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Connecting

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Connecting

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Helen Walker, Jan Buley, S. Rebecca Leigh, Christopher M. Bache, Bette B. Bauer, Rachel Forrester, and Laurence Musgrove

CONNECTING

Teaching as Spiritual Practice

Helen Walker, “Connecting” Editor

This year’s “Connecting” narratives go deep, stories of when we move past ego into the space of the other—or when we ache because we want to and can’t. Whether we get there or we don’t (yet, if we persevere, we may!), our path is leading us toward the mysterious space of spirit. Bette-B Bauer entitles her piece “Teaching as Spiritual Practice.” Perhaps that is a good title for this collection. As varied as these stories and poems are, each seems to me an exploration of the meaning of the supernatural or at least the extraordinary—the sphere of spiritual practice. The authors share their glimpses, each with a sense of humility, of what they can’t fully grasp except to know they are important beyond words.

Jan Buley’s poem “The Realization” celebrates her giving control over to the wondering of children. S. Rebecca Leigh does the same when she asks us to allow students’ passions into the classroom so that they can use what comes out of themselves in the service of their education. Christopher Bache follows with the ultimate question of spirit: who is in charge, when one opens the teacher self to “the magic of learning”? Bette B-Bauer affirms the importance of students finding their own paths, of teachers seeing this facilitation as their calling, and names this calling the spiritual practice of teaching. Rachel Forrester’s narrative goes outside the classroom into departmental politics. Her story of faith and belief that people can change despite certain evidence to the contrary searches for “the place of possibility.” Finally, Laurence Musgrove’s poem “Syllabus” takes us back into the classroom and focuses on that most important quality of the spiritual—love.

As I contemplated what unified the stories this year, I thought of what happened to me during and since the year I got an arts grant which took me out of my college classroom and into the alternative high school in inner-city Harrisburg—how things have shifted inside me, even though I can’t really name how, except to say that it is a spiritual shift.

I want to share a story about my friend with you, perhaps to widen your lens into this mysterious space. She is one of several high school students I still have a friendship with, after my year in their classroom. From her, I know that my primary calling now is to fight the injustice of poverty from my position as a privileged white woman—one who thought she had a handle on what acceptable behavior was and wasn’t, what a good person and what hard work were all about. All in all, I had it all together—until the arts-grant year. Now that things have shifted, I “see Jesus” in the eyes of this young friend. I put it this way to myself as a short cut, as a dramatic enough statement to get my attention. I heard no voice from on high and don’t even know the “moral of the story.” I don’t want to forget that something important happened. I want to persevere.

Seeing Jesus

My friend is a nineteen-year-old single mama who sucks her thumb in public. Her son just turned three, and if he thinks he's about to be bawled out, he bends his knees and curls up and gets still like he is trying to disappear.

Last night I took my friend to the Pure Movement Dance Concert at the Rose Lehman Arts Center in Harrisburg. I pick her up at the projects at 13th and Hanover. She jokes about my driving and laughs at my response and sucks her thumb. Her son, seat-belted in the back, starts to open his door just before I stop in front of the babysitter's apartment. She yells "What you doing? I'm going to beat you up." She is out and around to the back side door, and has popped him one before I have the car turned off. I see her son's eyes get round and fill full with tears before they run down his cheeks, one fat line each. He cries silently looking straight ahead. It breaks my heart. He is crushed by his mom's disapproval. He just forgot in his eagerness to go.

She and I talk about how she has to keep him safe in the projects. She agrees with me that hitting him is not that good, and she doesn't have to do it often because he almost always minds her. But she has to rough him up a little because he's too sensitive and spoiled. I tell her no one is ever too sensitive and never spoiled by too much love. She sucks her thumb and says, "Yeh."

My friend has told me quite a lot about her life, in bits and pieces. She's all alone now except for her sister who lives in the projects too, a far-gone alcoholic like her mama who died three years ago, from alcohol. She's mostly raised her sister's two sons; they are nine and seven and gentle like her son. Her grandma, at 90, died last summer. My friend took care of her, too, until her grandma's other kids made her move to Philly. They put Grandma in a home and sold her house in Harrisburg and took the money.

Last year when my friend turned 18, she moved into the projects, she and her son. Her rent was \$8.00 a month as long as she didn't work and make money. When her benefits from her mom's death ran out, her welfare check went down. It's harder to live now.

She keeps her place clean, and her son only watches shows like *Shrek* on TV.

Her mom was an alcoholic. My friend had to bust out the basement window once; the house was all locked up when she got home from school. She was 7 or 8, and she went to the neighbors to play. But when it got dark, she busted out the basement window to get in. No lights worked, so she got in her bed in the dark and waited for her mom.

She's all alone now. Except for her sister. Her dad was a pastor for a long time, and a barber. Everybody loved her dad. She didn't see him much though. Last summer, close to the time her grandma died, he was sentenced for molesting his daughters. One of the daughters testified. My friend said he never did it to her. Just her three sisters. He was almost sentenced a while back, but the sister who testified then took it back. This time she didn't. The neighborhood around the barbershop and the church was shocked.

The concert is the best of hip hop. Pure movement. Stories of the streets portrayed through the language of dance gone past what most bodies are capable of. My friend whispers that she can do most of what they are doing. I whisper back that I think she would be a good dancer and that she should take a dance class at the community college, and I'd help her. She lays her head on my shoulder.

We stand for an ovation, whooping and raising our fists in a salute to excellence. In the lobby she sucks her thumb as we wait for our coats from the coat-check.

On the way home she talks about her senior project and how she is almost done with the service hours except she doesn't want to write the essay. I ask if I can help, and she says, "Yeh." She makes her jokes about my bad driving and lets me know when the lights are green and I should go. "Miss Helen, oh Miss Helen," she says and laughs hard about how bad I drive. We don't have to pick up her son because he can just stay the night; he stays all night at the babysitter's a lot, and she will get him sometime soon. I pull up to the door that opens onto the littered sidewalk that winds past a myriad of closed doors like this one. This door that leads to her clean little place on the third floor. She smiles at me with those round eyes that look like her son's, and says, "See you, Miss Helen." I close my eyes and watch her climb 3 floors of dirty steps, hear her open the double locks. She slips inside to turn on her big-screen TV, to curl up on her black faux-leather couch and suck her thumb, to wait for what will happen next in her nineteen-year-old-going-on-ageless life.



The Realization

Jan Buley

I can remember my first teaching day three decades ago,
Anxious, tossing and turning throughout the night.
I'd already ironed my favorite blouse and denim skirt,
packed my lunch before I went to bed,
set the alarm clock and the oven timer just in case,
and then, arriving at school with swirling butterflies in my stomach,
wrote the date in my best grade-three printing on the blackboard.
Thinking that the kids in front of me would be all mine, just like

my cursive writing lessons
my smiles of encouragement
my poems and units and centers and penpals,
my laminated alphabet and my poster about migrating birds,
my seating arrangement with nametags already taped onto desktops,
my boxes of sharpened pencil crayons on each table,
my fossil collection and my box of seashells,
my colorful border on the bulletin boards,
my terrarium and my salamander,
my rules for the classroom library,
my read-aloud choices,

my big box of markers.

The bell rang, and they walked into my space.
They wandered around my classroom,
seeking their laminated names in silence
wondering who owned the air.

Out of breath, Monica arrived
with a smashed-open dormant hornet's nest
in a clear plastic bag.
Wondering and waiting exploded into sharing and shoving;
looking and touching spiraled into storying and questioning.

I wasn't in control of this buzz of learning at all.
Since then, I have tried to stay attentively dormant,
inviting the Monicas to remind me who owns the space
and who steers the learning.



Celebrating Ways of Learning

S. Rebecca Leigh

If you are a teacher, you have had a student like me before.
I am visual.
I am creative.
I know the difference between roller ball and gel pen.
The tool matters.
I wear marker on my hands like a tattoo.
I would rather draw meiosis than write about it.
I draw. I love to draw. Sometimes drawing gets me into trouble.

At twelve, I was caught drawing Scarlett, the Vivien Leigh kind. My name is Scarlett, so the interest is not unusual. But her pencil silhouette was discovered during a math lesson. I could not slip her fast enough inside a portfolio of similar sketches of 19th century life. In my 20th century life, I had a teacher who saw something in those drawings. He saw me, a creative spirit struggling in a word-centered school, a place where the pen was mightier than the paintbrush, the word produced mightier than the image

evoked.

At my teacher's urging, my portfolio became public. For one month, twenty of my drawings were showcased against red construction paper at the back of the room. For one month, I was the expert learner in the class on 19th century lifestyle; for one month, conversation stirred among us twelve-year-olds about Canadian and British history; for one month, some of the class came together to share ideas and technique about meaning from line and color; for one month, my drawings celebrated my knowledge of how to use line and perspective to create hoop skirts that twirled on the page and top hats that looked tipped; for one month, I felt like art as a way of knowing was valued in the classroom. Truth is, all that talk got me thinking about words, language, and the stories behind my drawn characters. I was a wordsmith buried in marker, felt-tipped and scarlet. Note to self (at the time): when you draw, you get ideas for writing. Who knew?

As a K-12 educator, I encouraged creative thinking in a variety of ways. Good thing for Antoine, a student in grade nine French who used illustration to support and extend his written ideas *en français*. An artist, really. A boy who wore marker like clothing. A puzzle piece made of something school could not easily recognize, understand, fit in a box. "Take his art tools away," said one teacher. "He has trouble focusing," said another. "Just give him one tool *and don't*," came that wooden tone we often associate with airport security, "let him draw or doodle or scribble during class. He can't art his way through school."

In my French class, he "art-ed" his way through by using illustration to support his ideas in French and English. In so doing, he improved in his ability to communicate in another language.

There are teachers out there who dream like I did, like I still do, about school climates that celebrate the Antoinettes of this world, school communities that allow creative expression to foster literacy learning by recognizing more than one pathway. I am not talking about the common practice of offering the last five minutes of class for drawing a picture or drumming the tables for attention and calling that music. I am talking about respecting process by using the knowledge one has in drawing, writing, music, dramatic arts, etc. to expand one's communication potential. Why not ask students to give what they have (and what they love) in the service of their own education?

Dream, I mean big by envisioning a classroom that accepts multiple pathways to learning;

Stand tall, I mean with colleagues, administrators, and policy makers who support your dream for offering literacy practices that embrace ways of knowing;

Act, I mean now in support of the Antoinettes in your own classroom.



The Opening Question

Christopher M. Bache

One day in class a student asked a question, but instead of giving the answer that first popped into my mind, I stopped for a moment to mull over the possibilities. There was a pause in the flow of my thinking, a break in continuity as I asked myself,

“Among all the answers I could give, which one has the best chance of getting through to this particular student?”

Suddenly I had a visual image of a small door in the back of my mind. The door opened, and a slip of paper came through it with a suggestion written on it, an answer I had never used before. A different slant on a familiar topic. I tried it and it worked. Not only was the student satisfied, but new ideas were sparked in the room. The magic of learning had happened.

I’ve always loved teaching and I’ve always had the gift of gab. I know how to work a room, how to pace an audience and take them through the material in a way that builds to peaks and crescendos. This was something different. This was about cooperating with some mysterious process that brought out what was inside me in a way that was exceptionally fine-tuned to my audience. So for the next five years I experimented with these moments of “deep listening” and learned how to weave them into my lectures. I learned how to integrate my prepared material with the novelty they unleashed. Then something new began to happen.

About the time I was jumping my first major academic hurdle going up for tenure and moving from assistant to associate professor, students started coming up to me after class, when the room had emptied and they were sure no one would hear them, and saying things like, “You know, it’s strange you used the example you did in class today, because that’s exactly what happened to me this week.”

The first time this happened, I thought it was interesting but shrugged it off. Then it happened a second and third time. In the years that followed it became a not uncommon occurrence in my classes. Not that it would happen every time I lectured, thank God, but it happened often enough that I couldn’t dismiss it. Students were finding pieces of their personal lives showing up in my lectures in ways that startled them, sometimes touching extremely sensitive areas of their life.

Was this just a coincidence as most of my colleagues would insist, or was something more going on? My colleagues would likely say that if you lecture to thirty people week after week, sooner or later you’re bound to hit a few bull’s-eyes even with your eyes closed. And they have a point. If you think about all the life experiences tucked inside our students, surely we are going to bump into someone’s experience some of the time. Do the math, and it looks less significant that it feels. That’s what rational people say. For a long time that’s what I said to myself. But the question kept bothering me. If something more were involved, what was it, and how did it work?¹



Teaching as Spiritual Practice

Bette-B Bauer

Walking home from school one afternoon, I passed four men working on the road, and we exchanged greetings. One man asked if I was a teacher. Surprised, I said, “Yes, how did you know?”

“By the way you walk—striding forth,” he said.

¹ This is an edited excerpt from *The Living Classroom*.

Becoming a teacher developed naturally out of a midlife search for more meaningful work in my life. At the time, I was moving from alienation to connection, from living in isolation to being part of community. Quaker educator, Parker Palmer, notes that “we teach who we are” (2). I could never in the world have done the work of teaching had I not gone through the spiritual honing—the surrender and self-exploration—that I experienced in this period of transition.

Palmer notes that “To educate is to guide students on an inner journey toward more truthful ways of seeing and being in the world” (6). My experience has been that I need to have made that passage myself, and be willing to continue to undertake that exploration, so I have sought to make the art and act of discovery, which has characterized my life, an integral part of my teaching.

Teaching is an act of hope defying the odds—a faith in a student’s ability, curiosity, and willingness to take this journey with me. There’s a Zen saying, “Leap and the net will appear.” That is exactly what teaching feels like to me.

In graduate school, I was fortunate to have as mentors a group of women friends in their thirties and forties who had taught before in high school. They called themselves the Fem Thugs, and met periodically for fun, food, and to discuss teaching. They helped introduce me to the concept of the student-centered classroom and the dialogic process, which takes more time, patience, and trust than presenting the “truth” via lecture.

To teach in this student-centered classroom requires particular spiritual practices—that I stay in the moment and listen carefully, that I be flexible in letting the discussion take its own course, that I respond when necessary but do not dominate discussion, that I am willing to allow periods of silence, and that I give students an opening to “correct” a misstatement or to solve a puzzle, rather than providing the “correction” or solution myself.

One of my best teaching mentors was Omaha storyteller Nancy Duncan. I learned how to be brave from watching her develop and perform stories—in parks, in auditoriums, in libraries, and at workshops. My exposure to the art of storytelling in workshops helped me to shape material for the classroom. I have found stories from my life and my reading, as well as from films and television shows that intersect with, and enrich, class material.

I enjoy the uncertainty, the creativity, and the surprise of involving students in the creation of knowledge. We work collaboratively with each other to assemble fragments of understanding into a whole tapestry which involves resolution as well as paradox and lack of closure. Through this process, students also develop an ability to entertain the co-existence of many ideas, rather than a resolution into one “answer.”

A friend observed me teaching, and noted how people surprise themselves by making comments that they didn’t even know they had in them. What is important to me is not just what is discovered, but that students find a path for themselves into understanding ideas as they help each other map new terrain. Then they feel a sense of investment in the ideas being discussed.

Theologian Anthony de Mello, in *Awareness*, talks about how most humans prefer living in the comfortable dream of their illusions, rather than to see life as it really is. To prepare students for this journey can be challenging spiritual work, as many of them are comfortable in the world that they have created for themselves, or that has been created

for them by family, church, coaches, or the popular media. Through collaboration, discovery, creating community, and sharing words, I hope to “wake up” students.

An old friend of my mother’s taught English at a tough high school in Portland, Oregon. She told me, “There are two things you need to know about teaching: set limits and love them.” As I approached my first class as a vetted teacher in the fall of 1992, I walked down an interminably long, dark hallway toward my new life waiting for me behind the closed door at the end, and kept saying over and over to myself, “love them . . . love them . . . love them.” Today, that is still my practice.

On the last day of class, I have a party to celebrate the community of learners that will soon be disbanding. It is the last time that particular configuration of people will be gathered, and it provides closure to our community: grapes and chips, cookies and chocolates—a benediction.



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Appalachia Finally in the Spring: Reflections on a Year of Departmental Angst

Rachel Forrester

I don’t know about you, but my department seems to be ripping apart at the seams. Last year, when a motion to allow non-tenure track faculty (of which I am one) voting rights in our department was tabled, the writing program administrators, God bless them, began searching for another way in for us. They quickly developed a proposal for the program to exit the English Department and house themselves (ourselves) in University College, our newest “department” on campus, which shelters all things general education.

A portion of tenured and tenure track-faculty of course did not take kindly to the proposal. We know what’s best for the non-tenure track faculty, they said. Sigh. It’s April now, and we await the final decision of the Provost.

The move makes some sense. I believe our writing center on campus owes some of its recent blossoming to a move to the more centrally located library, rather than remaining in the English building. Without doubt, there are similarities in the goals of both our writing center and our program. Though our composition courses have historically been housed in the English Department, it’s true that we serve the entire campus with them.

And I do very much believe that we, the non-tenured, need more of a voice in governing ourselves, more job security, and everything else that is on the table in this national (and international) debate.

But as I write, it's April, and being a lovely, long-awaited spring in the Appalachians, it's a little heartbreaking to look back and realize we've spent all year beating the war drums. Whenever it seemed to be quieting down again, something would happen on the department listserv or in a meeting—someone would stir the brew—and, well, there we'd go again. Our department has gotten a reputation as one of the most dysfunctional places on campus. It's a little embarrassing.

The bottom line is that really, we are all in the same boat together, at odds with, well, the bottom line. Colleges and universities, like businesses everywhere (and make no mistake, they are businesses) are always looking for ways to cut costs, in or out of recession, just as you and I are always looking for ways to minimize our grocery bill. Tenured and tenure-track faculty feel the push when the horde of non-tenure track faculty grows stronger and the rock-solid respect once granted a Ph.D. suddenly seems more sandy. Non-tenure track faculty feel it when the tenure folk pass that stress back downward, Yertle-the-Turtle fashion.

I'm probably preaching to the choir here, but I've had the urge all year to invoke the "L" word: we need to love each other at work. We don't just need to love each other in the rainbows-and-ponies way; we need to *fight* for each other at work, fight for the good in each other, do a lot of overlooking of thoughtlessness if we're to stop pouring all this energy, better directed toward students, down the toilet. These are conflicts that need sorting out, no doubt, both the erosion of tenure and the working rights of non-tenure track faculty. Maybe it's just growing pains: composition for so long seen as a non-discipline, now a teenager twisting for independence, Mom and Dad aghast at how ungrateful she is.

But in my idealism (and I freely admit to it), I see the possibility of staying together. After all, we're in wordcraft together. I don't just teach freshman composition; I teach business writing too, and I'm still a literature geek at heart. Yes, I want the right to vote, but I don't want just that. I want to roam freely among and between, dabbling in both Jane Austen and the *Wall Street Journal* online. Our minds are designed for these quirky combinations and fresh pairings; our synapses crave them. In other words, we need each other. I want positive relationships with the people in my community, even if I disagree with them, even if I think they're just wrong. I want to be able to work alongside them and model how it *could be*. I'm afraid that in winning the battle of moving, we'll lose the war—our ability to help effect gentle change on each other through the little interpersonal exchanges that only happen in office doorways and spur-of-the-moment invitations to lunch.

bell hooks reminds us in *Teaching Community* of the power of believing that people can change and of "loving our enemies" into doing so (one of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s philosophies too):

Throughout my academic career I have sought the spaces of openness, fixing my attention less on the ways colleagues are closed and more on searching for the place of possibility. What I find is that often an individual who seemed closed responds to the

positive assumption that they can change. One of the powers of subordinate groups is the power to demonize those who are in dominant positions. This demonization may serve to manage the fear and anxiety that usually abounds in situations where dominator culture is the norm, but it is not useful if our goal is to intervene and change structures and individuals. (74)

She also reminds us, when we exclaim, “but it’s not my job to teach them how to be!” that:

One of the most harmful ideas popularized in the seventies was the assumption that it is not the role of subordinated groups to teach dominant groups how to change. In actuality, to intervene in dominator culture, to live consciously we must be willing to share with anyone knowledge about how to make the transition from a dominator model to a partnership model. (75-76)

Some years ago, I wrote for newspapers covering city and county governments, boards of education and the like. Believe me, I saw my share of ridiculously immature behavior and commentary. But there were groups that got a lot done. Interestingly, the most progressive work was never done by the groups who always agreed. It was by the ones who could disagree agreeably, who knew how to “duke it out” over the microphones respectfully, and then walk out of the room, shake hands and go to dinner together.

It’ll take some growing, but on my good days, I see the same thing for us.



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Syllabus

Laurence Musgrove

On the first page just after the required novels
And before the list of learning outcomes
I’d paste a photo of me from ‘73
Scraggly hair and wire-rimmed glasses
And then torn from my long gone journal
Some half poem or worry of the day
So they might see me and not me
Who could be their dad or worse
With these handouts and so much to read
How jealous I am, I am almost crying
How much I love them.