aha” experience, and illustrate how the same process can be used to make sense in other situations.

  The patience and direction we need to do these things (which are much harder than simply telling writers to clarify their theses or add more support) come, in part, from naming our work “spiritual.” As we have named our work “spiritual” we have accumulated anecdotes that illustrate our strategies.

  Patrick’s story of the “three Lings” illustrates how he helped a writer generalize an epiphany. Patrick worked hard to get Li to understand the influence of audience. For some time, Li didn’t understand why and how a different audience would affect what could be said and how it could be expressed. One day, however, after several weeks of work, Li had a breakthrough. Li described how he could not expect his grandfather to speak to him the way that he spoke to his grandfather, that different levels of respect would be necessary. He indicated that his grandfather, the first Ling, needed to be approached with respect by him, the third Ling, and that it would never occur to either Li or his grandfather to diverge from expected conventions of discourse. Not only did Li’s revelation about the three Lings serve to help him understand audience and to articulate the discursive relationships between himself, his father, and his grandfather, but it served as a metaphor that both Patrick and Li used for the rest of the year. From that day forward, when Li learned something about perspectives, he and Patrick would exclaim, “it’s like the three Lings!”

  Naming experiences in which writers make sense of their writing and how it fits into their world “spiritual” makes a difference in how the experiences are conceptualized. Words matter. Words matter so much in the field of C/composition that there are fights not simply about semantics, but the “apparent squabble over words is a key part of our disciplines’ struggle for voice and search for self” (Zebroski 251). And the “self” that is found in this type of search is communicated to others by language. As Hannah Arendt says:

  
  
  [. . .] whatever men [sic] do or experience can make sense only to the extent that it is spoken about [. . .] men [sic] as they live and act and move in this world, can experience meaningfulness only because they can talk with and make sense to each other and to themselves. (4)

  Vincent Ostrom indicates that individual’s search for self is guided by words:

  Human cognition is, however, profoundly affected by the way that languages give expression to ways of conceptualizing what human beings experience in the course of living their lives. Wilhelm von Humboldt observed “by the same process whereby he spins language out of his own being, he ensnares himself in it; and each language draws a magic circle round the people to which it belongs.” (162)

  James Hillman reflects on the magic of language as well, but in more spiritual words: “We need to recall the angel aspect of the word, recognizing words as
independent carriers of soul between people. [. . .] Words, like angels, are powers which have invisible power over us” (28-29).

Naming an experience as “spiritual” is important because it makes a space for the ineffable, the mysterious, in pedagogy – the notion that we don’t know everything that influences student learning. And naming spirit does what Parker Palmer calls “create a space” (qtd. in O’Reilley 1). While we don’t think that the spirit is absent without the word to mark its presence, we do think that using the word can help us recognize the possibility of a spiritual reading of a situation. Naming an experience “spiritual” creates a space that can make it real, that can invite it to appear. Such an invitation can lead to an acceptance that, as Foehr and Schiller say, “even in the academy, intellectual activity, like language itself, is spiritual. Spiritually open pedagogy, as the ancient Greeks suggested, can reintroduce balance while at the same time fostering lifelong learning” (ix).

Thomas Moore articulates how he sees learning related to spiritual growth. He describes the purpose of “study” as “[t]he manifestations of one’s essence, the unfolding of one’s capabilities, the revelation of one’s heretofore hidden possibilities” (59). The notion that we could reconceptualize the academic to include the “spiritual,” that we can name learning as a spiritual experience, that study is about the sacredness of life, and that school should be about connecting the heart and soul to each other and the universe is a huge challenge for us. So much in our lives in school has taught us to resist it. But we are going to encourage others to use the word “spirit,” and to use it ourselves, in hopes that its echoes will break down some of the resistance. ☝️

Works Cited

Writing Awareness

Gwen Gorzelsky

“We looked like bozos going in there on the first day trying to organize the kids,” said Mark vehemently, a note of bitterness coloring his voice. Acknowledging that the situation had improved as we learned the middle school students’ names and faces, he still concluded that we continued to compromise what little authority we had—and to look ridiculous—in our ritual of “rounding up the steers.”

I felt myself tensing defensively as I listened. Mark was one of five mentors participating in the pilot semester of an after-school literacy mentoring program. In the program, graduate and advanced undergraduate students worked with urban middle school students for two hours a week and took a closely linked writing seminar in which they analyzed theories of writing, pedagogy, and ethnography, as well as their mentoring experiences. As instructor, I’d designed this combination to prepare student mentors for doing their own ethnographic research into literate practices and pedagogy. As a researcher, I’d begun an ethnographic study of how participants’ metaphors for literacy, learning, and teaching correlated with our accomplishments in these areas.

I’d known we’d encounter problems, given the new program and new environment. And I’d known mentors’ feedback and suggestions could provide crucial guides in working through those problems and redesigning the program. Nonetheless, I tensed as I listened to Mark and his colleagues emphasize important issues like middle schoolers’ association of some mentoring rooms with play time, the lack of supplies, and the need for orderly means of moving students from common spaces to mentoring sites. As I tried to respond and take notes on mentors’ suggestions, I realized that I was tightening my solar plexus into a knot, hunching my shoulders, and collapsing my chest. While my response was probably not noticeable to most onlookers, I’d drawn up my abdomen and arched

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2 I use pseudonyms for all characters in this essay. I collected ethnographic data through fieldnotes, audiotapes, and videotapes, but I have drawn only on the fieldnotes in composing the essay.
my spine backward slightly. As I’d physically drawn back into myself, pulling my limbs closer to my trunk, I’d restricted my breathing as well, taking progressively quicker, shallower breaths. My affect was a guarded self-protectiveness, but I became consciously aware of it only after noting my bodily constriction. Only when I felt I’d nearly cut off my breathing did I recognize a stance I’d learned to associate with defensiveness. Only then did I begin to see that I was diminishing my ability to process mentors’ feedback because I was hearing it as, implicitly, a critique of my direction of the mentoring program.

Not until after the seminar session, while I was taking fieldnotes, did I begin to grasp that the emotional edge of mentors’ critiques probably arose from their deep investments in reaching and positively affecting their middle school mentees. Deirdre’s voice, emphatic, almost aching, echoed in my head, as I recalled her query: “How do I develop a rapport with these kids?” With that echo, the voices of mentors’ worries rustled in my mind, recalling their concern about determining the source of the tensions in their mentee relationships: how much grew from middle schoolers’ perception of the program as remedial? how much from programmatic failures? how much from family and neighborhood circumstances beyond any of our control? and how much from their individual mentoring styles? Belatedly, over fieldnotes and tea, as I pieced together descriptions of the seminar’s discussion, the interactional tone, and my own responses, I was able to understand and empathize with mentors’ frustrations and anxieties. Only as I composed the pieces of the fieldnote puzzle did I begin to grasp how I’d diminished my awareness of mentors’ concerns—and so, of course, of a pedagogical opportunity to work with those concerns—by unconsciously embodying my defensiveness.

The process of composing ethnography can powerfully develop a reciprocal awareness of one’s teacherly practices and of students’ actions and responses. Such reciprocal awareness, or reflexivity, forms the heart of critical pedagogy. In this essay, I argue that an embodied, writerly ethnography, one that works explicitly with figuration, offers a productive method for critical pedagogy. Section I uses composition and ethnographic theory to argue for a writerly critical ethnography to show how embodied ethnography can further the goals of reflexivity and critical pedagogy. Section II builds on composition theorists’ arguments for embodied writing and for the inherently figurative nature of language to define a phenomenological ethnography. It shows how this ethnography examines metaphoric logic to explore the intersection of body, emotion, and cognition in order to analyze how that intersection shapes social, cultural, and pedagogical systems. Section III uses Gestalt theory to illustrate how the embodied, figurative awareness this process offers can help us to shift our perceptions of systems and our roles in them. In the first two sections, I incorporate ethnographic depictions based on my fieldnotes on the mentoring seminar, and the final section rereads these depictions through the essay’s theoretical lenses. Thus, I conclude that this embodied, writerly ethnography can help us not only to confront some of our most pressing pedagogical concerns but to pursue critical pedagogy’s goals of more equitable relations and social justice.
Embodied Ethnography: Lens for Reflexivity and Critical Pedagogy

Like Ira Shor, I see critical pedagogy as a means for “self and social change,” for approaching “individual growth as an active, cooperative, social process” that involves both cognition and affective activity. It springs from reflexivity, which “can transform our thoughts and behavior, which in turn have the power to alter reality itself” (22). As Ann Berthoff explains, reflexivity entails examining our theory and practice so we can derive a method from the dialectic of their relationship (xi). Mariolina Salvatori argues that to accomplish such reflexivity, we must make manifest (or aware) our implicit theories and methods (445-50). It is this process that enables us, first, to see the dialectic between our theory and our practice and, next, to derive—and perhaps change—the methods implicit in that dialectic. Because critical pedagogy involves the emotions, teachers who practice it must look reflexively at affective, as well as intellectual, interactions. Writing awareness through embodied ethnography provides a particularly generative means of achieving such reflexivity about both the cognitive and affective dimensions of our pedagogical interactions and about their intersection. It allows us to (re)compose awareness, to derive and change the method inherent in the theory-practice dialectics of our classroom interactions. Thus, it enables us to foster “self and social change.”

Arnetha Ball and Ted Lardner point to both the significance and the challenge of looking reflexively at the affective dimensions of pedagogical interaction. In “Dispositions Toward Language,” they argue that their concept of “teacher efficacy” extends reflexive pedagogy “[b]y making affect a central issue in theorizing pedagogy” and thus moving “closest to the largely unspoken dimensions of pedagogical experience” (478). They hold that by “[o]pening up these deeply felt but difficult to name dimensions of interaction, teacher efficacy speaks to the cumulative effect of teachers’ knowledge and experience on their feelings about their students and their own ability to teach them” (478). It is these “deeply felt,” “difficult to name” regions an embodied ethnography probes—and that our mentoring seminar broached.

In the second half of his class presentation, Mark focused on the process of rereading his own fieldnotes and the perceptual shift he’d experienced while doing so. Often when he was initially writing the notes, he explained, Mark had felt quite emotionally invested in the mentoring session he was describing. He emphasized the significance of returning to the notes later, when he felt more emotional distance. Citing Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw’s Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes, Mark explained what he found to be the need for a sort of double perspective: “You have to be involved and aware, but you have to divorce yourself to be objective.” In composing his notes, Mark explained, he tended to read his mentees’ resistance, misbehavior, and other responses by thinking “He’s reacting to me” or by concluding that the student was, at the least, reacting to the mentoring situation. Mark contrasted his initial tendency to “take it personally” with later rereadings of his fieldnotes. At these points, he explained, he found himself thinking, “They’re being kids” and “They’re being who they are.” The re-evaluation he experienced in rereading had led him to evaluate his own mentoring more positively, Mark continued.
But he named his revised expectations as one of the most significant shifts he’d experienced. Holding his hand just above his forehead, Mark commented that he’d begun mentoring with expectations “up here.” Those expectations had plummeted almost immediately, he went on, dropping his hand to just below the level of the grade school desk in which he sat. On first reading his mentees’ work, he’d felt quite disappointed, thinking they had “godawful spelling.” In contrast, when he looked back at students’ papers and the mentoring process, Mark had decided that his expectations for students needed to remain high but that his middle school mentees were much brighter than he’d thought at his initial reading. Raising his hand to a level mid-way between its two earlier positions, he named that point as his current expectation level and concluded that not only had his perspective on each of his mentees changed as he reread his fieldnotes but that “I’m almost as positive as when I came in.” Describing his revised expectations as “more realistic,” Mark noted his plans to reread his fieldnotes sporadically and, especially, to notice the chemistry and group dynamics among mentees in addition to his own interaction with them.

Ethnography seems to have functioned for Mark not only as the research method he was learning but as an educational experience that shifted his perceptions. In “The Problematic of Experience,” Min-Zhan Lu and Bruce Horner argue that combining critical ethnography and critical pedagogy in the classroom offers a way of working toward social justice and social change. A commitment to those goals has sharpened in ethnographic practice and methodology over the last twenty years as well. Critical ethnography that works explicitly with the literary, subjective nature of language and seeks to foster social change has evolved as a significant force. Critical ethnography calls for dialogue between researcher and research subjects and for reflexivity about the literary, figurative aspects of any depiction. Such ethnographies work with the tension between the desire to produce rich, thick description of existing social conditions and the desire to change those conditions when they appear manifestly unjust. Lu and Horner emphasize this tension and its relationship to that between discourse and experience (266).

Because of the inevitable gulf between lived experience and our languaged representations of that experience, Lu and Horner argue for including all participants’ voices in research and pedagogical encounters. They extend critical pedagogy’s usual emphasis on problematizing students’ experiences to argue that such pedagogy should problematize the teacher’s knowledge and experience as well (267). Lu and Horner echo critical ethnography’s concern with the tension between understanding and changing its research context, particularly when they emphasize the pull between producing knowledge about students and fostering students’ change (271). They advocate creative efforts to use this tension productively and to use the experience of the teacher (as well as the student) in

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3 George Marcus and Michael Fischer describe the movement and many of its key texts in *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*.

4 For examples of such work, see Austin; Fischer and Abedi; Harrison; McCarthy and Fishman; Mienczakowski; Schaafsma.
critical projects (268). Reflexivity, or reciprocal awareness, is crucial to such efforts. It allows us to access and examine the dynamics of student-teacher interactions (rather than to produce a static knowledge of either party). Accessing the intersecting bodily, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of student-teacher dynamics enables a holistic reflexivity. It does so by exploring the interactional system at various moments, by examining the roles participants play and what those roles reveal about how a particular classroom’s theory-practice dialectic operates in specific instances. Increased awareness of the system’s function and of our (changing) roles in it can help us to modify those roles and their impact. As we become more aware of the disjunctures between our theory and our practice, we can work toward systemic change by revising our own roles.

Lu and Horner conclude by suggesting that compositionists “use the new interventions in one field, ethnography or pedagogy, to address the specific dilemmas faced by the other” (275). I’m drawing on pedagogical theories of affect, like Ball and Lardner’s, and on new theories of an embodied writing and pedagogy, such as Kristie S. Fleckenstein’s and Richard E. Miller’s work, to show that an embodied ethnography provides access to the intersecting bodily, affective, and cognitive dimensions of learning. Conversely, I’m using that embodied ethnography to argue for a composition research-pedagogy that pursues social change by examining this intersection to revise the role of teacher (and researcher) in classroom systems. In doing so, this research-pedagogy enacts power dynamics that offer participants the opportunity to craft and experience more equitable social relations.

Seeing the Mesh: How Embodied Ethnography Accesses the Intersection of Body, Emotion, and Cognition

Fleckenstein’s “Writing Bodies: Somatic Mind in Composition Studies” and Miller’s “The Nervous System” represent a new attention in composition studies to the body and the embodied-ness of writing and pedagogy. Their exploration of this embodiment illuminates a crucial, previously ignored, dimension of the theory-practice intersection. Deriving a method from the dialectic of the theory-practice relationship, in Berthoff’s terms, requires attending to this bodily dimension because in it we enact the theories we hold implicitly but not yet consciously. Attending to it provides a crucial source of information about our cognitive and emotional processes, information that, as many feminist epistemologists have noted, has been repressed from awareness through Western science’s emphasis on excluding subjective, bodily perceptions as valid sources of knowledge (e.g., see Griffin, especially “Place” 73-96).

Fleckenstein argues that this bodily dimension is inherently integrated with intellectual experience, whether or not an individual is aware of the integration. She defines “somatic mind” as “a permeable materiality in which mind and body resolve into a single entity which is (re)formed by the constantly shifting boundaries of discursive and corporeal intertextualities” (286). Fleckenstein thus refigures Lu and Horner’s tension between discourse and experience. She explains that “[t]here is no natural, biologically essential body; but there is no textual or symbolic body, either” (289). Drawing on cultural anthropologist
Gregory Bateson, Fleckenstein argues that instead the physical and symbolic aspects of our experience intersect to produce our perception, which integrates discursive and corporeal codes. Thus, we experience ourselves in and through our contexts, our material and social environments. But because our perceptions become part of these contexts and because we continually re-integrate discursive and corporeal codes through those perceptions, we are not only shaped by our contexts, we reshape them as well. In doing so, we reshape our own experience. Somatic mind, Fleckenstein explains, “turns back on its own constituting system to (re)constitute the context that creates it. It becomes a sign—a difference that makes a difference—in its own system” (289). The moment when embodied mind reconstitutes its context makes possible reciprocal awareness. Through it, we can learn how we interweave discursive and corporeal codes in specific circumstances, how our bodily, affective, and cognitive dimensions intersect. It allows us to flesh out Berthoff’s explicit method and to grasp the theory-practice dialectic.

For Fleckenstein, the theory-practice dialectic takes shape through the process of immersion in and emergence from relations with a context and an other. Linking immersion with metaphoric, or “is logic,” and emergence with simile-based, or “as if logic,” she explains that the first enacts corporeal coding while the second performs discursive coding (295). She draws on Bateson to associate simile-based logic with classifying objects and metaphoric logic with symbolizing relationships among beings and between beings and environment. Bateson shows how the former logic has contributed to Western epistemology’s mind-body dichotomy, its combative rather than complementary approach to other groups and the environment, and to individualist, blame-apportioning approaches rather than systemic analyses (see especially 177-94; 244-70; 309-37). He associates metaphoric logic both with emotional interactions and with literature, music, dance, and the arts. Rather than arguing for metaphoric over simile-based logic, Bateson advocates drawing on the arts, religion, and human relationships as uses of metaphoric logic that in fact integrate not only the two kinds of thought but the aware and unaware levels of mind that shape our experience (particulary 432-45; 446-53; 454-71). Thus he valorizes experiences that integrate our bodily, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. Fleckenstein extends his work to argue that such experiences combine immersion and emergence. Writing, she argues, ideally combines them as well to integrate corporeal and emotional—or metaphoric—dimensions of experience with its cognitive—or simile-based—dimensions. Immersion enables us to write from our subjectivity, to experience and respond to our intellectual and other contexts, and to mentally evoke (and thus speak) to our readers. Emergence, on the other hand, allows us to step back into “the abstract as if logic of politics, of ideology, of hegemony—into the responsibility of and for boundaries” (297-98).

The same dialectic is required in teaching. An embodied, reflexive ethnography can enable us to examine the dialectic, to recognize where and how we’re enacting pedagogically a corporeal, emotional, metaphoric logic and to undulate between that realm and a discursive logic. Such ethnography itself operates precisely through this undulation, as it moves from the immersion of participant-observation and initial fieldnotes to the emergence of later rereading and coding
fieldnotes and composing an ethnographic text. It cycles between the two stages throughout much of its process.

In seminar, mentors explored this rhythm and its writerly and intellectual ramifications. When Mark finished his class presentation, we discussed the implications of his observation process. As he and Peter explored metaphors for using multiple ethnographic perspectives, they played with the notion of a person watching himself while the watched self observed yet a third “self.” The process was something like watching yourself on t.v. as the “you” on television watched yourself doing something, Mark commented. As the discussion unfolded, I asked Mark whether he’d considered incorporating these multiple perspectives into his ethnography paper. He described the possibility of composing two narrative layers. Seeking elaboration, I asked whether one layer would describe a mentoring session blow-by-blow, while the other layer would present the mentor’s later perspective based on a rereading of his own fieldnotes.

“Thank you!” said Mark as he glanced at me, his voice rising slightly in his response. He’d chuckled as I articulated the phrase “blow-by-blow,” then immediately took up the metaphor. As he turned quickly back to Peter, Mark transposed the figure, explaining, “One is a play-by-play,” as he began describing plans for designing the two narrative layers. As their conversation evolved, Mark and Peter joked about combinations of sportscasters who could represent each narrative layer. Mark then described a contrasting layer that might detail how the fieldnote writer felt or thought about the play-by-play events. Deirdre spoke little but listened intently, occasionally punctuating Mark and Peter’s conversation with vigorous nods.

Miller’s “The Nervous System” offers a powerful frame for reading such interactions and their intersecting bodily, affective, and intellectual dimensions. He argues that attending to our visceral reactions when writing can help us to “excavat[e] bodily responses for material evidence of the ways a culture is present in the writer’s very act of experiencing the composing process and in the reader’s responses to the writer’s text” (272-73). Such attention is equally warranted during pedagogical interactions. The “material evidence” provided by our bodily and emotional responses illustrates how we literally embody and enact cultural metaphors. My teacherly defensiveness in this essay’s opening vignette suggests that I was, in Fleckenstein’s terms, corporeally coding my experience through the metaphor of combat. My use of the figure “blow-by-blow” in characterizing Mark’s first narrative layer, which was to describe the incidents of mentoring, similarly suggests a metaphorics of conflict. Only in the process of rereading and coding my fieldnotes on the seminar did I perceive this figural thread. The realization felt particularly ironic given that, consciously, I see myself as working from feminist metaphors of negotiation and collaboration. Yet the theory I enacted was clearly another, one I’d severed from my conscious awareness and could access only by reading my embodied and languaged metaphorics. This reading, accomplished through the performance of an embodied, reflexive ethnography, allowed me to grasp more of the dialectic between my pedagogical theory and my practice.

Miller details an example of such attention to the visceral in his own writing process. Describing the act of composing a particular poem, he explains how he
felt “overwhelmed with grief”; the act of writing, he says, “caused tears to run down my face” (273, 276). He explains that “writing the poem provided me with a kind of emotional experience which, in turn, supplied me with a new analytical machinery to think about a host of problems related to ‘composition,’ broadly construed as the art of putting oneself and one’s writing together” (273). This writing incident mattered, he concludes, on two levels: that of experience, “in that I physically responded during the process of composing” and that of cognition, “because it provided me with the material for a revision of both my professional and my personal circumstances” (273).

My own realization parallels Miller’s description. While composing an ethnography, I recognized that I was enacting pedagogically an unaware metaphorics of combat. At the level of experience, I saw myself embodying conflicted metaphorics (collaboration/negotiation vs. combat), and I responded viscerally to the knowledge. But the realization has also provided me with an analytic frame, with “the material for a revision of both my professional and my personal circumstances.” Through it, I accessed the intersection between my emotional and cognitive processes by using embodied ethnography to bring my own metaphoric logic into awareness. Like Mark, I’ll enter future pedagogical situations with a new set of lenses. I’ll attend to my embodied and rhetorical actions to augment my awareness of where, when, and how I enact the metaphorics of conflict. Because metaphor logic is the level where emotion, cognition, and embodiment mesh, accessing it and its connection with discursive logic enables me to derive a method from my own theory-practice intersections. As Gestalt theorists Joseph Zinker and Gordon Wheeler both demonstrate, developing such awareness, such an analytic frame, is the first step in transforming an interactional system: when one’s own role in the system changes, its dynamics shift. Because it’s rooted in the ethnographer’s explicit attention to her subjects’ and her own experiences of reality, the ethnography that produces this awareness is phenomenological.

Reweaving the Mesh: Embodied Ethnography, Awareness, and Change

Zinker holds that insight and change rely on increased awareness of the metaphorics that undergird our being and doing, our bodily, emotional, and cognitive experience. Such vision, he says, can “organize itself around another’s wholeness” by focusing on the process, rather than content, of interactions. This vision develops metaphor perceptions of another’s bodily and affective process, and one’s own, as a means of accessing interlocutors’ basic assumptions, worldview, and phenomenological experience of reality (Foreword xiv). Because such phenomenological experience is “a highly personal sensory experience at this moment in time and place,” Zinker argues, “Actuality as it is experienced is a private affair” (Good Form 96). In Zinker’s terms, then, we can never truly know another’s experience. “Sensitive people may express what they experience when they are with us,” he concludes, “but if they were to make an interpretation of the ‘real’ meaning of my behavior, the purity of our experience as it is concretely revealed at this moment would be lost” (Good Form 96).
Yet insights are possible. First, we can listen to others’ terms and our own, attending especially to figural language and its sensory referents. Second, we can attend to both our own embodied metaphorics and others’. “If we construct a ‘process picture’ of him,” says Zinker of an example interlocutor, “made of his words, his voice, his physical choreography, his way of gazing sadly, then that picture, that idea, that metaphor will ‘pull for’ seeing a part of his wholeness” (Foreword xiv). Zinker argues that such perception can allow the perceiver insights “where [the other’s] awareness has not yet traveled” (Foreword xiv). Nonetheless, this potential for insight doesn’t enable objectivity or a naming of “reality.” As Zinker emphasizes, “The content of my experiencing is as valid a datum for me as another person’s experiencing is for him or her. There are no ‘good’ or ‘bad’ experiential phenomena; things ‘just are’” (Good Form 96). In this view, no one’s metaphoric can trump another’s. It offers no single “reality,” providing instead one composed of the intersections among individuals’ phenomenological experiences. This approach makes possible an ethnography that negotiates among such experiences by bringing their metaphorics into focus—into awareness—and then putting those metaphorics into dialogue.

This ethnographic dialogue among metaphorical systems can work toward the social change that both critical pedagogy and critical ethnography seek. It enables the ethnographer to revise her or his role in a given system and so to revise the dynamic of the system itself. Gestalt theorist Gordon Wheeler argues that developing the kind of awareness such ethnography offers feeds the spring of personal and systemic change, explaining that “therapeutic change flows from going to the contact that is possible” (145-46). Thus, it starts, to invoke Lu and Horner’s terms, with the desire to describe participants and the system’s dynamic, to produce knowledge—or awareness—about their workings. Wheeler argues that by using this existing contact to foster awareness, people can initiate change: “The complex interpersonal intervention of joining-and-analyzing that contact process, thereby destructuring it, unblocks the rich and spontaneous possibility of a new and more satisfying creative adjustment, a new organization of self in the field” (146). The very recognition and analysis of an embodied metaphorics—for instance, a metaphorics of conflict—produces an expanded awareness that tills the ground for one to experiment with different roles, different approaches to similar situations and systems. For Wheeler, the very process of developing this jointly crafted awareness fosters systemic change. His work implies that the tension between thick description and encouraging change, as described by Lu and Horner, can become generative if we devise more fully collaborative ethnographic methods in which subjects and researchers, students and teachers, negotiate the naming of their experiences. Such collaboration requires Fleckenstein’s undulation between immersion and emergence, between the visceral, corporeal experience of our own and others’ subjectivities, on one hand, and the abstracted experience of “responsibility of and for boundaries” on the other.

Mark’s presentation demonstrates just this undulation in his description of shuttling between initial fieldnotes, written while he was still emotionally invested in the events described, and later rereadings of those fieldnotes when he had greater emotional distance. Reading Mark’s presentation through the lens of Ball and Lardner’s argument about teacher affect might suggest that Mark has
problematically decreased his expectations for students. In contrast, I argue that Mark’s presentation demonstrates greater development of his ability to see his students’ achievements, achievements that were initially invisible to him. His revised emotional dynamic, his undulation between immersion and emergence, has enabled Mark to see dimensions and motivations of his students’ behavior that he’d previously interpreted more narrowly through the lens of his pedagogical interaction with them. In Wheeler’s terms, this broader vision and awareness ground the capacity to make different, more effective interventions in any system, pedagogical or otherwise. In Lu and Horner’s terms, Mark problematizes his own teacherly experience. He enacts the work of Fleckenstein’s somatic mind by attending to his emotional-intellectual experience to revise his context in shifting his perception of it, changing it by changing his participation in it.

Mark’s work sparked my own parallel development. His transposition of my conflict-based “blow-by-blow” figure into a team-based “play-by-play” metaphor crystallizes one moment of the seminar’s underlying, pervasive tension between metaphoric systems. Mark’s transposition is a single example of mentors’ frequent, often extended, use of the metaphors of team play and teamwork. Mark and Peter acted out of this metaphorics when they centered the discussion of writing strategies among themselves—peers and colleagues—rather than responding primarily to me as instructor. I developed awareness of this tension between metaphoric systems through the process of composing this embodied, literary ethnographic representation of the seminar. In doing so, I paralleled Mark’s enactment of the immersion-emergence cycle.

This essay begins the work of negotiating mentors’ team-based metaphorics with my own conflict-based metaphorics. It takes a first step toward Wheeler’s awareness, toward unblocking “the rich and spontaneous possibility of a new and more satisfying creative adjustment, a new organization of self in the field.” Thus, it works, in Berthoff’s terms, toward deriving a method from the dialectic between theory and practice. It is the form—or rather the process—of embodied, literary ethnography that enables the essay to make its beginning.

If this paper’s scope permitted, I’d present and analyze further instances of mentors’ rhetorical and enacted uses of team-based metaphors. Further, I’d chart what I’m beginning to see as an inevitable tension between team and conflict metaphors in pedagogical situations, and I’d theorize means of working productively with this tension, à la Lu and Horner.
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A Medical Humanities Course: 
A Pertinent Pause on the Medical Beat

Kathleen Welch

As medical students enter the world of clinical discourse, they must absorb not only the vocabulary, but also the structure, logic, and attitude of clinical medicine. Learning medical jargon is one of the crucial steps medical students take toward becoming full-fledged physicians. For the most part, the clinical language medical students learn during training is an impersonal and detached discourse. Michel Foucault argues that medical students learn early on in their training to avoid making any reference to how they personally feel about a patient or a medical procedure; they are taught instead to ‘stick to the diagnosis.’ As medical students become further and further immersed in the passive diagnosis-centered discourse of clinical medicine, they often (even unconsciously) begin to use this medical discourse to maintain some distance from their patients. By reformulating a patient’s pain and problems into a language that the patient doesn’t even speak, the students are sometimes able to reduce the situation’s emotional impact. Even medical students who want to talk more personally about doctor/patient encounters are not apt to do so since they know mastering the clinical language of medicine is essential if they wish to become acceptable members of the professional community of medicine.

“The Literature and Medicine” movement, which took place in the 1960s, was begun in an effort to counteract the impersonal nature of clinical medical discourse. With increased criticism from outside sources that teaching clinical discourse alone was an ineffective way to train physicians, isolated physicians began to look to the humanities, to disciplines such as literary studies, religion, and philosophy, to effect progress in teaching medical students how to communicate with the whole patient. Firmly believing that reading literature works against the traditional tendencies of medical education, medical humanists started employing literature as a means to teach medical students how to think beyond their limited world of experiences to see ‘thicker descriptions’ of our human situation. Believing that medical schools produce medical students adept at diagnosing biological illnesses, but less able to make sound, independent judgments based on personal experiences, medical humanists believe that reading literature can help medical students become “wiser, more observant, and more humane doctors” (Fishbein 651). Current research supports the notion that how well a doctor communicates with and shows a caring attitude toward his or her patients is the most important criterion patients consider when choosing a new physician (Shaw 8),

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but assessing whether reading literature can create more humane and understanding doctors is still open to debate. Although two smaller qualitative studies have been done to assess the immediate effects of a literature and medicine experience (Kohn; Welch), to date, there have been no extensive, longitudinal, quantitative studies done to determine to what extent exposing medical students to literature and medicine courses can improve clinical practice and possibly benefit future patients. Evaluating the long-term benefits of literature and medicine courses is not a high priority area for medicine and literature scholars since faculty release time and funding for such studies are not readily available. Additionally, since the majority of medical schools offer medicine and literature courses on an elective basis, it is difficult to gauge the effects of the course experience since students who enroll in the courses are likely to already be the more well rounded and observant medical students.

This essay will argue that although the field of literature and medicine has not reached a point where disciplinary members are able to demonstrate convincingly the long-term benefits of immersing medical students in literature, recent qualitative data from a study does suggest that one specific tangible benefit of teaching medical students how to read, interpret, and evaluate literature is that it provides medical students a brief but important time for “pausing” to consider medicine and themselves in another light. Although it is not possible based on this one limited study to predict exactly how this “pausing period” will influence the future behavior of these soon-to-be physicians, it is possible to suggest that this course did help these medical students reflect on the fact that medicine is a personal, as well as a professional, discourse by showing them that life experiences and personal prejudices do affect how doctors and patients communicate during medical encounters.

Background of Study

From April 1994 through May 1995, to provide modest insight into whether reading literature really helps medical students deal with the physician-patient encounter, I conducted an ethnographic study of medical students who were taking a required three-hour literature and medicine course. The fact that these medical students were required to take this course is noteworthy since a medical humanities course is usually taken as an elective, thereby drawing only the “captivated” medical student. By engaging with these medical students’ writing, thinking, and actions for a limited period of time, I attempted to learn how medical students talk about the practice of medicine. One question entertained at the beginning stages of my study was the following: When a group of fifth and sixth-year medical students takes a literature and medicine course, considered an interdisciplinary course, what can I learn about the discourse of medicine? I observed two medical humanities classes that fulfilled the students’ course requirement: “The Body Image in Medicine and the Arts” (60 students) and “Literature: A Healing Art” (14 students). Each course had the identical schedule (four weeks, five days a week, two hours each day), required a great deal of writing, and shared many of the same texts. Before each meeting, students were responsible for readings ranging from books such as Richard Seltzer’s Down From Troy to poems
such as those by Sylvia Plath and short stories such as “The Birthmark” by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Class time was devoted to reviewing the material, with each instructor allotting a certain amount of time to discuss a topic in his or her area of expertise. As well as attending classes regularly, students wrote three journal entries, approximately five pages each, that connected to topics discussed in class. In addition to journal writing, students took a final exam at the end of the course in which each instructor wrote two questions based on his or her area of expertise. All these materials were taken into consideration when determining final student grades.

I began my study with the working hypothesis that interdisciplinary learning, such as this medical literature class, can broaden students’ thinking patterns by providing them exposure to forms of learning not common to their disciplines. Gerald Graff says that within their respective university programs, students are never allowed to answer questions such as “What is the most important knowledge—scientific, humanistic or in some measure both? What do these terms mean and what is their relation? Is increasing specialization good or bad?” Graff concludes his discussion by saying that recent interdisciplinary programs have emerged to give students the ability to understand the relationships among disciplines (143). Taking Graff’s beliefs as my starting point, I chose to study medical students because I believed them to be a group of students particularly vulnerable to a specialized mode of training. I envisioned this specialization as a key ingredient in helping me recognize subtle advantages of interdisciplinary learning since a literature/writing class during the third year of medical school is a highly unusual activity for medical students.

Whether one calls the process by which ethnographers combine personal views with systematic collection narration, inscription, or allegory, the end result is the same. Ethnographers purposely weave together the data they obtain from research sites and their own personal interpretations to provide an image of “the story” that coheres for a particular community. Although more formalistic researchers often categorize data around previously formed assumptions, ethnographers adopt a “wait and see” attitude, withholding judgment until the weight of evidence determines particular directions to take. Following this methodology, I developed several themes and patterns in this study about medical students’ experiences in a medicine literature class only after several months of intensely immersing myself in their environment (e.g., I observed the daily classroom activities, read student essays, handed out questionnaires, interviewed both teachers and students, and made myself a part of their community by “hanging out” with them during breaks or before and after class). A basic premise behind my study was the belief that “the meaning and value of a text [e.g., a piece of writing or a conversation] is created in the reciprocal social relations that writers [speakers] and readers construct in their own language” (Brodkey 96). I assumed that by engaging with this environment for an extended period of time, I would be able to determine what meanings of medicine medical students constructed through their day-to-day social and written interactions in this particular class. Thus, while ethnographic methods allow the researcher opportunities for personal insight, they also require verifications of and challenges to those insights through identification with other evidence. Based on my research, I argue that this literature and
A Medical Humanities Class: A Pertinent Pause

When I first began formulating a metaphor to conceptualize what happened to the particular medical students I observed in a medical humanities course, I kept returning to the word “blip” because this word seemed to best convey what these medical students experienced during this class. I associated the word “blip” with concepts that are “brief,” “irregular,” “strange,” “small,” and “quick,” yet “definitive” and “apparent.” As I thought further about what I was trying to convey by using the word “blip,” I realized that the term “pause” might be more appropriate because of the word’s medical connotations. A “pause” in medicine is any obvious break in the rhythmic activity of the body. For instance, since the heart generally beats in very rhythmic, synchronous beats, whenever there’s an irregular heart, it’s defined in medical terms as a “period of pausing.” Since the healthy body is rhythmic, any unnatural “pause” or “irregular rhythmic activity” is suspect. All the medical connotations for the word “pause” nicely complement my notion of this course being a “blip” in these students’ lives. Not only does “pause” connote images of this course being a brief or reflective stop, on the medical circuit, it also accurately conveys how this course was perceived by medical students. This course was as an “irregular” or “arrhythmic pause” on the students’ “rhythmic” medical beat.

The following two questions were included on a survey filled out by the students:

1. A friend of mine, when I told him that I was observing a medicine and literature class, commented that he thought these kinds of classes were “a waste of time,” since medical doctors need to know as much as possible about medical issues and all their time should be spent in these kinds of classes. What is your reaction to this statement? Do you agree, disagree, both? In other words, what did you learn in this kind of class?

2. What, if anything, would you say is the most valuable lesson or lessons you’ve learned from this class? Would you recommend it to others or not? Explain.

When I presented these questions to the students, I expected some students to agree that this course was valuable and worthwhile, but I never expected to receive as many positive responses as were given. Out of approximately seventy completed surveys, only three students commented the course was inconvenient or “a waste of time.” The large majority of students believed the course was valuable if for no other reason than it provided a break from the medical routine. One student writes, “We spend 90% of our time doing the science of medicine. This class was a break where we were reminded of broader social perspectives.” A
second said “as a medical student [she feels] in a rush to learn the facts” and this class “was a break that caused [her] to question the origins and reasons behind medicine and related issues.” A third student writes, “This class is a reminder not to forget that the patient is a person, which you might be surprised to find out can happen (not blatantly though) when you rush thru six clinic patients in three hours due to time constraints” (Welch 310).

For a short but decisive amount of time these students put aside the “rhythmic” world of medicine to hear the “pauses” within the rhythms. Although it is not possible, based on this limited study, to predict exactly how this “pausing period” will influence the future behavior of these soon-to-be physicians, I think it is possible to suggest that because this course exposed these students to other aspects of doctor/patient encounters, these students did begin to conceptualize that medicine is not simply a digested body of knowledge, but a real-to-life, complicated activity. Although it isn’t likely that the average medical student will change into “a different physician” because of this medical humanities experience, it is likely that most of these students will leave this class perceiving and/or approaching their patients a little bit differently. This accomplishment may be as much as medical humanists can hope for since the discourse of medicine is always at the front of these students’ minds.

The “Pausing” Components of a Medical Humanities Experience

A series of textual examples from my qualitative study are included below to illustrate some of the specific ways that reading, discussing, and writing about literature prompted these students to pause and self reflect. One undeniable factor that precipitated medical students’ learning within this environment was the presence of Marjorie Sirridge, MD. Sirridge openly admitted that because she is a physician, students more naturally respond to her messages:

The first time we taught this course, we recognized that there were differences in the way students responded [to me and the Education instructor in the course] even though I made all kinds of efforts to downplay my physician role. Unless I had clinical rounds, I would go in my street clothes. [B]ut when it was all over, students wrote in their evaluations that they liked my ‘practical’ medical stories. (Welch 210)

One student, Carrie¹, said:

[I]t’s nice to be able to talk to a physician like [Sirridge] because she knows how our clinics [medical rounds] work, how our medical school system is, and it’s good to be able to talk and listen to somebody like that. (Welch 213)

¹ All student names are coded, and all transcripts of student/faculty/classroom data are taken from Welch.
One powerful example from the two courses that demonstrates Sirridge’s effect upon the medical students occurred during a September 27 discussion of assisted suicide. The students had read “A Summer Tragedy” by Arna Bontemps, a short story about an elderly couple who chose to drive into a lake to control their own deaths. They had also read an article by Dr. Robert Hudson “The Meaning of Kevorkian,” a story that relays the humane side of Dr. Kevorkian’s assisted-suicide cases. As they discussed the readings, the physician-instructor commented that she knows from her 50 years of medical practice that long before the days of intense debate over the issue of physician-assisted suicide, “there isn’t one doctor who hasn’t helped a patient die, sort of like hospice, providing them with comfort.” At this point, an intense discussion ensued. I relay this discussion verbatim here to demonstrate how eager the medical students were to learn from “someone who knows” about the practice of medicine.

Student #1: Well, like, when did it stop being like “Little House on the Prairie,” where a doctor just said, there’s nothing more we can do, wasn’t this with technology?

M.D. Instructor: Sure, it’s all technology. Can you believe that in my day, there were no ventilators? No breathing machines? So it was acceptable to send someone home. I remember one patient I had with Hodgkin’s Disease. She kept turning up the oxygen and I kept saying she didn’t need that much. She’d say, well, I feel out of breath.

Student #2: Oxygen Toxemia?

M.D. Instructor: No, she just felt like she needed help breathing. There were no blood gases, or electrolytes in my day. You guys can’t believe it. We had to accept limitations.

Student #3: Well, I hate to sound futile, but I think more doctors would do [assisted suicide] if they didn’t want to get sued.

M.D. Instructor (In a loud and commanding voice): People rarely get sued for that. They get sued for not communicating with families, for not explaining, or being careless. That’s why doctors get sued. That’s where suits come in. Record what you’ve done and why, and it will be most unlikely that you will ever get sued. I’ve never been sued or threatened in 40 years. I’m very aware of that, because I’ve made mistakes. But these are the things that have saved me, even during high tech procedures. Talk to the family and be honest. (Welch 234)

Throughout this discussion, I recorded in my notes that these students were “silent,” “mesmerized,” and “totally absorbed” with the physician-instructor’s every word. Particularly at these moments when the physician-instructor speaks from the depth of her more than fifty years of medical experience, students found her a unique source of inspiration and a voice of authority. Regardless of what Sirridge was saying, medical students respected her presence, and this accentu-
ated the importance of her message. For the medical students, the fact that Sirridge was simultaneously a physician and a humanist complicated medical students’ assumption that learning medical knowledge always had to supersede the study of art or literature. Although all three instructors made the students aware of the humanities, it was the physician-instructor who most grounded the humanities as a legitimate form of learning for these medical students.

Another factor that encouraged these medical students to pause and listen to the non-clinical aspects of medicine were the nonmedical students who participated in the course. As these students voiced their critiques of the readings, many of these medical students began to question the notion that accurately assessing a medical situation is simply a matter of diagnosing a patient’s illness. Nonmedical students revealed to medical students the fact that particular social circumstances do affect doctor/patient relationships. Whereas these students had been taught to apply general scientific principles to doctor/patient interactions, the shared experiences of nonmedical students made them aware of the fact that successful doctoring may involve more than diagnosing and treating illnesses.

In the June course, there were eleven nonmedical students (mainly art or literature majors), approximately 20% of the class total. In the September course, two out of the fourteen students were nonmedical students: one was an English major, the other a psychology major. The nonmedical students viewed medical issues differently than the medical students did and these different perspectives enriched the lives of the medical students. As an example, on June 14, during the discussion of women and pregnancy, Sirridge asked the students (particularly women) if they had ever felt separated from their body during a gynecological exam. Carol responded first, saying “well, I’ve had two children with two different doctors and they were different. One was with an English doctor, who talked with other doctors about betting on the weight of my baby. My second baby was in Independence and they were discussing a baseball game, and I felt separate from my body.” Some time later in the discussion, a male medical student interjected that “we keep talking about insensitivity to the patient, but you have to rank it. Babies’ needs come first and mothers’ comfort given only until it affects the baby.” Parsons interrupted the student, asking “according to whom?” The student quickly responds “according to doctors we train with at this hospital.” In her interview, Carol comments on this: “I guess the problem is we’re dealing with such young students that you get comments like ‘when you’re having a baby, the baby’s the main concern.’ I’m sorry, I’m there [having the baby] and I don’t want a doctor ignoring me”(Welch 255). In her paper, Carol elaborated that “she felt like an object during her second delivery” and argued that “in her estimation [the doctor who did this delivery] was not a good doctor” since a good doctor “is one who listens and understands.” Although many medical students felt uncomfortable listening to a “negative conversation” about the practice of medicine, they seemed genuinely involved in what Carol was expressing and considered her other perspectives of doctoring.

On September 12, another dialogue occurred that illustrates medical and nonmedical students’ opposing views of medicine. As the students are discussing Leo Tolstoy’s, *The Death of Ivan Illych*, May brings in her perspective that “doctors have a tendency to say you’re not getting well.” She goes on to say that
“many doctors get angry with [her] because [she] believes in miracles,” and she feels “this is wrong.” Robert was exasperated with Maryann in the September course because he felt that she kept steering the conversation toward religion and away from medicine. He explains in an early survey that:

[Mary] is obviously a devout Catholic background and a lot of her discussions center around religion, something me and the other medical students are not into, study, or read [. . .]. I mean I do have conflicts with my grandparents because they’re just very oriented toward [religion] for me, it’s science. (Welch 252)

As can be seen from this quote, Robert’s frustration with Mary had more to do with his own family background than it did with medicine. At a later point in the semester when I interviewed Robert, he had come to realize that Mary’s in-class comments about her own faith had provoked him to reflect on his own family tensions that have arisen between him and his devout Southern Baptist grandparents as he has begun practicing medicine. This is one of many demonstrations of how nonmedical students from alternative discursive backgrounds affected the focused lives of these medical students. Tammy, a medical student, comments about this fact during her interview. She says that mixed conversations in a literature and medicine class are helpful for these soon-to-be doctors:

It’s kind of interesting to hear somebody’s view who isn’t one of us. Sometimes we’re so geared into thinking one way and you hear things like “oh, there are miracles,” and it’s a thought we are not even in tune with. It goes against all the things we have been taught. Now we’re beginning to consider that maybe people out there who aren’t in the medical profession think this way. (Welch 248)

While these medical students’ traditional training had prepared them to “read” patients in order to interpret medical signs, it had not prepared them to “read” other signs affecting doctor/patient encounters. Thus, as nonmedical students shared their real-life medical experiences, these medical students began to pause to consider the fact that other factors also enter into medical encounters.

A third activity that provided these medical students the opportunity to connect more personally and reflectively to the practice of medicine were the journal writing assignments. The writing assignment for the journal essays, as stated in the syllabus, was to write “three journals of approximately 5 pages […] that should include discussion of several examples of works of art, items in the popular media, literary works, patient encounters, etc. which are relevant to the subjects covered in the course.” This writing assignment was a challenging task for many of these students because their traditional medical classes had never asked them to connect outside experiences to clinical experiences. It was apparent from reading journal essays that many medical students didn’t comprehend (or chose to ignore) the statement on the syllabus that they were to integrate “outside experiences” into journal essays. A large majority of medical students primarily focused on telling their own personal, e.g., usually clinical, stories rather than incorporate many “outside” sources.
A brief, poignant passage of Mike’s description of his own strong body image and his brother’s weak image demonstrates that writing does help him clarify his thoughts and feelings about his brother:

While my brother stumbled his way through grade school, I made up my mind to become a doctor and was quickly placed in gifted and talented classes as I began to really apply myself [. . .]. [Pete] always considered himself an ugly duckling in all the possible meanings of the phrase [. . .]. The thing is, he died two weeks before his wedding [. . .]. [T]he moral of all this scribble is that I have learned how important the body image is in determining not only how others look at and perceive the world, but also how others look and perceive. (Welch 265)

Another female student, Kathy, writes an essay about a former AIDS patient in an attempt to understand what this experience taught her. She begins the essay expressing her initial anger and frustration with this patient, writing “I was furious. This guy must think I’m a joke, believing some story like that from some guy straight off the streets I don’t know anything about. He doesn’t even have a complete record. How could I be so easily fooled?” The writer then puts herself in her patient’s shoes and reflects on why this patient may have lied to her, saying “After I got over my anger, I thought more practically. Would I have lied if I were in my patient’s position.” Toward the end, Kathy tells how she confronted this patient with his lie and provoked him to share his personal feelings. She says,

I told him, I thought about reasons why you might have lied to me, but I can’t think of anything that would be important enough to sacrifice your health over. Our following conversation more than answered my questions. “My life was going pretty good when I found out I was HIV positive,” he said as tears welled in his eyes. At the time he was going to school part-time and waiting tables. When he found out his lover of three years tested positive, he got tested himself.

In the conclusion, she reflects on her own persona: “Did I treat him differently when I knew he had AIDS? No, not homosexuals. But what about winos or punk gang members or women pregnant time and time again and using abortions as birth control? I didn’t feel so good about myself after being honest with myself and realizing I had been judgmental in the past” (Welch 277).

Although these students were trained to write down only what they could “see” or “determine” during a particular medical situation, they discovered through their journal writings that it is also important to note situational factors that aren’t necessarily perceptible or apparent at first glance. For these soon-to-be doctors, learning to read the “unknown” was an important first stride toward comprehending actual doctor/patient relationships. This course contested science’s traditional approach to writing by exposing these students to the fact that they do not remain
“detached” during doctor/patient encounters. By teaching them this lesson, many of these students left this medical humanities experience wiser about the fact that medicine is much more than an impersonal, get-the-facts transaction. Since five years of medical training hadn’t made room for such a discovery, this class was valuable because it gave these students the chance to reflect, at least momentarily, in a less concrete fashion on themselves and their own life experiences through the process of writing. Journal essay writing allowed these students the opportunity to create some sense of connection between their professional and personal selves, and most of these students wanted and needed to articulate such a connection.

Conclusion

Many students revealed that this course was the first time during their five or six years of medical training they felt comfortable enough to talk about or deal with issues such as death or suffering and come to terms with their own experiences with these issues. Through the thinking process evoked by this course, students freshly examined themselves and their medical experiences. Robert tells the story of what it was like for him trying to deal with the death of his patients in a room full of senior-level physicians he was trying to impress. He says that this course finally gave him the opportunity to temporarily step back from this experience and become more aware of what it had meant to him personally.

[This course] is changing the way I read things. It’s really helped me with death and dying. What happens in the seniority of the hierarchy of the med school is that patients with terminal illnesses are rolled all the way down the hill to the third-year students. That’s what happened to me. My first day [in clinics], I had a patient die. Seven days in, my next patient died. Five days after that, and then two weeks after that, [other patients died]. But when they [did] die, what takes the emotion out of it, I mean, really it does is that my senior partner, the resident, his partner, are all in the room and you don’t [show emotion while they’re there]. So this class has let me take a little of that [experience] and reflect on things I did a long time ago when I should have been feeling. The stories put [the feelings] back and help me remember old patients. (Welch 281)

Foucault argues that in every discourse community members are prohibited from using particular kinds of discourses since “we all know perfectly well that we are not free to say just anything when we like or where we like” (176). The kind of discourse most barred in the clinical medical environment is what I would term “personal discourse.” Jack Coulehan agrees, arguing that young medical professionals learn through their clinical training to “substitute technological intervention for personal interaction” when dealing with patients (17). Clinical training had taught these medical students to avoid making any reference to how they personally felt about a patient or a medical procedure; this medical humanities class emphasized active, self-reflective, and discussion-based aspects of patient care.
Louise Rosenblatt notes that “the reader’s role is an active role, not a passive one” (49). Similarly, Ann Herrington argues that as “writers write, they are constantly involved in reading their own writing, reading other material, and using understandings they have acquired from past reading” (232). Writing, reading, and discussing all contributed to broadening these students’ understanding of what it means to be a doctor because these activities helped them recognize that being a good doctor doesn’t always necessarily entail finding the right diagnosis or picking the right multiple-choice answer. It also sometimes entails “reading” a particular medical situation in order to figure out what’s going on at this one moment. These acknowledgments demonstrate that these students began to recognize a more complicated dimension of doctor/patient interactions as they participated in a medical humanities course. Michael Polanyi defines ineffable knowledge as knowledge that “has a meaning for me [. . .] in itself, not as a sign has a meaning when denoting an object” (91). Polanyi’s insight illustrates how a medical humanities class differed from these students' traditional academic training. Whereas most of their classes had taught them “fixed rules of conduct,” this class alerted them to the fact that what’s immediately observable may not tell the whole story. Because the complicated language of patients and doctors was brought forth during this medical humanities course (through the literature, and writing and discussion which ensued), these students began to glimpse the fact that instead of doctoring being a “fixed” procedure dependent upon “impersonal rules,” it is often an “interpretive” activity requiring “natural ability, training, and intellectual effort” (Polanyi 106). Joanne Trautmann states that one goal of medical humanities is to “teach [medical students] tolerance for ambiguity and give them the capacity for coming to conclusions when the data are incomplete or capable of being interpreted variously” (171). This goal of “teaching tolerance for ambiguity” was probably the one most accomplished task I observed during my study. These students didn’t learn to fully appreciate literature; they didn’t significantly alter their medical perspectives; and they didn’t develop a broader appreciation of the humanities. They did, however, come to recognize that “the practice of medicine is an interpretive activity,” because doctors must often “[adjust] scientific abstractions to the individual case” (Hunter xvii). An interdisciplinary literature and medicine course contributes to the education of medical students because it provides them a brief, but important, time for retrospection. As Rita Charon says, “reflecting on practice can grant to doctors time’s ultimate dividend—second sight [. . .] brooding can enrich a doctor’s vision of individual patients and themselves so as to be all the more attentive and able to care” (68). ☐
Works Cited


Inventing Metaphors to Understand the Genre of Poetry

Phyllis Whitin

Poetry should be like fireworks, packed carefully and artfully, ready to explode with unpredictable effects.

- Lilian Moore

Have you ever stared at the sky, and seen a bright, shimmering jet fly through the air?

Heard its roar, seen its bright, shiny hull?
I believe poetry shares the same attributes.

Poetry is a beautiful thing that shines, and can be heard for miles in someone’s heart.

- Robert, Grade 7

A perennial tension that teachers face when exploring poetry with children is how to balance explication and appreciation. As Louise Rosenblatt cautions, “Do not hurry the young reader away from the lived-through aesthetic experience by too quickly demanding summaries, paraphrases, character analyses, explanations of broad themes” (“What” 392). On the other hand, analyzing poetry can further enhance appreciation. Dorothy Strickland and Michael Strickland state, “The talk and learning about poetry comes not as a totally impromptu by-product of the sharing, but as one of the many aspects of a well-conceived literature program” (203). As a seventh-grade teacher, I wanted to form a design for poetry analysis that would encourage children to examine the unique features of poetry without losing “something vital and alive” (McClure 35).

I had previously used an immersion model of teaching poetry at the elementary and middle school levels, in average, advanced, and remedial classes (D. Whitin 456-58). By making oral poetry sharing a daily routine, I found that children of all ages and abilities developed a love of this genre. Children voluntarily learned poetry by heart, shared it with family and friends, spontaneously

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dramatized pieces for their classmates, and chose to write original poetry during writers’ workshop. I was comfortable with the appreciation part of teaching poetry, but I was searching for an entree into a more analytical stance. During the year described in this article, I taught seventh grade in a suburban school in the southeast. My two literature classes were identified as academically gifted, with about 90% Caucasian, 9% African American, and 1% Asian American. I decided to explore ways to analyze poetry more deeply with these children, as well as to draw upon my experience with other populations of children so that the tools we developed would be useful in a variety of settings.

Having taught in the district for several years, I knew that during elementary school these adolescents’ reading experiences had centered around reading stories and poems in basal texts and answering corresponding comprehension questions. Despite their academic abilities, I found that the students were hesitant to describe their personal interpretations of literature of any genre. I felt that the children needed two kinds of experiences before turning to the analysis of poetry. First, I believed that these students, like others in different settings, needed a lengthy immersion period into poetry. Secondly, they needed experience with personally interpreting literature. To address this second goal, I introduced the children to sketching as a response to reading (P. Whitin, 1-4). In this strategy, called “sketch-to-stretch,” children make symbolic sketches for ideas, themes, and characters (Short and Harste, 528-36) rather than summarizing or paraphrasing text.

I postponed formal analysis of poetry until the spring. During this time I developed tentative plans. However, when enacting these plans, I found that my own vision had been limited, and I revised my thinking about the teaching process. In the remaining sections of this article I describe my reasoning in choosing a tool for analysis, the implementation of the project, and the changes that I recommend to others as they use the approach.

Deciding Upon a Tool to Analyze Poetry

First, I decided upon questions that I wanted the students to consider while analyzing poetry: What makes poetry poetry? What is its power? What does it do? Next, I considered how we might examine closely the essence of poetry without destroying its aesthetic dimension. I did not want to revert back to a traditional approach of picking apart individual poems. We needed a vehicle to talk about poetry without dissecting the poems themselves. I decided that creating metaphors about poetry could serve this purpose. These metaphors would be once removed from the poetry itself. Analyzing the metaphors would enable the students to examine the nature of poetry without destroying the wholeness of the poetic experience. I based my decision upon commentaries that poets have made about poetry and the children’s experience with sketching.

My inspiration from poets came from several sources. I read that Eve Merriam had once compared poetry to condensed orange juice (Sloan, 962). Her metaphor helped me to think about the importance of word choice in poetry. Poetry is not “watered down” with excess words. Another of her metaphors helped me consider the way poetry invites multiple interpretations and multiple perspectives:
“As a crystal can be turned in the sunlight to reveal all the colors of the rainbow, so a poem can be turned over and over in your mind and new meanings will radiate” (Merriam 3). Mary Oliver, elaborating on a metaphor by Walt Whitman, emphasized the emotional response to poetry. She compared it to a field or a temple, where the primary experience is feeling, and where intellect is secondary (Heard 46). Poets use metaphors to express what poetry can do.

Metaphor, then, could be a useful vehicle for the students to use to express their thinking. Poetry is grounded in metaphor, and poets themselves use metaphor to explain what poetry means to them. Elliot Eisner’s description of metaphor helped me to see it as a tool that would keep the students from merely listing qualities:

[Metaphor] capitalizes on surprise by putting meaning into new combinations and through such combinations awakens our senses. Metaphor is the arch enemy of the stock response [. . .] for making public the ineffable, nothing is more precise than the artistic use of metaphor. (226-27)

I also felt that inventing metaphors for the essence of poetry would build upon the children’s experience with literary sketching. Throughout the year, the children had created visual metaphors as they sketched responses to stories. For example, one student symbolized a character as a sun because of her positive role in a story, while other children used lines of blue or red to show pain in conflict. Creating visual symbols forced the children to interpret literary features in personal ways, rather than summarizing or paraphrasing a text. I felt that these experiences with metaphorical sketching paved the way for talking about poetry without dissecting it. Earlier experiences had also shown me that students of all ages and abilities could talk about literary devices in quite sophisticated ways through sketched responses. I therefore thought that my current plan for inventing metaphors to explore “what is poetry?” could apply to a wide range of audiences.

In deciding how to enact this plan, I also considered the children’s experience with literature circles. They were quite experienced in extending one another’s ideas through exploratory talk (Barnes 108-15). I wanted the children to invent metaphors individually, but I also believed that through conversation, they would be able to extend their metaphors and enrich their understanding of poetry. I therefore decided that we would follow the authoring/inquiry cycle model (Short and Harste 257-62) as a framework for the experience. The inquiry cycle model capitalizes on the interchange of ideas. It was this decision that brought me the most surprises as a teacher and forced me to revise my future plans about the project. At the outset of the experience, however, I planned the following steps:

• Introduce the idea of describing poetry through metaphor by relating to the students’ experience with metaphorical sketching.
• Conduct a group brainstorming session to generate ideas.
• Allow time for students to develop rough-draft ideas for individual metaphors.
• Meet in authors’ circles to extend and develop one another’s metaphors.
• Present metaphors in final draft form to the whole class.
What actually occurred exceeded my preconceived notions. I had simply expected that the metaphors would highlight various literary devices. As I describe in the following section, the students surprised me with their aesthetic connections to poetry as readers and writers. Through conversation, they extended each other’s metaphors and found patterns and themes among them. I believe that it was the decision to follow the inquiry cycle that led to my changed thinking and revised plans. However, choosing metaphor as the vehicle of analysis proved to be a key decision. By examining poetry through the essence of poetry itself, we kept the mystery, beauty, and personal qualities of poetry alive.

Setting the Challenge

In order to introduce the idea of creating metaphors for “Poetry is. . .”, I asked the students to brainstorm “What poetry does” and “What poetry is” as a class. Some ideas included: poetry is happy or sad, it expresses feelings in depth, there is a certain “ring” to it that includes rhythm and rhyme, it’s your thoughts running wild on paper, it is music or song, poetry lets you get away from the world, you know what it means to you, it makes you observe closely, and poetry is a way to show secrets without saying them. Next, I reminded them of sketched metaphors they had created throughout the year: “Remember Heather’s sketch that showed Mary Call as the sun? And the collaborative sketch that compared Long John Silver to an ocean? What metaphor could you create that might capture some of these ideas about poetry? What is something that makes you happy or sad, or causes you to feel deeply, or is secretive?” I suggested that they think over ideas for a few days. I planned to explore some sample metaphors together after they had developed some ideas.

Megan, however, gave me a better opportunity for exploration. She loved writing poetry, and our discussion inspired her to write a brief essay at home that evening. In it she described how she composed poetry, and she concluded the piece with several metaphors: “Poetry is the tree of life, blown gently by the wind of love,” “Poetry is a child that never grows old,” and “Poetry is a brook that never stops bubbling.” I asked her if the class could interpret one of her metaphors in order to develop ideas for their projects. She agreed, and I copied the brook metaphor on an overhead transparency. I asked, “How is poetry like a brook that never stops bubbling?” They contributed:

- they both have movement
- they both have rhythm
- the rhythm can go slow or fast, but it’s steady underneath
- new ideas surface, just as the water bubbles up
- a stream can be spring-fed; poetry has new meaning over time
- poetry is fresh and refreshing
- poetry is life-giving
- poetry nourishes by sight, sound, taste, feel and smell
- poetry leads to other ideas when a reader connects a poem to personal experiences; a brook feeds into tributaries

As a group we were able to make a number of interesting associations. Each
of the brook’s attributes inspired a connection to poetic devices or a reader’s response. Its flowing movement suggested rhythm; its bubbling hinted at new ideas “rising”; its sustenance implied satisfaction of needs; and its part in a larger watershed conveyed a sense of making connections. After we generated a few other possibilities for metaphors, I asked them to each bring a rough-draft idea for a metaphor to an authors’ circle in a few days.

Already Megan had caused me to revise my plans. I wondered, “But another year I won’t have a Megan. What else could I do to encourage a group discussion?” I decided that I could have invited small groups of children to write descriptions of poetry for initial exploration. I also could have provided children with copies of poems that published poets have written about the nature of poetry, and asked them to use the poems as springboards for discussion. Megan’s spontaneous response helped me to see possibilities for future planning.

Next, I designed another group experience before the children’s rough-draft metaphors were due. I wrote Merriam’s comparison of poetry to condensed orange juice on the overhead. Some students were not familiar with condensed orange juice, so I explained that it is compact, with all the water taken out. To make juice, a person needs to add water. The metaphor and the description sparked an interesting conversation. Stephanie commented that poetry is smaller than a story, but it still has as much meaning. I added that orange juice is really strong tasting, and Keesa remarked, “Poetry pops out at you like an explosion,” (interestingly, an idea quite parallel to Lilian Moore’s at the beginning of this article). The idea of strength interested Kim, who said that emotions are strong, and poetry was emotional. Meg then described that reconstituted orange juice has everything, including the water, and that “having everything in it has taken away the wonder.” Perhaps she had connected the idea of adding water to the expression “watering down.” At first I felt uncomfortable with Meg’s idea because I felt as though part of poetry’s wonder is in its intensity, but I held my tongue and listened to the children. Interestingly enough, her comment inspired several students to ponder where “wonder” comes from in a poem. Several students decided that a reader has to add the wonder to a poem just as a person adds water to the juice. After several student-student interchanges, I found myself becoming more and more intrigued with their ideas. To me they were explaining a transactional view of reading (Rosenblatt, *The Reader* 16-19) through their metaphors. The students’ observations emphasized the active construction of meaning on the part of a reader. The issue that these students were describing reminded me of a professional article that I had been reading the night before. I decided to share a portion of this article with them, so I read aloud, “Interpreters do not decode poems; they make them” (Fish 12). We talked about the similarities between their idea of a reader “adding the wonder” and this professional theory. I used their metaphor to explain further that a reader can create a “new poem,” or new meaning, upon rereading, and I was glad that I had initially held my tongue! Once again I learned the lesson that I must be patient and leave room for children to explore ideas without my interruptions. I was amazed that the metaphorical image of orange juice supported these seventh graders as they expressed quite abstract, theoretical ideas. With this in mind, I looked forward to the sharing planned for the next day.
Extending Metaphors through Collaboration

To be prepared for our authors’ circle day, each student needed to have invented a metaphor and written a reflection to defend how the metaphor described poetry. I found during this time that some students’ comparisons were more figurative than others, some were more developed, and some were not technically metaphors at all. However, each of their ideas generated interesting conversations about poetry. We used the strategy, “Save the Last Word for Me” (Short and Harste 506-11) to share the metaphors. One author stated a metaphor, such as “Poetry is a cloud,” and the other members of the group responded with their interpretations for the metaphor. The author’s perspective was “saved for last.” In this way I hoped that the students would extend and enrich their metaphors through the multiple perspectives their classmates would give.

I visited the groups as they shared, and I tape recorded two of them. Four girls met in one authors’ circle. Keesa announced, “Poetry is like Mariah Carey’s, ‘Without You.’” Both Ashley and Shannon thought that “you can’t live without poetry.” Kelly compared the singer to a poet telling a story. Shannon commented that Mariah Carey has a unique voice and “every poet is different, and everyone has their own style.” Keesa then contributed her idea last, affirming the girls’ ideas and adding, “It is so amazing that she can make an old song new. And that’s like poetry. It can change the way you think about things, just like her remake. It changed.” Just as Mariah Carey revived an old song and developed a new meaning for it through her personal interpretation, so too can readers change their thinking through personal interpretation of poetry. I was reminded of Merriam’s words, “But in a poem, there is only one central character, and it is always the same person. It is the ‘I’ of the poet who is really you the reader” (2).

Rusty, a student in another group, later told me that his authors’ circle had helped him extend the meaning of his metaphor. Originally, Rusty had decided that poetry was a perpetual motion machine because the motion of the machine was like the rhythm of a poem. After thinking some more, he decided that this perpetually moving machine could also symbolize that poetry can be preserved forever. During his authors’ circle conversation, he made another connection. He realized that “no one really knows what a perpetual motion machine looks like because one hasn’t been discovered. That’s almost exactly like poetry. No one knows exactly what a metaphor for [poetry] is because they haven’t found a perfect one.” Rusty’s last observation highlighted the notion that there is no one-to-one correspondence between a metaphor and its referent. We were dealing with the ineffable, so we could not find the “perfect” solution to capture the essence of poetry, just as people have not created a “perfect” perpetual motion machine. Neither experience is finished or closed.

Julie reported that her authors’ circle participants related their ideas to each other as they talked. I found this interesting, since their metaphors were quite different. Dahlia said that poetry was a treasure chest with a missing key (the reader finds the key), Heather thought that poetry was a jewelry box with ornaments for varied occasions, and Julie decided that poetry was all the extra emotions in the world. Despite the differences among their metaphors, the three girls found that they shared an appreciation for the generative power of poetry.

Julie
wrote, “Me, Dahlia, and Heather discussed how every time a poem is read, a new idea is generated and a new idea from that, etc. Sort of like poetry is just images or thoughts passed down from other poems.”

While listening to discussions, I was impressed with the wide variety of metaphors that the students had created. Many of the metaphors reflected personal interests of various students. Jackie compared poetry to piano playing; he played piano. Shannon, who loved tennis, said poetry is a tennis match. Candice’s father was an artist, so she chose one of his paintings to help describe poetry as art. Rusty, who was fascinated with scientific discoveries, called poetry a perpetual motion machine. Despite their differences, however, most of the students extended their metaphors by “saving the last word for me,” or connected them to one another by discovering underlying patterns. Shannon deepened Keesa’s metaphor of personal expression in poetry, and Rusty’s authors’ circle gave him new perspectives to consider about his perpetual motion machine. Julie, Heather, and Dahlia discovered new ways to express the ongoing process of meaning-making. This spirit of connecting and extending metaphors that we developed during authors’ circles paved the way for a fruitful whole group celebration of metaphorical writing. However, my expectations for the final sharing were short-sighted. I expected that the culminating celebration would serve as a summary of our exploration; instead, it became an additional opportunity for extending and connecting ideas. I later realized that I could extract from this final experience teaching practices that could facilitate these connections in future lessons.

Celebrating and Extending: Examining a Writer’s Perspective

After our discussion of Megan’s “bubbling brook” metaphor, I noticed that certain themes, such as the never-ending possibilities for personal meaning, crossed several metaphors. That night I wrote in my journal, “Maybe patterns and themes would help us tie together ideas and develop a sense of the uniqueness of poetry.” I was beginning to see the potential of metaphor that Pugh, Hicks, Davis, and Venstra describe: “Through metaphorical thinking, divergent meanings become unified into the underlying patterns that constitute our conceptual understanding of reality” (3). When the children gathered to celebrate their finished projects, several key patterns did emerge.

We sat in a circle, and one by one students read aloud their favorite poem and their metaphor essays. Two or three students responded to the ideas of each presenter. These comments helped to connect ideas across metaphors. No one metaphor could capture completely the nature of poetry, but clusters of metaphors offered perspectives on poetry for us to consider. Some students had created metaphors that emphasized the writing of poetry; others had concentrated on the reading of poetry, and still others had considered both poet and reader.

Julie, for example, identified with the poet’s process of writing. First, she shared Merriam’s “I, Says the Poem,” and then commented:

Poetry is everything in the imagination, and poetry is all the extra thoughts and emotions in the world. A poem can be anything like a little girl or an old man. And the way poetry is started, one poem is written, and that con-
tinues a cycle. Someone reads that, and they get a thought, and they write it down, and they get a thought from someone else, and those two thoughts together can inspire a poem. And like they lead to other things, and later on they might affect your writing. So it’s sort of like how everything that you read adds up bit by bit, like little things make up the ocean [. . .] anything you read comes out in your poems.

Julie’s explanation reflected her own extensive experience of writing both poetry and prose. She realized that anything can become a topic for writing through an author’s imagination and that all experiences and reading create a fund of writing material from which to draw.

Next, Andrew described poetry as a plane in flight because planes can take people to new places. Most of his explanation centered on the role of the poet. He called the pilot the poet, the controls pencil and paper, and the wings the lines “because they keep the plane steady.” The passengers were the readers. During the time for comments Andrew added a new idea, “If the plane crashes, that would make it a bad poem.”

Julie objected, still taking the perspective of a writer that she had developed in her own metaphor: “If a poem doesn’t work, then you can go back to it and get one line from it or something. You could go back and get an old part of the plane. Like you could take the plane apart and take out the pieces that could be used with another poem.” Reacting to Andrew’s metaphor gave Julie an opportunity to elaborate upon her understanding of the process of writing, for she herself often found seeds for a promising piece of writing from a discarded draft. Julie showed me that a personal metaphor can become a lens through which a learner can interpret another point of view as well as develop one’s own.

A Second View: Taking the Reader’s Perspective

A few minutes later Sarah read her paper, in which she called poetry a “dandelion in a meadow of light”:

As I walked through the tall, green grass, I saw a dandelion and not so many other flowers. I took the dandelion in my hand, and just looked at it awhile, pondering my wish. When I finally decided the wish I wanted, I blew the fluffy, white flower into the wind. Then I went along my way, still holding on to my wish. I chose poetry is like a dandelion because when you come to a poem, you have to read it, and you have to read it over and over again. And just pondering the poem, just like you ponder a wish [. . .] if you do poetry quickly without pondering it, you won’t understand it, and it won’t be as meaningful to you.

Sarah’s metaphor developed her perspective of the reader’s stance in poetry. Julie, however, still influenced by her writer’s perspective, concentrated on a different attribute of dandelions. She commented, “When you talked about how when you blow it and it scatters, it’s sort of like when you read a poem and it scatters different ideas. And like each one of those little seeds is going to be a new flower,
and each is going to turn into a new poem.” Julie’s remark strengthened both Sarah’s metaphor and her own. Julie extended Sarah’s idea by taking a different perspective on the seeds blowing in the wind, emphasizing that they bear new flowers. On the other hand, having the opportunity to consider Sarah’s metaphor supported Julie to add a new dimension to her own thinking about writing.

Next, Raymond remarked that he, too, could connect his idea to Sarah’s, but from a different angle. Raymond’s metaphor was “Poetry is a spark.” He explained, “If the spark hits wood or leaves or whatever, at exactly the right time, that would be the reader’s thoughts. Then it becomes a fire. And the more thoughts the reader can come up with, the bigger the fire is, and the more important it would be to that particular reader [. . .]. You have to have wood from the reader—an open mind.”

Raymond’s metaphor, like Sarah’s, shows the reader’s active stance. Amy McClure describes the same idea in this way: “Although [a poem] owes its creation to the poet, it owes continued life to its readers and listeners” (35). Raymond’s perspective of the reader affected the way he interpreted Sarah’s dandelion metaphor. He extended her metaphor to show how he saw the connection: “I think that a dandelion is a good way to describe it because, if you’re out in a field full of flowers, there’s flowers out there. And a dandelion is really just a weed. It’s real simple, and you don’t really want to look at it, but some people are going to bend over and pick it up anyway. And that’s the people who are going to understand the poetry.” By developing Sarah’s idea of taking time to ponder a weed, Raymond, too, enriched Sarah’s metaphor. His comment also balanced the reader-writer relationship that Julie initiated. Only would potential writers benefit from reading poetry if they took time to “bend over and pick it up anyway.”

I found my own thinking changing during the conversation as well. For instance, Heather compared poetry to a jewelry box with a dancing ballerina. She explained that jewelry boxes contain a variety of jewelry for all tastes and occasions, just as a wide variety of poems appeal to different people for different reasons. The ballerina represented the way poems “sing to you.” However, several of the students’ comments focused on the music box. As they talked, I found myself thinking about the simple structure of a music box song. It reminded me of the economy of words in poetry. I commented, “The song in a music box is always really simple, and poetry is kind of pared down to the bare essentials of meaning. You know, you can’t have a lot of extra words in poetry. You pare it down so that each word is really concentrated.” Rusty added that my explanation was similar to Merriam’s poem, “How to Eat a Poem” because there’s nothing left over. Then Julie realized that our comments were similar to Merriam’s metaphor of condensed orange juice. The power of metaphor and of exploratory talk were affecting me, too. I connected my personal interest in music with my own appreciation for poetry, but without the students’ comments, I would not have done so. I, too, was a learner during the discussion.

This part of the discussion evolved in unexpected ways. In reflection, I now see that other teachers could encourage students to make connections among metaphors with questions such as, “Who else can relate a metaphor to Sarah’s dandelion idea?” “What do these metaphors suggest about writing poetry?” Of course,
listening for additional insights to highlight is equally important to including these questions. The experience of these children only shows one possibility. One lesson from this experience, however, is probably applicable in all cases: the role of the teacher as a learner. During this discussion I found myself sharing my own process of thinking, and I believe taking this stance encouraged the students to think more flexibly as well.

Finding a Theme Among Metaphors

This sharing of metaphors led to one other overall generalization. During the discussion the group discovered an underlying theme of cycles among many of the metaphors, and several students attempted to relate more and more metaphors to this idea. Julie began by describing how one poem leads to the creation of another. When Sarah shared her dandelion seed idea, Heather said, “It’s like Julie’s poem; it was a cycle.” Dahlia connected Julie’s image of the ocean as a cycle of the tide going in and out. When Candice showed her art slide as a metaphor, Julie noticed a sun in the painting: “I thought of the sun; the sun has always been here, just as poetry’s always been here. It keeps going, and the sun keeps going around [. . .] back to the cycle again.” Steven’s metaphor compared poetry to a caterpillar that became a butterfly “if you gave it time.” His classmates then connected metamorphosis to the theme of cycles. I marveled aloud that one idea led to another. Suddenly Dahlia exclaimed, “Cycle is a big theme! Think about it, everybody!”

The idea of a cycle implied that poetry lives over time, and that it is enriched by each reader’s experience. Equally important to the students was the notion that poetic interpretation is deeply personal. When George compared poetry to a key, he explained, “Some keys can open some locks, and some poems only mean something to certain people, so they can only get into the mind of certain people.” Dahlia, whose metaphor was a treasure chest with a missing key, described a similar symbol but from a different angle. She insisted that each person (reader) has a different key, and each has to find that special key to unlock the treasure. Raymond’s spark metaphor implied personal meaning, as did Heather’s jewelry box. However, personal meaning can change over time, as illustrated by the conversation around Robert’s metaphor. He called poetry a cargo ship, and the class discussed what would happen if the ship sank. Raymond thought that the sunken ship, or forgotten poem, would never be as good as it was originally, but I objected: “Sometimes sunken treasure is more valuable.” Raymond, following this idea, changed his mind and said, “People might read poems that they don’t like, and then they come back and read it again and say, ‘Good!’ People’s attitudes toward something change.” The idea of a cycle was modified by this perspective. A cycle is ongoing, but it may be altered, thereby opening new potential. Similarly, poetry lives on, yet it reflects new personal interpretations and new forms of expression over time. Merriam expresses it this way: “[Poetry] becomes like a stone that you skim on a lake; the ripples widen. New meanings unfold, and you have the pleasure of discovering more and more each time” (4).
A Final Reflection

Through individual and collaborative work, these students identified several of poetry’s unique features that are consistent with the views of poets themselves: readers make new meanings over time, yet poetry changes readers; poetry evokes emotions; it is deeply personal; it is rhythmic and image-laden; and reading and writing poetry influence one another. However, despite all of our attempts to define a cycle of meaning-making, a reader’s perspective, or a writer’s perspective, none of our ideas could fully explain the fullness and the mystery of poetry. Using metaphors to frame our thinking preserved poetry’s ineffable qualities. Metaphors have no one-to-one correspondence with their referents; they bridge the known and the abstract through interpretation. Maintaining an interpretive stance kept us from reducing poetry to a list of dry attributes. I felt as though the students deeply explored poetry as a genre while enhancing their appreciation of it. As a teacher, I gained a new appreciation for the power of metaphor that is manifested in unexpected ways. I learned to be a better listener to my students.

Although I was extremely excited about the insights that children generated individually and collectively, through reflection I have revised my ideas about using this plan with other groups. I particularly wish that I had planned for the students to reflect upon the meaning of their metaphors as they repeated a cycle of immersion into reading and writing additional poetry. I now would include in my plans for future experiences:

- Introduce an interpretive response to literature through sketch-to-stretch.
- Postpone formal poetry analysis until after a lengthy immersion period.
- Provide opportunities for students to create collaborative poems about what poetry means, and engage in small-group readings of similar poems by published authors.
- Extend metaphors through small and large group brainstorming.
- When sharing rough-draft metaphors in authors’ circles, encourage students to look for patterns and connections among metaphors.
- When sharing refined metaphors in a large group, take an active role in asking students to relate their metaphors to each other and to further extend the metaphors rather than regard them as “finished” products.
- After developing metaphors, use them as a frame of reference while reading and writing additional poems; test out and refine the ideas in the metaphors over time.

I conclude, then, with an invitation to others to take these ideas and transform them in new ways with their own students. These strategies serve not as templates, but as suggestions. With plenty of room left for surprise, more students will continue to discover what Stephanie observed: “Understanding poetry is like trying to understand a rainbow; it has no limits, no beginning and no end.”


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Remembering Things We’ve Never Done: Memory’s Daughters and the Literary Experience

William C. Johnson

From early literature to the present, the creative process has been linked to memory. The Greeks depicted Memory (Mnemosyne) herself as mother of the Muses; without Memory, the Muses would be unable to inspire creative and recreative participation in the arts. Their inspiration, in classical terms, engages artists both in remembering their own origins and then in “re-membering” forms into new formations. Memory is equally important to the perceivers of artistic creations, those inspired by the work of others and who, through reading, share in creating new worlds. Connecting to place and people, by suspending us in that liminal space where fiction and fact, art and life, converge, Memory and her daughters empower us to reorganize our understanding of reality and to shape a deeper understanding of the self.

Although the phraseology may strike the modern ear as odd, we have all found ourselves “inspired by the Muses.” Listening to a symphony (where the Muses’ participation is recalled even in the word “music”), viewing (perhaps in a Muse-um) a painting, or “musing” over a book, we employ a complex of various cognitive faculties, doing so in a dynamic of recognition, information retrieval, re-collection, and memory. And though we no longer write of Mnemosyne as a goddess who helps us collect and recollect the past, remembering her archetypal roles allows us to be more conscious of Memory’s integral involvement in shaping Western thought and culture. Remembering Memory also helps us understand her importance in the writing/reading process and deepens our appreciation of the experience of artistic inspiration—for which her daughters, the Muses, may even today be credited. And recollecting Memory, particularly as she stimulates our active reading both of literature and of ourselves, enables us to stand mindfully in the doorway of the present, poised between past and future, remembering the connectivity of origins and of our own original selves. In other words, by awareness of Memory’s roles and presence, we draw upon and are inspired by memories to weave our literary reading into the narrative of our own experience and to seek through the fragments of lives-in-books our own psychic wholeness.

Re-Membering Memory

In this broader context, it is worth considering the origins of Memory. In the old literatures, both Eastern and Western, it is no coincidence that the subject of creation stories is often the sky/gods’ and earth/beings’ interaction. It is likewise
no coincidence that in such literature the narrator is inspired (literally in-spirited and breathed-into) by the gods, who are able to tell the stories because they have first-hand experience of “the beginnings.” In Western thought, Memory’s origins return us to some of the earliest Greek myths, those describing the union of Uranus and Gea and the birth of their twelve children, the Titans.

Being children of Uranus (Sky) and Gea (Earth), the Titans are cosmic elements. Among those twelve Titans is Mnemosyne. By her nephew Zeus, she had nine children—the Muses—hence Memory’s essential connection with history and the arts. Thus, with divine help Memory originates and gives birth to inspiration. The Muses themselves echo their function, and the word “muse” is linked etymologically with pondering, collecting, recollecting, and reminding. It is important to think of the Muses (i.e., history and the arts) as offspring of Memory, for, without Memory, neither history nor the arts would exist.

Yet Mnemosyne is greater than her genealogy and her progeny. Ginette Paris writes that Mnemosyne “is at the source of every culture and her work is essential to the survival of every group [. . .]. In an oral culture memory includes all knowledge, all practical know-how, all history, and all the mythology handed from one generation to another” (119). The names of Mnemosyne’s Muse-daughters give some idea of their scope: Calliope presides over epic poetry; Clio over history; Euterpe over lyric poetry; Melpomene over tragedy; Terpsichore, choral dancing; Erato, love poetry; Polyhymnia, sacred music; Urania, astronomy; and Thalia, comedy (Morford 61-62). Through their mother, Memory, the Muses keep us in contact with the first things (origins and originals), with those beginnings when earth (Gea) and heaven (Uranus) were united. Memory, therefore, remembers and reassembles our original oneness and wholeness, both collectively and personally. By musing, we are reminded of both what was and what will be; by re-calling, we call into active presence what already is. According to Hesiod, Mnemosyne knows “all that has been, is, and will be.” Mircea Eliade suggests that:

when the poet is possessed by the Muses, he [sic] draws directly from Mnemosyne’s store of knowledge, that is, especially from the knowledge of “origins,” of “ beginnings,” of genealogies. The Muses sing, beginning with the beginning—the first appearance of the world, the genesis of the gods, the birth of humanity. The past thus revealed is much more than the antecedent of the present; it is its source. In going back to it, recollection does not seek to situate events in a temporal frame but to reach the depths of being, to discover the original, the primordial reality from which the cosmos issued and which makes it possible to understand becoming as a whole. (71)

Through the unfolding of their family history, the timeless Muses are intimately identified with time, from its earliest moments and figurations through its present manifestations and to its future unfoldings. Zeus, son of Chronos, is father of the Muses; thus, history and the arts are in part engendered by the Son of Time. And time is intimately identified with, and essential to, narrative, which in its most elementary form is the accounting of a temporal succession of events; in
one pattern or another, narrative is fundamental to “story,” where it connects times, worlds, and people in active, patterned participation. It is no wonder that we are fascinated with that which transports us from one time to another. In Alice Walker’s *The Temple of My Familiar* and in Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones*, regression upon regression returns us to time before time and to the roots of the primordial and primitive, to the prime, the origins, of being. Rene DuBos posits that even Jack London’s *The Call of the Wild* probably owes part of its success to its ability to evoke “ancient precivilized traits that persist in man’s [sic] nature” and that celebrate “the mysterious and wonderful world of the past which survives in the deepest layers of man’s [sic] nature” (qtd. in McConkey 33).

Robert Sardello observes that “Mnemosyne [...] brings the gods into active, playful, artful speech, uniting their fateful workings with the world we daily inhabit, making a bond or bridge between the world available to our senses and the ever-present action of the gods” (39-40). To be possessed by Memory is to be empowered to see the present in the larger picture, to know where boundaries are, and to have the choice to exceed them. The timelessness of these states, especially in terms of the unconscious, implies their coexistence; this atemporal simultaneity gives rise to a form of insight or intuition that perceives hidden connections between and among events over the span of all time. Just such a condition of no-time/time/all-time is nicely exemplified in one of the great tales from Northern mythology. The chief Norse god Odin, guide of souls, bears a raven on each shoulder; one (Huginn) is Thought; the other (Muninn) is Memory. Each morning, Odin dispatches these birds to fly out into the world; each evening the birds return home to Valhalla where they relate the day’s events so that Odin, who, on the basis of what Thought and Memory counsel him, determines the fate of humankind.

Memory also has her dark side. She can destroy time, especially the past. To lose memory is to have amnesia, etymologically linked with “mnemonic” and Mnemosyne. To have amnesia literally means to lose our memory of the past, to be out of active contact with the roots and origins of being. Pausanias, in the second century C.E., gives an account (9.39.8) of Mnemosyne’s spring, next to which flows another fountain—the spring of Lethe. The first one connects us with primordial design and oneness, the second to forgetting, to being hidden, and to not even noticing what else is hidden (qtd. in Karenyi 121). To lose contact with Mnemosyne is to lose our connectivity, a sense not just of the historical past, but of our personal and collective place. Thus, epic literature almost always rings with a sense of nostos (nostalgia), of homecoming, a remembering of, and returning to, where we came from, lest we forget. The loss of Memory is associated with the loss both of past and future, a condition similar to that of the damned spirits who inhabit Dante’s *Inferno* and who ultimately are disempowered by living solely in their present.

To Hesiod, Mnemosyne weaves the fabric of our lives. But Hesiod also notes that Mnemosyne’s patterning of our lives is capricious. In the words of Virginia Woolf, “Memory runs her needle in and out, up and down, hither and thither. We know not what comes next, or what follows after” (49). Memory’s “capriciousness” is a complicated subject, and she only appears capricious because we situate ourselves in worlds that are logical, orderly, and comfortably framed by our
limited experience and limited scope. Unlike us, Mnemosyne is not so constrained, and the sometime jumble of Memory ought to remind us that pattern itself is fleeting and is something we create; it is also something that can be created and recreated, ad infinitum, with the same materials, much like the unending weaving of Odysseus’s Penelope. Accordingly, the “same” plot can be used, reused and revised countless times in equally, countless poems, plays, and novels. Mnemosyne’s capriciousness does not reflect a fault but, instead, suggests that Memory “is nimble, innovative, interpretive” and that she “works in more than one direction,” producing more a tangle than a single taut thread (Sexton 41-42). At the same time, that tangle offers each of us, as writer, reader, critic, or individuating psyche, a way to find our own story in multiple forms and by means of various voices calling us from numerous sources. Weaving becomes a characteristic metaphor for memory’s operation; the analogy is appropriate because it suggests the procedural nature both of weaving—in which new and different patterns, designs, and forms are constantly being produced—and of memory, always in the process of bringing forth different memorial configurations and an ever newly shaped Self (Olney 20).

Our examinations and accounts of Memory reflect the variety of her identities, voices, and functions. Mnemosyne fashions, re-shapes, and continues to pattern our various ways of constructing our culture and thought. Ironically, despite millennia of philosophical, theological, scientific, medical, and technological explorations of who she is and what she does, Mnemosyne herself remains illusive. She appears transcendentally in an infinite variety—much the same as archetypes are reflected and expressed in, but are not the same as or limited to, the myths that depict them. Her own dispersed activities, sometimes reflective and sometimes anticipatory, allow us, as well as induce us, to generate psychic wholeness.

Memory and the Psyche

If we consider Memory as archetypally active, it is perhaps she who stimulates us into actions that draw us towards the wholeness that is her origin. Such an action might be any analytic process, either psycho- or literary analysis, that would move us to remember or to seek connection. These processes are neither arbitrary nor completely private, except insofar as the analysand or reader incorporates the text into his or her own experience.

The text of a book and the text of a life are readable in many of the same ways; our knowledge of one assists in the knowing of the other. We know Odysseus’ Ithaca, Arthur’s Camelot, Dickens’ London, Thoreau’s Walden, and Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County because our memories—conscious and unconscious, individual and collective—tell us we have been to the heart of these places. Similarly, we recognize such people as Medea, Dante the pilgrim, Hamlet, Emma Bovary, Faust, Prufrock, and Sula because they stimulate in our own memory the very deepest parts of our own Self (sometimes, until then, unknown even to ourselves). We remember them and, in doing so, remember our psyches. As we constitute the meaning of the literary text, we constitute ourselves (Iser 150).
We might find it useful to consider memory a force of the psyche, an energy that, like Psyche herself, has its own reality. In analytical psychology, for example, developing a creative, collaborative relationship with our unconscious and ultimately seeking psychic wholeness are the goals of analysis. In archetypal psychology the goal is soul-making. The work of Memory is identifying and recreating that wholeness that was and can be again and healing the broken yet reparable soul. Memory, the soul’s magnet, draws us to our dispersed psyches and, in the process of recollection, reassembles our fragmented self. Memory blends fictions and perceived realities, shaping and reshaping each as she weaves new fabrics out of old cloths. Irish playwright Brian Friel comments on this fiction/reality liminality when, in his play Dancing at Lughnasa, he revisits his own childhood. He begins his play with “And so, when I cast my mind back to that summer [. . .] different kinds of memory offer themselves to me” (1) and ends with the profound observation:

But there is one memory of that Lughnasa time that visits me most often, and what fascinates me about the memory is that it owes nothing to fact. In that memory, atmosphere is more real than incident and everything is simultaneously actual and illusory. (71)

Perhaps the illusory nature Friel describes is a result of the inability to actually hold onto a definition of Self. As we attempt to define who we are, we find ourselves limited by our relationship to space, to time, to other persons (living and dead, “real” and fictional), and to an unlimited array of factors that shift each time any of the other factors change. In one sense, the psyche’s search for wholeness and stability stimulates the life quest itself. In this pursuit, Memory reminds us of our fragmented oneness and suggests that what was can be again. Prose fiction, drama, and poetry all provide us examples of these relationships and these factors; the artist originating such works creates a new world that, in its own ways, becomes part of our world and our revised reality. In the non-fiction of our daily lives, our longing for contentment, rest, self-knowledge, and self-atonement, reflects the same push and pull of Memory’s activities.

In dealing with the fragmented self in search of wholeness, archetypal psychologist James Hillman, like Friel, believes that the empirical facts of one’s life are far less important than how one remembers them, how one internalizes and is driven by them, and how one weaves them into realities of one’s own. Hillman and others reconceive therapy in terms of an analysis of fiction, in which imaginative art becomes the model and in which patients are brought to a consciousness of their stories and then are set upon the work of re-writing the story collaboratively by retelling it in a more profound and authentic style (45). Thus, the transference of “fiction” and “reality” is effected, and an individual becomes author of his or her own life.

In analysis, it is often through memory that what we knew becomes what we know. In a complex dynamic of cognition and recognition, of calling in the present, on the past, to shape the future, we bring images and imagery to the threshold of decision and action. In this liminal space and time, reflection (which Jung, among others, identifies as the more conscious counterpart of memory) connects us with
dreams, symbols, and fantasy (Samuels 128-29). Thus, reflection becomes instrumental in bringing meaning to one’s life. Both memory and reflection participate in the opening and developing of our psyches; both extend our psychic boundaries by expanding experience and reality. In their own ways, reflection and memory help create the worlds we, as writers as well as readers inspired by our own muses, experience and perceive in literature. This is, in part, how psychoanalysis functions when it encourages a remembering of our stories and, then, with the joint work of analyst and analysand, leads to a re-membering (through amplification and circumambulation) of the materials from a new point of view and within a new narrative. This is how artists and reflective readers operate. For many readers, these new narratives and new worlds are “new” only in the sense that they are fresh to our consciousness, having already existed in the unconscious, and are now re-collections energized by reflection (literally by bending again and, in this case, paradoxically, bending back to what is the newly-composed Self). By such means identity is constructed and reconstructed, woven and re-woven, repeatedly. In the midst of the Heraclitean flux of all things, Memory allows us a poised receptivity, even if only briefly, of the self that was, is, and can be.

Towards a Literary, Psychic Wholeness

In making ourselves whole, we both write as well as read our stories; Memory’s many roles and functions become especially evident and important in considering writer/reader interactions. These connections, and our own psychological, psychic, and even neurological participation in them, are complex and may be exemplified by the very ways we respond to a work of prose fiction or a narrative poem. After reading such a piece, we do not remember the whole story, action by action, line by line. Instead, we recall the “essence” of the work, internally indexing it in various ways. When one of those indices reminds us of the story’s essence, we may expand it into our own version of that original, yet we are likely to tell our version differently depending on which index brings the story to mind and of what else it reminds us (Schank 25).

As readers, it is the (re)creative work of the artist that allows us to find the sources of Self that characterize our humanity. Memory ultimately links us to the origin of things, empowering us with an expanding awareness of time and an ability to reorganize our worlds. The heaven-and-earth union of Uranus and Gea provides the transportive link for readers recollecting that they are part of something larger than themselves (“That Man may know he dwells not in his own,” as Milton writes in Paradise Lost). The literary experience can do this, too. In our own literary and literate culture, one has only to look at the considerable body of current literary criticism to witness how powerful is this notion of Memory as encapsulating cultural identity or how powerful is the assertion of family-race-gender-memory. Each has become both a public and personal necessity. The popularity of written and cinemagraphic narratives that concern, for example, the Holocaust, slave narratives, and world wars, suggests our contemporary inner longing for identification with our past, so that by rediscovering connectedness we might be better prepared to shape our future. For us memory is thus both
recollective and anticipatory, adapting with self-adjusting plasticity to changing stimuli and circumstances.

Truly encountering the present enables one to transcend time, where past, present and future all exist in a different relation to time than that experienced by the conscious ego. Memory links our personal narrative with a larger trans-temporal, trans-spatial narrative, examples and fragments of which comprise the subject of literature at all times and in all places. Conversely, without memory, narrative—the unfolding of a series of events—could not exist. Had we no memories, either personal or collective, either conscious or unconscious, we would have no remembrance of the meaning of words and, therefore, would have no ability to understand text. The via linguistica would lead us to no place, as place could not be carried from there to here or here to there.

Our personal memories, then, which we so often take for granted, become very much a part of the reading/writing process. The artist, whether reader or writer, may not be conscious or cognizant of the extent to which memory shapes artistic expression, but gathering from the past, reshaping known material, selecting what to include in accordance with the needs and interests of the present are essential to any artistic production, and all of these operations rely on memory as an active, creative force, not just as a “receptacle for the dead weight of times gone by” (Flores 381). Memory is thus essential both to creation and to recreation. The Muses who inspire our reading/writing are the same ones who, through their mother, make possible our reading/writing.

For both artist and receiver, Memory flows freely between the unconscious and conscious, allowing a suspension of “reality” and immersing us in liminality where “the impossible” is held up as “possible” and where fiction becomes fact. Memory herself is composed as “much of fantasy as of recovered information [. . .] mak[ing] stories of the past by giving shape to fragments of lost experience—personal, cultural, archetypal—and [she] stories the present by giving depth to the immediate” (Sexson 43). Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* gives rich, rhythmic voice to this when the title character actually is created out of memory itself, born of the memory of a mother escaped from slavery, who cannot forget having killed (out of love) her infant daughter. The reader never is certain if Beloved, the young woman who years later enters the mother’s life, is “really” a person or a memory-generated fantasy. In literature as in life, the experience of memory sometimes floods us unawares and often catches us, like Beloved’s mother, off guard. Memory’s actions are, and her presence is, intimately connected with associations. One action, one thing, re-minds us of another, and that, of another. The smallest gesture, the slightest bit of dialogue, can link us with a character who moves us to recollect other characters or other people we know or have known. These associations reshape who we are. And whether consciously done or not, the memory connections are either stimulated by, or are themselves, a longing that pulls us nostalgically backward and telically forward to the Self from which we came and to which we strive to return. Such deep longing, *Sehnsucht*, keeps us connected, in much the way that the pulley in George Herbert’s poem continuously draws us to heaven or that Pascal’s “cross-shaped hole in the heart of Man” makes us yearn for oneness with God.

Ultimately, how we remember our life is less important than how we inter-
nalize those remembrances and are moved by them and how, with the creative cooperation of Memory, we weave them into our own realities (Hollis 80). Who, for example, has not in some ways identified with, or even for a time “become,” Juliet or Romeo, Huck or Jim, Daisy Buchanan or Nick Carraway, Gertrude Morel or her son Paul? “Fiction” and “reality” thus change places. As Friel suggests in recalling Lughnasa, the literal “facts” are not important, but the atmosphere, the images, are what matter most (71). Although memory is transmitted in more ways than by language, it is language that triggers the retrieval processes; certainly this is the situation in the literary experience in which language stimulates images that in turn create realities.

Through reflection, by means of Memory, in the words of a poem, drama, or novel, the reader/writer brings to consciousness not “fictions” as we think of that word, but old realities newly-articulated. Inspired by their own Muses, readers as well as writers become instruments of the work that incarnates through them. This is effected by a creative, imaginative response to the yet unformed ideas that lie dormant in all of us but that are stimulated by the literary text. Just as the artist is the voice that brings Logos into consciousness and, as with Orpheus, sings new words and fresh worlds into being (in this case as literary creations), so the reader responds by joining in the creative act, remembering these words and worlds through his or her own experience. As readers we participate in the creation insofar as our personal and collective histories, our own memories (individual and collective), are triggered by the artist’s words, images, depictions of place and action, and narrative. Thus, the writer as well as the reader, in great part through a kind of mutual psychogenesis that is both creative and evolutive, produces the literary experience.

The intimate connections between present and past, between past and future—these “confluences,” as Eudora Welty calls them—affirm larger realities than the subjective can comprehend. The connections could not exist without Memory, who continually facilitates the weaving of Self. Nor could the literature exist in which and through which fragments of the Self are expressed. In this context, E. M. Forster’s dictum “only connect” assumes a meaning much larger than perhaps even he might have imagined when in 1910 he penned his famous term.

When we are moved by a story, poem, or drama, it is in part because the artistic work sets off a chain of associations that often involve moving us beyond ordinary self-experiencing. There is a kind of recognition of something deep within us, a memory of something, some place, someone we “know,” but not necessarily in the essentially phenomenological, empirical, or intellectual way we use to identify or classify “knowledge.” As Paul Jordan-Smith writes,

when we are touched by a story, when this phenomenon of recognition takes place, we are somehow connected with someone else for whom the story also had meaning. The story, like any linguistic construct [. . .] is a symbolic structure. What differentiates it from the language of ordinary discourse is that it is a description of people that are not here now and perhaps never existed, doing things that are not now happening and perhaps never happened (in the histori-
cal sense), usually in places other than the place here, in which we are hearing the story told. (51)

Thus, it is that memory/Mnemosyne leads us to recall those places we have never been and those things we have never done, but places and things that, having once been brought into consciousness, are very much a part of our psychic reality. By engaging the unconscious, by drawing it into the conscious, Memory/Mnemosyne becomes an integral part of our Self-creation, as well as of literary creation, from creative writer to creating reader. In the conscious as well as in the unconscious, Memory and her daughters lead us to the threshold, and poised there we encounter both literary and psychic realities, are transformed and (re)created anew. In this process the Psyche re-collects its wholeness, doing so in the art of writing as well as in the act of reading.

Works Cited

REVIEWS


Sandi Albertson-Shea

This slim volume is not for the faint of heart. Some of the student narratives are so pain-full, I found myself gasping, hoping, even, that the next page would signal the chapter’s end.

Concerned with the growth of violence in our culture and citing the influences of Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner’s *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* and Mary Rose O’Reilly’s *The Peaceable Classroom*, Michael Blitz and C. Mark Hurlbert conduct their classes on the premise that “[t]he teaching of writing is connected to living [. . .] and dying, that our students are not only among the living, but also among the dying and, like it or not, we (as faculty) are fully in the presence of both” (1). They argue that “our real lives” (those of instructors and students) are “integral to creative, collaborative pedagogy” (2).

Each of the five segments in *Letters for the Living* uses different typeface to interweave e-mail correspondence between the authors, extensive excerpts from their students’ writings, and honest, thoughtful, shared philosophical/pedagogical commentary.

The role of violence in the lives of today’s students is abundantly attested to by the mix of writings from Blitz’s mostly urban, predominantly African-American, Latino/Latina, and Caribbean students at John Jay College in New York City and those of Hurlbert’s rural, small town, working class, predominantly white sons and daughters of miners and steelworkers at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, as they “compose writing from the raw materials of their lives” (5).

One segment follows the dilemmas and rewards of an interstate collaborative project in which writing classes of the two authors, paired into letter-writing teams, research and describe for each other the often shocking realities of their diverse neighborhoods. Other sections wrestle with the specific “narratives of pain” brought to their classrooms through their students’ written life experiences, as well as an accounting, for each other and the reader, of what it is they actually do in their writing courses.

Determined to “tell a fuller story [. . .] of what it means to live and teach composition in these times” (25), *Letters for the Living* includes, often with gut-wrenching detail, the compositions done when students are encouraged to write about something they are “burning to tell the world” (144):

What’s wrong with this picture? An eighteen year old kid comes home to find his mother totally drunk, as usual. His little sister has most of her clothes off with her boyfriend who is older and bigger than the eighteen year old so what can he say? The father? Well
he’s no place, nobody knows where he is or if he is dead. The eighteen year old finds a pile of dirty dishes and empty bottles and the baby brother is crawling around in garbage. So the eighteen year old picks up the baby and puts in his chair while he starts to clean up the kitchen and make dinner. Nobody’s going to eat anyway. The eighteen year old will be too tired to study again and he won’t have time to write his paper for the only class he thinks he can do good in. What’s wrong with this picture? (6)

While students in many composition classes may view academic writing as occurring “in a vacuum” (61), Blitz’s and Hurlbert’s students clearly do not. The authors claim that “the vast majority […] come away with a sense of competence and confidence that reading and writing are not simply the dreary business of school, but a potentially integral part of their lives” (139). The “books,” which are the end products of both individual and team work throughout the semester, require the skills of research, documentation, editing, and revision. While Blitz and Hurlbert give little, if any, attention in this volume to their classroom skill-building practices, one is left to trust (and this reader does) that caring about the content will eventually lead to the requisite transition signals and semi-colons.

Addressing the anticipated criticisms that the focus of their classrooms is too much on the lives of their students rather than on skills, or that they “read pain into texts,” or that they give assignments which elicit only narratives of pain, Blitz and Hurlbert respond that, prizing the lives of their students, what they are about is “teaching for the living,” that they ask students “to write about what they need to write about because it does some kind of good to give testimony to the legitimacy of their lives” (47).

While some teachers of writing (indeed, one would hope, many) might claim no such degree of violence in the lives of their students, the violence in the cultural milieus of Blitz and Hurlbert’s students is all too real. It would be wonderful if, asked to write about something important to them that they want others to know about, no students wrote of violence. Having provided a “safe” classroom environment for writers and having asked students to consider what in their lives is worth writing about, one is not likely to receive, or at least one should be prepared to receive something other than, a comparison/contrast essay on “Two Cars I Have Owned.” “If we tell our students not to write these (painful, personal) stories for us to read, what will we have them write that will be worth reading?” (169). Indeed.

Blitz and Hurlbert ask, “What is the point of teaching people to read and write if we are not also trying to teach them to understand the world and to make it better?” (55) Some instructors may feel overwhelmed by the authors’ call to deal with the “personal and cultural implications of what each student is telling us” (21), yet Blitz and Hurlbert argue that “to ignore violence as a reality in the lives of our students and ourselves […] is to invite a living death into our classrooms, to encourage an insensitivity to living in the culture” (22). Their challenge to faculty to “help students better understand their experiences in relation to their cultures and to work toward solutions to the problems they face everyday” (143) and to “investigate with students the connection of that pain to the
social injustices that cause it” (43) is a pretty heavy assignment for faculty. Yet, one could ask, what else is more worth the doing?

Since both Blitz and Hurlbert argue for recognizing those “moments of peace when they happen” (56), I did wish for more examples, strategies, suggestions, of just such affirmation—to balance the narratives of pain in their text. In an open, honest exchange with students on subject matter, one should begin, they claim, “as in this book, by attending first to violence, to pain” (57). Yet a counterpoint is also needed and should be identified if our students are to be empowered and guided towards the hard work of “peace-making,” a catch-all phrase that the authors need to define more clearly in the context of the classroom.

South African playwright Athol Fugard, during the worst years of apartheid, forced himself to recall, before allowing sleep, ten images of beauty or goodness that the day had contained, even if only in his peripheral vision. My students, asked to do a similar journal exercise, often record stunningly affirming observations: “silent snowfall”; “a child throwing himself, arms outstretched, onto the grass”; “the smell of a good cigar”; “two young girls, heads bent over a book”; “birdsong.” I would have liked to see this kind of affirmation balance the sometimes overwhelming stories of violence and pain.

To be sure, composition cannot be a series of “pain clinics,” nor are English faculty therapeutic counselors, and Blitz/Hurlbert clearly acknowledge that change may only come incrementally, one person at a time. They give an example of the student who came to the insight that “I am not just average; I am loved” (79).

The narratives in Letters for the Living reveal that in our turn-of-the-century culture of violence, the “slaughter of the innocents” continues. The college classroom, for many, can offer an escape route, an alternative, as well as a forum for addressing the truth of the lives they bring to the classroom.

Blitz and Hurlbert have recognized the need in all of us to “testify,” to bear witness to the significance of our lives. The recounting of an important painful experience, if not obviously an act of peace-making, might be at least an exercise in “speaking truth to power,” perhaps a way of strengthening resiliency and a source of hope.

Tobias Wolff states that

[s]o many of the things in our world tend to lead us to despair [. . .]. The final symptom of despair is silence. Story-telling is one of the sustaining arts; it’s one of the affirming arts. A writer may have a certain pessimism in his outlook, but the very act of being a writer seems to me to be an optimistic act. (Qtd. in Charters 1384)

Challenged by Letters for the Living, at the risk of learning about more pain in my students’ lives than I would like to think is theirs and in the hope that affirming what is real for them will clarify some truths and perhaps lead to some new alternatives, I plan to change the way I teach my comp class next semester.

Work Cited


Susan A. Schiller

John P. Miller writes for teachers who have not yet attempted to bring soul and the sacred into the classroom. In the introduction to the book, Thomas Moore (*Care of the Soul*) defines education within the context of soul and presents Miller as a leader in spiritual curriculum development. More compelling than this introduction, however, is Miller’s extensive history of using spirituality in the classroom, as well as his twenty years of personal meditation practice.

Part One, “Exploring Soul,” establishes a foundation and framework for understanding soul; Part Two, “Nurturing Soul,” describes pedagogy, current schools using soul, meditation practices, and principles upon which to base a spiritual curriculum. Newcomers to this subject will most likely find part one useful, but a bit truncated. It only offers a bare bones view of the philosophical and theoretical foundations for a spiritual curriculum. While key concepts are introduced, they could be enhanced with additional specificity and depth. Part two, on the other hand, offers a wide range of wise and practical ideas. It should satisfy the teacher who is searching for new methods and appease those who are critical of nurturing soul through curricular choices.

Using a clear and accessible voice, Miller attempts to persuade his readers of the value of using soul in their professional and personal lives. Miller’s motivation is similar to Parker Palmer’s in *The Courage to Teach.* Both writers care deeply about teaching and students, and both assume that other teachers care as deeply as they.

Miller begins by centering his attention on “soul,” which he defines as “a deep and vital energy that gives meaning and direction to our lives” (9). In his view “soul connects our ego and spirit. Ego is our socialized sense of self [...] spirit is the divine essence within. Through spirit, we experience unity with the divine” (24). This separation of soul from ego and spirit allows him to address the spiritual aspects of education from a certain distance, one that attempts to dissolve any resistance to spirituality in education.

In establishing the support for his ideas, Miller cites such philosophical sources as Plato and Plotinus, Emerson and James, Williamson and Sardello. However, his conceptualization of soul and spirit are more closely related to the work of Thomas Moore than of any of these others. His perspective, like Moore’s, assigns great significance to love. Miller believes that the soul recognizes multiplicity and unity, seeks subjective time, and focuses on love.

Miller strongly supports multiple approaches to using soul in pedagogy. He expertly integrates soul into the curriculum through a multi-disciplinary approach and describes teaching activities that use art, music, movement, color, earth science, literature, history, and writing. He also draws our attention to creative alternative schools from around the world that have integrated soul into the whole curriculum. Waldorf schools, following the ideas of Rudolf Steiner, provide interesting examples, and the Ojiya School in Japan offers an exciting, in-
novative view of why nurturing the soul must include nurturing the earth.

The Oljiya School owns a small forest with about 300 trees. Much of the curriculum includes this forest in some way or another. For instance, students write poetry about the trees and study the biology and environment that is natural to the forest. A similar school in Newburgh, New York, has access to 3,700 acres of ponds, streams and woods. Students in this district go into the woods to study in an integrated way. “Integrated learning activities,” (100) such as those designed around the environment, offer holistic experiences that nourish the soul, and the educators at these schools provide convincing and compelling proof that a soulful curriculum is beneficial for students and for teachers.

As one with a long-term meditation practice, Miller requires his students to meditate up to 30 minutes a day. He introduces a number of meditative techniques from which they might choose and integrates reflective writing into the assignments. These are explained and described fully enough to be helpful to those already using meditation in their classrooms as well as to those who wish to begin. However, the primary assumption of this chapter is that “some of the most important work we can do is on ourselves” (138). This work begins in contemplation and in living contemplatively so that “we can begin to create deep and powerful change in our world” (138). To understand how individuals can initiate significant change, Miller points us to Parker Palmer’s model of change as explicated in *The Courage To Teach*.

Overall, Miller’s goal is to restore a balance to our educational vision. He believes an awareness of soul can do this (140). As we all know, American education relies on reasoning and objectivity. Nearly anything subjective is denigrated as “touchy feely” or at best as an extreme form of expressivism that lowers the quality of academic activity. To help restore a holistic view, Miller offers eight “Principles of Soulful Learning” that oppose this false dichotomy:

1. The sacred and secular cannot be separated.
2. The dominance of the secular has led to a repression of our spiritual life.
3. An awareness of soul can restore a balance to our educational vision.
4. We can nourish the student’s soul through various curriculum approaches and teaching/learning strategies.
5. The authentic and caring presence of the teacher can nourish the student’s soul.
6. Soulful education must be accountable.
7. Teachers need to nourish their souls.
8. Parents can do much to nourish their children’s souls. (140-42)

Readers might see this list as a summary of the book, but in it one can also find an inspirational starting point upon which to base a balanced approach to teaching. By practicing and implementing these principles, teachers can create a balance in their lives as well as in the lives of their students.

Miller believes that teachers must develop this balance for themselves before they can model it or insert it into the curriculum. He suggests that teachers begin with contemplation. Like Palmer, he asserts that “the teacher sets the tone
and the atmosphere of the classroom. If the student’s soul is to be nurtured and
developed, it follows then that the process must begin with the teacher’s soul”
(121). With these words, Miller echoes and reaffirms what I so firmly believe
about teaching from a spiritual or soulful position: It must start with the teacher,
but the teacher must be aware of the possibilities and potentials in this way of
teaching.

Spirituality in education is growing in America as it is across the globe. Miller
calls it a global awakening (4); Marianne Williamson says there is a spiritual
renaissance sweeping the world (3); and in The Spiritual Side of Writing I have
used Jean Houston’s term, “whole systems transition.” These terms all lead us to
the essential realization that spirituality joins the inner and outer life. Those of
us drawn to teach this way are doing it because, like Miller, we believe that “our
best teaching occurs when spirit and soul take over” (150).

O’Reilly, Mary Rose. Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative

Jeffrey D. Wilhelm

When I read the title Radical Presence, I expected to be shaken up. I thought
the book would be juiced by blue bolts of righteous electrical energy. To the
contrary, it was stimulating in the reassuring way of an evening of good conver-
sation with a friend. It was comforting and kind, challenging and healing.
The book is about how good living and good teaching intertwine and are
built around the same simple principles. Some of these principles include fram-
ing our central life and professional pursuits in spiritual terms, continually in-
quiring and seeking, working to develop nurturing relationships, welcoming true
dialogue and challenge, immersing ourselves completely in the moment, listen-
ing intently to others, creating spaces and time for growth.

I’ll admit it. I really liked this book. As with all my best and most memo-
rable reading experiences, whether with fiction or non-fiction, I felt as if I had
come to know the author’s sensitivity. In this case, I liked the author and was
glad I had conversed with her; she seems to be a great-hearted person, and she
certainly espouses great-heartedness in the classroom.

Mary Rose O’Reilly rightly argues that to teach we must be fully present to
our students and allow them to be fully present to us. Teaching is so often con-
ceived and practiced as a purely cognitive pursuit, eliminating or slighting the
emotional and spiritual elements of our learning and living. My friend Brian White
reminded me once that those we revere as the greatest teachers are all spiritual
teachers, yet we do not make spirituality our own practice or a topic of our pro-
fessional conversations. This kind of book fills a niche, and I hope many others
like it will follow.

One of the great strengths of the book is that it is stamped with the authority
of personal experience and practice. It does not shy away from joyful and painful self-revelation, from celebration and critique. In the third and what I would regard as the central chapter of the book, O’Reilly explores the importance of being listened to, and how a “soul friend” can be one’s spiritual teacher. At the same time that she celebrates her close and necessary relationship with her friend Peter (“If someone truly listens to me, my spirit starts to expand”[19]), she also critiques herself (“Solitary. Short-tempered.” “Always whining.” [18]) and Peter (“He is always full of advice for others yet he does not attend to details of his own life—he eats standing up and sleeps in his clothes, for goodness sakes!” [18]) and studies both the costs and benefits of their relationship (“Peter has helped me to learn that intimacy entails pain.” [18]). She shows here how common human bonds—even just being buddies with someone who grants respect to your being, as fraught as this relationship might be with noise and confusion—can be liberating, uplifting, and truly spiritual.

O’Reilly recognizes the difficulties of this kind of “radical presence” to oneself and others. When she really listens to students, she often finds herself in situations bigger, messier and more disconcerting than she would like. Yet she compels us to believe that spiritual relationships are necessary to teaching, to growth, and to healing. Of course, compassion and listening are tough. We have lots of reasons not to listen, attend, or act on behalf of others. O’Reilly challenges us to overcome the obstacles in our way: indifference, fear, and ignorance.

I am loath to critique this interesting and vital book. This book is what it is, and I can’t say that I wish it were anything different. However, O’Reilly speaks from the perspective of a university academic, and as a long time middle school teacher, I found some of her suggestions inapplicable to my own teaching. Nonetheless, the main points that we must know our students to teach them, that we must engage in deep listening (what the author calls “listening like a cow”), and that we must not compartmentalize ourselves, our students or our work together (e.g. into subject areas with clear boundaries) are relevant to us all.

I also sometimes wished that the book would have pushed me harder. I wished it to be a little less comfortable and a little more contentious and full of challenging suggestions, like the author’s friend Peter. Spiritual growth requires some agitation and challenge.

The book begins with a very moving foreword by Parker Palmer, a foreword worth reading in and of itself. It presents a ringing endorsement of O’Reilly’s accomplishment:

The “secrets” of good teaching are the secrets of good living: seeing one’s self without blinking, offering hospitality to the alien other, having compassion for suffering, speaking truth to power, being present and being real. These are secrets hidden in plain sight. But in an age that puts more faith in the powers of technique than in the powers of the human heart, it takes the clear sight and courage of someone like Mary Rose O’Reilly to call “secrets” of this sort to our attention. (ix)
Palmer continues by arguing that what our students want are “[n]ot merely the facts, not merely the theories, but a deep knowing of what it means to kindle the gift of life in ourselves, in others, and in the world” (x).

Seven short chapters that could be called crafted meditations follow. I read the first chapter “To Teach Is to Create a Space” as a call to shake the commercial and functional metaphors used to describe teaching so that we can recover teaching as a sacred calling. This chapter sets up the rest of the book nicely.

The second chapter “Love Calls Us to the Things of This World” fuses insights from O’Reilly’s Catholic, Quaker, and Zen experiences to argue for the merging of spiritual and professional life:

Certainly there are good reasons for keeping the two separate. I break silence on the issue because I know the longing we teachers feel to exist fully in the long stretch of identity: persons of a certain gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, class, Myers-Briggs type, and—even—spirituality [ . . . ]. Pedagogy emphasizes technique; spirituality addresses who we are. (14)

Chapter Three introduces the idea of deep listening. I was struck here by the insistence that friendship, like teaching, must attend to wholeness, big pictures and long paths, and that listening and attention are necessary for this pursuit. She writes that “one can, I think, listen someone into existence” (21). O’Reilly reminds me that if educational practitioners are not up to the cost of this relating, then both teacher and learner will miss the most powerful rewards and refreshment offered by teaching.

The rest of the book is about teaching as being transformational, as supporting and ushering people through the exciting state of becoming, and of the necessary dissonance that will vex us when we become something new. The final chapter, “Nourishing the Prophetic Vision,” was my favorite, and I can hardly reread it now for all the notes I made in the margins. I’ll mention just a few of the many things that grabbed me: first was a quote from Mukherjee’s protagonist in Jasmine: “The incentive is to treat every second as an assignment from God” (40). Later, the author asks us to touch our deepest sense of call by composing a job description that reflects our clearest and most significant sense of our teaching task. I also loved the story about the pastor’s squirrel, the initially unwelcome mystery that comes to live at your house and changes everything.

In her preface, the author cites Hans Urs von Balthasar who wrote that “Truth is symphonic” (xi). This phrase reminds me of Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism, how each one of us is the site of many voices and many possibilities that we must somehow orchestrate. But, of course, we must be open to and recognize other perspectives to engage in dialogue—and ultimately to learn and to grow. That kind of openness can be at once both life-expanding and very scary.

Radical Presence is about that kind of deeply spiritual dialogue. Reading it required dialogue. If you were one of my own students, you’d probably find it slipped into your book bag some day. Then I would want to talk to you about it—to continue the conversation. Once you read it, you are likely to do the same for your own friends and students. Light a candle for yourself, and pick up Radical Presence. Enjoy!
**JAEP**L REVIEWERS
(2000-2001)

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