

2008

Creating Spaces for Listening, Learning, and Sustaining the Inner Lives of Students

Gesa E. Kirsch
Bentley College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#), [Disability and Equity in Education Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Educational Psychology Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Instructional Media Design Commons](#), [Liberal Studies Commons](#), [Other Education Commons](#), [Special Education and Teaching Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kirsch, Gesa E. (2008) "Creating Spaces for Listening, Learning, and Sustaining the Inner Lives of Students," *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*: Vol. 14 , Article 8.

<https://doi.org/10.7290/jaepl14a6a0>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl/vol14/iss1/8>

This article is brought to you freely and openly by Volunteer, Open-access, Library-hosted Journals (VOL Journals), published in partnership with The University of Tennessee (UT) University Libraries. This article has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning by an authorized editor. For more information, please visit <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl>.

Creating Spaces for Listening, Learning, and Sustaining the Inner Lives of Students

Cover Page Footnote

Gesa E. Kirsch is Professor of English at Bentley College in Waltham, MA. She has written and edited a number of books on feminism and composition, ethics and representation, and research methodology. Recently, she edited *Beyond the Archives: Research as a Lived Process* (with Liz Rohan).

Creating Spaces for Listening, Learning, and Sustaining the Inner Lives of Students

Gesa E. Kirsch

This essay explores what it takes to “create a space in the classroom that allows students the freedom to nourish their inner lives,” an issue raised by Mary Rose O’Reilley in *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice* (3). This question is profound and worthy of exploration for several reasons:

- it assumes that students *have* an inner life, a big leap of faith for many academics trained to be highly analytical and critical;
- it grants students agency to explore their inner lives, to reflect on and write about what moves them, what is meaningful to them, what engages them;
- it treats students as complex human beings with intellectual, spiritual, and emotional dimensions to their lives; and
- it encourages reflection, contemplation, and introspection, processes which can provide deep insight into lived experience, enhance intellectual development, and, in the best of cases, lead to civic engagement (as I have argued elsewhere).

These are strong claims. What would it take to create spaces in the classroom which allow students the freedom to nourish and sustain an inner life? It takes *vision*—an understanding that teaching is an honor and a privilege, that to work with students presents a unique moment in their life’s journey—and ours. It takes *depth and honesty* that we rarely achieve in the classroom, and even more rarely in our everyday lives, where competition and one-upmanship reign prominently, where we compare, measure, rank, and evaluate rather than welcome the diversity of gifts we bring to the table.¹ It takes *faith* that students are smart, engaged, and eager to learn. It takes a sense of *wonder* and curiosity to join students on a journey of discovery. It takes *courage* to face *not* knowing what we will encounter, courage to trust that students can—and will—honor their inner life, their inner teacher, the parts of themselves that are deep and meaningful to them. It takes meeting students with high expectations and enthusiasm, with an open heart and open mind to hear what they are saying—or are on the verge of saying—to attend “not to the stammer, but to the poem being born” (O’Reilley 21). It

Gesa E. Kirsch is Professor of English at Bentley College in Waltham, MA. She has written and edited a number of books on feminism and composition, ethics and representation, and research methodology. Recently, she edited *Beyond the Archives: Research as a Lived Process* (with Liz Rohan).

¹ See Elbow’s “Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking: Sorting Out Three Forms of Judgment” for an insightful discussion of these different forms of judgment and their implications for teaching and writing.

takes *heart* to explore how we can create spaces in the classroom for appreciating silence, being present, attending to the presence of others, listening deeply, and fostering creativity and a sense of community.

This essay is my effort to take heart, to bring my whole self into the classroom, to invite students to do the same, to connect “mind, heart, body and soul” as Jacqueline Jones Royster urges us to do in *Traces of a Stream* (279). In her ground-breaking chapter, “A View from a Bridge,” Royster clearly articulates that it takes more than an analytic mind to achieve excellence in scholarship and teaching: “This approach [afrafeminist ideology] embodies the notion that the mind, heart, body, and soul operate collectively and requires intellectual work to include four sites of critical regard: *careful analysis, acknowledgment of passionate attachments, attention to ethical action, and commitment to social responsibility*” (279, emphasis in original). Royster illustrates how these principles inform both her scholarship and her teaching; she examines closely—and helps her students see—how scholarly work is always informed by our interests, our history, our connections to community, and importantly, our obligations to understand and honor those who came before us.

This essay is my attempt to articulate how I invite students to bring all of who they are into the classroom, into the learning process, into the “sacred space” of the classroom, as O’Reilly calls it (15). In recent years I have been exploring how to create spaces for nurturing an inner life—my own and my students—starting with the time when I decided to be vulnerable when introducing a new and what at the time felt like a very “suspect” writing assignment: a spiritual autobiography (a topic I have written about elsewhere). After attending a workshop on the writing of spiritual autobiography which used some drawing and story-telling exercises I found fascinating and fun, I decided to try this assignment once in one writing course. I felt vulnerable when introducing this assignment but decided to take a chance. Meeting my students with honesty (I told them why I thought this new assignment was worth trying and asked for their feedback) and vulnerability (I told them that I didn’t know what a spiritual autobiography would look like and asked them to help me define the genre), I was surprised—and pleased—to encounter students who were willing to take a chance, to be honest, and to be vulnerable themselves.

The decision to take a risk—the risk of being vulnerable, of potentially failing—started a shift in my teaching: it gave me courage to try new things, to set the parameters of my course as I see best fit (for instance, deciding not to grade every piece of writing despite pressure from students, colleagues, and administrators to do so), to talk with students about my pedagogy and course goals, not just the details of assignments.² Once I came to terms with my vulnerability, an ongoing process to be sure (more about this below), once I realized that I didn’t have to live up to the many images of teaching I carry within me (e.g., being funny, witty, and entertaining like some teachers I admire or, alternately, being challenging, demanding, and tough as other teachers I admire), I could bring all of myself into the classroom, be more fully present in the moment, attentive to others, engaged by the interactions among students and myself. Most importantly,

²Other factors which led to my willingness to take greater risks in my teaching, or, better put, to bring more of myself into the classroom, include attending a faculty workshop on contemplative pedagogy (offered by the Society for Contemplative Mind in Society) and reading work by Bishop; Daniell; Foehrer and Schiller; O’Reilly; and Palmer.

it shifted my attention to creating spaces for students and myself to nourish and sustain an inner life, by which I mean the rich dimensions of reflection, introspection, and contemplation which lead us to know and understand things beyond the analytical mind.³

Teaching was no longer a performance, no longer “a show” I put on, but became a part of who I am, emerged from my own inward journey, from a deep sense of self. Parker Palmer writes about the courage to teach (in his same-titled book), about integrity and identity, and about creating spaces where the “shy soul” can emerge (*Hidden Wholeness*). He explains, “if we want to develop the identity and integrity that good teaching requires, we must do something alien to academic culture: we must talk to each other about our inner lives—risky stuff in a profession that fears the personal and seeks safety in the technical, the distant, the abstract” (“Heart of the Teacher” 21). When I teach, I hope to bring some of these aspects—mind and body, heart and soul—to the classroom, to stretch myself and my students beyond the critical, analytical modes of academic discourse (which can easily lead to detachment and cynicism, I find). Instead, I hope to create in my classroom a space which can foster engaged students who go on to become civically-minded business leaders and thoughtful, engaged citizens. Lofty goals, I know, but worth pursuing I believe.

I now turn to describing a few attempts to create such spaces, but, like O’Reilly, I would like to caution that we must teach from the depth of our own being, from our own traditions, from what is in our heart: “when we talk about teaching within a contemplative frame of reference, I think we should keep our prescriptions to a minimum. I want to sketch the lines of a certain approach, but I don’t want to trespass into another teacher’s prayer hall” (14). With that caution in mind, I outline a few of the ways in which I try to create spaces for listening, learning, and sustaining an inner life.

From the first day of class, I introduce exploratory writing, trying to create an atmosphere where students can write without being judged, where they can explore what is at the edge of their consciousness, and where they can enjoy the discovery that comes with writing. As the instructor, I write with students, engage in the same process, share my surprise—and pleasure—at what emerges on the page, nourish my inner life, and discover what is at the edge of my own consciousness.

One goal I have for any writing course I teach (whether expository, persuasive, or creative nonfiction) is for students to enjoy writing as much as possible, to recognize writing as a powerful tool for learning and discovery, and to think of themselves as writers, thinkers, and intellectuals. I envision any writing course in these larger terms rather than as a “next step” for preparing students for the next writing course, for writing in their major, or for writing in their profession. I certainly want students to be successful in those future endeavors, and we talk a lot about genre, purpose, audience, ethos, and context, but I emphasize the deep pleasure and great discoveries that writing can foster.

It is the first day of class, a sunny, cold Thursday in January. We are assembled for the first time for a creative nonfiction writing course; we have gone over the syllabus and just introduced ourselves. There are questions hanging in

³ Among composition scholars who have explored different aspects of this kind of knowing—with our body, heart, and spirit—are Bishop; Daniell; Elbow; Foehr and Schiller; Murray; O’Reilly; Perl as well as many authors published in this journal.

the air, first impressions being formed, expectations for the course assessed. The high tension of uncertainty that comes with a new course is palpable. I dive right in and ask students to get out pen and paper, to listen, and to be ready to begin their first piece of writing (which will not be collected or graded). I read aloud a short essay by Terry Tempest Williams, "Why I Write." I read slowly, loudly, clearly; I find a rhythm, pause and look up at regular intervals. All eyes are on me; all heads turned my way; the tone has been set: listening, paying attention, matters in this class.

Next, we write together. I ask students to write for ten minutes non-stop about why they write, using the passage I read for inspiration, and I do the same. After ten minutes, we pause, reread, circle what surprised us, write for another ten minutes. We talk about the writing process, the difficulty of starting, of getting past the first few sentences, of continuing when it seems we are faltering, when words feel awkward and slow to come. We talk about what surprised us, what emerged on the page, what we didn't expect. We talk about what we learned about ourselves today, on the first day of class. A message has been sent: writing can offer surprises, insights, and discoveries; writing is serious business.

As writing instructors, we can introduce the importance of paying attention to the world around us, of being present, of being observant, of being mindful. We can ask students to pay attention to the small, minute details of everyday life: a snow flake, a speck of dust, the shape and color of a blade of grass, the light and shadow a water bottle casts onto a desk.

It is the second class meeting, and I read aloud a passage from creative writer Judy Reeves: "Be present as you go through your day, mindful of such details as the mist rising from the orange you peel, the ridges of pattern in the peel's color that fade to yellow near the green nub of stem, and the stem's starlike pattern" (63).

I tell students that although I try to be observant and mindful, attempt to be present in the moment and pay attention, I did not know the shape of the stem of an orange until I read this passage. The next time I peeled an orange, I was more fully present, paying attention to its color, observing the shape of its stem, tasting its sweet succulent flesh.

We can tell students that paying attention, being mindful, is an ongoing, life-long process—and challenge. Whenever I ask students to pay attention and write about what they notice, I benefit just as much as they do: I become more aware of my environment, of living in the here and now, of listening deeply, attentively, of being present. I learn about what my students notice, what they pay attention to, what draws them in.

It is the middle of the semester, and I arrive to class carrying a basket with seashells. My students smile; by this time in the semester, we have engaged in many kinds of exploratory writing; they know to expect the unexpected when we meet.

"Take out a piece of paper," I instruct. "We will begin the new essay with a free writing exercise. I will not collect or grade this writing; it is designed to give you a feel for the kind of essay you'll be writing next—a personal, reflective essay."

I pass around the basket, asking students to pick one object from the sea, one that appeals to their senses. They choose sea shells of different sizes and colors: sand dollars (some broken, some whole), razor clams, snails, pebbles

polished by the sea, the remnants of crab shell; a bit of dried seaweed. With their new possessions in front of them, I suggest: “For the first ten minutes, describe the object in front of you with as much detail as you can, capturing its size, color, shape, texture, smell—anything you notice and observe. After that, I will ask you to shift gears, moving from the description of the object to associations and memories that have been invoked for you.”

For the next ten minutes, students observe and write: they handle the object, turn it over, hold it to the ear, shake it, dislodge grains of sand that drift onto the seminar table, and return to the page. When the time is up, I ask students to pause: “Reread what you have written and circle any images, details, phrases that hold interest for you. Now explore these images by writing about ideas and associations that arise for you. Perhaps it is a memory of visiting the sea; perhaps it is a meditation on the color blue; perhaps it is about seeking shelter; or a reflection on beauty, on nature, on life. Write for ten minutes and see where your writing takes you.”

Our pens start moving again. I always enjoy the “seashell exercise,” as I have come to think of it, because it has invoked many different memories, reflections, and discoveries for me. After another ten minutes, we finish our writing and pause, jotting down further ideas, images, and associations we still might like to add.

Then comes the moment I anticipate most eagerly: we read paragraphs or pages aloud, bits of text that surprise us, delight us, reveal unexpected directions. There are reflections on scars—scars on the seashell and scars on the writer’s body, meditations on the depth and beauty of the ocean, reflections on grains of sand, on the life of a hermit crab; there are concerns about ocean pollution, the fragile state of the world, our role in all of this; there are memories of seaside trips, ocean swims, sandcastles, the seagull who stole lunch; there are memories of cousins, family, friends; there is humor, reflection, seriousness, laughter—there are glimpses of the rich inner landscape of the students assembled in front of me.

As writing instructors, we can speak about the sacred nature of story-telling, the profound human need to express ourselves, to make sense of a seemingly chaotic world, of the need to be heard. I tell students that the process of story-telling, narration, imposing order on random events, is a very deep human need. Sometimes I read a passage from James Carroll:

The very act of story telling, of arranging memory and invention according to the structure of the narrative, is by definition holy. . . . We tell stories because we can’t help it. We tell stories because we love to entertain and hope to edify. We tell stories because they fill the silence death imposes. We tell stories because they save us (qtd. in Wakefield, front matter, n. p.).

Or I read the words of Gayl Walker: “We have the innate need to express ourselves, to discover who we are, to bring meaning to the situations in our lives, and to tell our stories. We want to respond to life and reflect on it” (108). The reflective, personal essay, I explain, is an invitation to do just that—to respond to life and reflect on it.

We can invite many different voices into our classroom: the voices of those present, the voices of those we read, the voices of those we remember, of those who have shared their insights and stories with us. We can create a space where

we hear written language spoken aloud, where we listen for meaning, rhythm, intonation (Elbow “Three Mysteries”). We can speak about the importance of reading texts out loud;⁴ of language that is rich, inviting, moving, powerful; of creating a space where we can go about the serious business of “listen[ing each other] into existence” (O’Reilly 21, 29).

Such spaces matter profoundly because they nourish the soul, because they honor a sense of self, an inner teacher, an inner life. Such spaces matter because they allow students the freedom to listen and learn on their own terms, to move from small observations to complex topics, to tackle challenging issues, to discover who they are and what matters to them, to bring to voice what is at the edge of consciousness. I would not, could not, do not presume to know what voices—and visions—will emerge, what students will reveal of themselves. As teachers, perhaps all we can hope to do is create a space in the classroom for silence, attentiveness, and wonder. It takes great courage to create such spaces and great faith to wait patiently to see what will emerge, who feels moved to speak, what questions will arise, what challenges will be posed.

Some would say that this approach to teaching writing encourages navel-gazing and lacks focus and rigor. To that concern I respond by pointing out that deep engagement, serious thinking, and rigorous research most often emerge when we write about topics to which we have a strong, personal connection. Unless we create opportunities for students to write about topics in which they have a personal stake, we are likely to get papers in which the writer simply goes through the motions. As Jane Danielewicz argues in “Personal Genres, Public Voices,” there is a clear connection between the two: personal genres and public voices. In fact, one enables the other. Time and again, I find that students are more interested, more engaged, and more willing to do serious research when the topic is one they have selected, they have a stake in, they have claimed as their own. Danielewicz suggests that “action comes from commitment or a stake. Students need to have a stake in what they write in order for it to mean anything, either to themselves or to readers. The more that something is at stake, and the more what’s at stake is connected to the person, the more there are possibilities for energy. Once there is energy, there can be action, or it’s likely that action might happen” (personal correspondence).

It is two months into the semester, and we are beginning another reflective essay. This time, I have asked students to keep an ongoing record of things they observe in daily life; things that make them pause, wonder, or puzzle; “small

⁴Reading texts aloud, and asking students to do the same, assumes that students are not hearing-impaired. This assumption does not always hold true as more students with disabilities enter college; in turn, many colleges now offer extensive support for students with disabilities. In my classrooms, I try to provide copies of the texts which are read aloud so that we can use the ear and the eye in responding to language. I also use drawing exercises (inspired by Dan Wakefield, *The Story of Your Life*) to enhance memory and writing, and I ask students to use all their senses for many writing assignments. In this way, I hope to heed the caution that Brueggemann and her colleagues make in “Becoming Visible: Lessons in Disability”: “When we expect all students—and ourselves—to think in oral, visual, and kinesthetic arenas, in addition to the ones that privilege written words, we learn from those who were previously excluded. What is more, when we disrupt our own comfort with writing as a way of knowing, we problematize our assumptions, tilt our perspectives, and recast our metaphors” (381).

*moment's that shape us in subtle ways."*⁵ Mike reads his list of small moments aloud in class; one stands out for him: On a rainy day, he observed a fellow student walking slowly across campus, seemingly unbothered by the downpour, while everyone else was running quickly to seek shelter. Mike takes this small moment as the starting point for his essay, reflecting on what it means to be different, what it means to fit in (or fail to fit in). In a frank and personal essay, he explores moments when he himself has tried hard to fit in (as a newcomer to town when his family had moved) and moments when he did fit in but was himself perhaps not as welcoming to outsiders as he could have been (when, for instance, a new player joined his sports team). When Mike reads a draft of his essay to class, other students join in, offering their experiences of being in and excluded, of being different, of not fitting in. Without my prompting, we find ourselves in the midst of an important discussion: the complex identities which students negotiate in- and outside of college.

I welcome such moments of introspection and reflection in my classrooms. I greatly admire students' willingness to look hard at themselves and the world around them. I consider topics like the one Mike introduced as rich venues for bringing complex issues to the center of the classroom. Because these topics grow out of the students' own experiences, they can be very powerful. I find myself drawn to a pedagogy that invites students to observe, reflect on, and bring their own topics to class, a pedagogy that encourages them to follow their pen and heart as new material emerges on the page. It's what is at the edge of consciousness that interests me because it can engage us deeply, can challenge and change us. What emerges from the hidden recesses of our memories, mind, and hearts often carries with it the depth of lived experience and the desire for understanding and change.

In my classes, I talk a lot about the importance of silence, of attending to what's inside you, not just on the outside, to listening and locating the places where creativity, insight, and intuition reside.

It is a cold March morning when I take a group of students outside the classroom building, telling them that we will walk out in silence, stand still and listen to silence for about ten minutes, return to the classroom silently, and write about silence for the next ten minutes. That's a lot of silence—and risk—to put into a single class period. I cannot help but feel vulnerable, fearing that I will meet students' resistance—expressed with rolling eyes, bored expressions, hoods pulled deep over the face—and perhaps complaints: What does this have to do with writing?

I try to address these concerns by being very clear about my purpose in conducting an exercise; I always debrief students by asking: "What was it like? What did you experience? What did it feel like? What showed up on the page as you wrote about the experience? What surprised you most? Why?" I find that the ensuing discussion is often rich, and that students will notice things I did not notice and vice versa; our debriefing enhances my own as well as their learning experience.

Just as my students feel self-conscious when a friend or teacher walks by, I feel self-conscious when I see colleagues, or the dean, walking across the quad as we stand in silence. "Is she just unprepared today?" colleagues might won-

⁵See Perl and Schwartz's *Writing True* for more details on keeping a notebook and capturing small moments (24-25).

der. "Did she forget her lesson plan? Or is she just pandering to students' desire for a break, for going outside, for taking it easy?" Although I consider my colleagues innovative and supportive, I had no trouble conjuring up questions they might ask themselves as I stood still on the campus quad, surrounded by a group of students, standing equally still on a brisk March morning.

Institutional and peer pressure do not encourage much experimental—and experiential—teaching and learning. While we do have rich models for how service learning can be integrated into courses, how experiential learning can enhance students' academic knowledge, we have few coherent models for using short experimental moments, in- and outside the classroom: they beg questions of effectiveness, relevance, assessment, of how student learning is enhanced. Ultimately, it calls into question the preparation and expertise of the instructor.

The awkwardness of standing in silence in a public place often has another effect: it heightens self-consciousness. ("My peers must think I'm weird," students tell me they worry.) The heightened self-consciousness often generates fertile ground for writing and reflection: Why are we so self-conscious about being different? Why do we need/want to blend into the crowd? What does it mean to be different? Does it take courage, defiance, vision, or self-centeredness to stand out in the crowd? How do we treat others who don't conform?

I also use humor, often self-deprecating humor, to put students at ease: I tell them that they now have evidence that their instructor has some "wild and wacky" ideas; that this is "not your average" writing course that they should be ready for more surprises in future class meeting. I also invite students to make their own suggestions for exercises which contribute to our course goals: to become keen observers of the world around us; to become thoughtful and attentive listeners; to develop fluency in different kinds of genres; to write with grace, clarity, and depth; to become thoughtful and engaged writers, thinkers, and intellectuals; to appreciate writing as a creative, enriching, and dynamic activity.

More often than not, experiencing silence becomes a favorite moment in the semester, a touch stone to which students return, reflecting on their need for silence, the lack of silence in our lives, the stares of those who observed us as we stood silently, the sense of community created by a class moving, standing, and writing in silence, and the sense of otherness experienced when one acts "weird," standing silently on the campus quad.

The importance of silence, of pausing, of standing still, of attending to the moment, of being fully present, of listening deeply cannot be overstated in this day and age, and especially for a generation of students who are always wired, always multi-tasking. This kind of generative silence is in line with what a number of composition scholars suggest about the power of silence as a rhetorical tool: Elbow in "Silence: A Collage;" Pat Belanoff in "Silence: Reflection, Literacy, Learning, and Teaching;" and Cheryl Glenn in *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*. I try to create a number of such pauses—moments of silence—in the classroom: after we read an essay, after we complete a free-write, after we workshop an essay. I often invite a minute of silence so we can reread what we have read, reflect on what we have heard, jot down an image, thought, or idea that has been evoked for us. In these moments of silence, I hope to create space for words to form, thoughts to arise, images to surface. These moments of silence allow students to be ready to speak, write, and listen once class discussion begins.

This kind of generative silence stands in contrast to oppressive kinds of si-

lence which can make us feel small, stupid, unworthy. Those kinds of silences can easily be generated in a classroom when the instructor (or dominant students) always have the “right answer,” when debate is used to emphasize competition, when talk is used to dominate and few take the time to listen. Belanoff observes that this kind of dominating, oppressive silence can be particularly troubling for “marginalized groups such as the poor and women and other minority groups” (401). I try to be mindful of avoiding this oppressive kind of silence by varying my methods of instruction: I often ask everyone to jot down an idea or observation they’d like to share before calling on anyone. In this way, I do not have to rely only on the hands that go up first. Instead, I can go around in a circle or call on different students; everyone will have written something he or she can read or explain. This process tends to put students at ease, especially those who are shy, reticent, or have been silenced in the past; it invites everyone’s contribution and values everyone’s voice.

As writing teachers, we can invite introspection and reflection into our classrooms. We can point out that most of us rarely take the time to be fully present, to listen, to observe, to attend to others, to attend to what is inside us and around us. We can suggest how rich and nourishing it can be to move into a silent space, to listen to what’s inside, to honor who we are, to take time to be still and observant. Most importantly, we can invite students into this process of attending to their inner lives.⁶ Take, for example, a student I call Melissa. She provides a glimpse of her inner life when she reflects on a moment when she traveled into nature and learned about herself and her family, about separation, connection, and finding peace. In her essay, “Growing in the Woods,” Melissa reveals her younger self and describes how, after being scolded by her mother for spilling salad dressing on her new Easter dress, she sought refuge in nature.⁷

Stepping into the undergrowth, I breathed deeply and wholly, absorbing all that I could. I took in the scene—drinking in the fresh, young smell of spring. I feasted my eyes on the sets of leafy green ferns that were growing all around me, and tried to find the biggest one for my hideout. As I crouched down beneath the bowed fronds of a cluster of cinnamon ferns, I felt an immense sense of peace in me. All of my anger had evaporated as soon as I set foot in the woods. I plunked myself down on my bottom, with my lower back against the central pedestal of the fern plant. The soft ferns arched perfectly over me, with their tips reaching over my head and ending just above my eyes. Peeking from behind my new “fern bangs,” I felt an understanding unlike anything I’d ever experienced.

The midday sun filtered through the leaves of the trees above me, and the rays glinted in my eyes and danced on my skin. I closed my eyes and smiled, my face glowing. I was showered with light and love from the forest, and I could feel

⁶For specific suggestions for cultivating an inner life, see Jamison’s *Seeds of Awakening*; many of her suggestions go beyond writing. See also *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education: A Handbook of Classroom Practices* for suggestions for courses across the curriculum.

⁷All student excerpts are quoted by permission.

energy pulsing through my body radiating out of me. I felt beautiful, just sitting there underneath that fern plant, all alone yet completely surrounded with life.

From my secret hideout, I was one with the plants. I was a plant. I sat perfectly still, wondering what it would be like to stay in one place without moving for my entire life. The silence of the woods was overpowering. The woods were a quiet place, free from angry mothers and chores. *I could stay here forever*, I thought, as I sunk deeper into the earth, rooting myself to the spot (emphasis in original).

What I find remarkable about Melissa's essay is her strong connection to nature, her self-awareness of seeking refuge and finding peace, of identifying with the lush plants around her, and her ability to recall this peaceful, quiet moment more than a decade later.

In another essay, Bill takes us on a journey of discovery, a midnight skate, revealing his struggle to come to terms with a difficult decision. He describes what he calls a "moment of nothing" when he finds peace, feeling alone yet powerfully connected to the universe.

It was one in the morning, the temperature was ten degrees, the wind made it feel much colder. I wore only a hooded sweatshirt, jeans, and a knit hat. These few items were supposed to keep my twenty year old body warm, but my teeth chattered and a wind gust sent shivers up my spine. There was no one around, and that's the way I wanted it. The week had been difficult, my tests hadn't gone well, and, to make matters worse, I had more work than seemed accomplishable. My girlfriend was mad at me and the pressure from my parents to get better grades was starting to add weight on my shoulders. I was looking forward to the alone time, even if it was in the freezing winter air. The lights reflected off the ice, creating a scene I never tired of. I stepped onto the ice and glided around for a few minutes. There was no purpose to where I was going or what I was doing. Slowly and surely, the cold sharp wind didn't bother me anymore and my worries started to drift away. I was alone, just me and the ice. . . .


People describe moments when they reach peace, whether it be through prayer, meditation, a Red Sox World Series win, or any other thing. Peace has been achieved in their mind, and they rave about it. Peace is not something everyone achieves, and I don't believe that it lasts forever, but you know when it happens. It was that freezing cold night in February when every single breath was visible that I achieved my peace. . . .

I skated freely, stick handled and took shots on the empty net, everything worked so smoothly. The skates cut in the ice, kicking up chunks of ice. When I stopped, a wave of snow covered the ice in front of me. The stick clicked on the ice, the post rang when a slap shot when off of it. It's difficult to describe what it's like to just think about nothing. There was

no past, no future; I only lived in the present. I was totally at peace. I don't know how long I was out there, but, when I stepped off the ice to unlace my skates, I had forgiven how the game had treated me; my homework and my test were not as significant. It was something more satisfying than any game winning goal, any championship. I had lived in the moment, just the moment.

Here, Bill takes us into his life as a hockey player, revealing the pressure to perform, the challenges of competition, and the process of coming to terms with the fact that he will not be playing professionally, or even competitively, at the college level. What I admire about Bill's essay is that he reveals a dimension of his inner life that could easily remain hidden. Our culture does not encourage introspection, reflection, or a change of plan: we are taught to fight, carry on, pursue a goal single-mindedly, even if the process comes close to destroying us. Bill reveals that he has found a way to make peace with this turn of events at that same time that he recognizes that peace can be short-lived.

As writing instructors, we can run writing workshops that establish trust, focus on aspects of writing that work well, and invite more such writing. We can talk with students about writing that remains unfinished, that tests new waters, that dares to go places even the writer barely knows as part of his or her inner landscape. We can encourage students to take risks in their writing by not grading all writing; by giving them opportunities to revise, rethink, reinvent their work; by giving them choices about what to include in their course portfolio. If we bring a genuine interest to student writing, if we convey a sense of excitement that comes with exploration, reflection, and discovery on the page, if we invite humor, joy, and discovery into the classroom, then we have begun to create spaces for nourishing and sustaining the inner lives of students.

To create such spaces is to listen and wait, to invite wonder, silence, and wisdom into our lives. To create such spaces is to acknowledge that it takes a life time of learning, listening, and returning to the inner fountain that sustains us; that it takes faith to honor moments of silence, to foster mindfulness, to learn the art of being present. Creating such spaces—to hold and behold the presence of others—is a gift for teachers and students alike; it is the process of creating a community, of honoring those in our presence, of acknowledging each other's stories, dreams, hopes, and visions.⁸ 

⁸I wish to thank Kami Day, Kristie Fleckenstein, Rosaleen Greene-Smith, and Killian McCurry for their helpful feedback on this essay.

Works Cited

- Belanoff, Pat. "Silence: Reflection, Literacy, Learning, and Teaching." *College Composition and Communication* 52 (2001): 399-428.
- Bishop, Wendy. "Teaching Lives: Thoughts on Reweaving Our Spirits." Foehr and Schiller 129-35.
- Brueggemann, Brenda Jo, Linda Feldmeier White, Patricia A. Dunn, Barbara A. Heiffler, and Johnson Cheu. "Becoming Visible: Lessons in Disability." *College Composition and Communication* 52 (2001): 368-98.

- Contemplative Practices in Higher Education: A Handbook of Classroom Practices*. North Hampton, MA: Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, 2007. Available at <<http://www.contemplativemind.org>>.
- Danielewicz, Jane. "Personal Genres, Public Voices." *College Composition and Communication* 59 (2008): 420-50.
- . Personal Correspondence. June 5, 2008.
- Daniell, Beth. *A Communion of Friendship: Literacy, Spiritual Practice, and Women in Recovery*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2003.
- Elbow, Peter. "Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking: Sorting Out Three Forms of Judgment." *College English* 55 (1993): 187-206.
- . "Silence: A Collage." *Presence of Mind: Writing and the Domain Beyond the Cognitive*. Ed. Alice Brand and Richard Graves. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1993. 9-21.
- . "Three Mysteries at the Heart of Writing." *Composition Studies in the New Millennium: Rereading the Past, Rewriting the Future*. Ed. Lynn Z. Bloom, Donald A. Daiker, and Edward M. White. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2003. 10-27.
- Foehr, Regina Paxton, and Susan A. Schiller, eds. *The Spiritual Side of Writing: Releasing the Learner's Whole Potential*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997.
- Glenn, Cheryl. *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2004.
- Jamison, Paula W., ed. *Seeds of Awakening: Cultivating and Sustaining the Inner Life*. Kalamazoo, MI: New Issues P, 2001.
- Kirsch, Gesa, E. "From Introspection to Action: Connecting Spirituality and Civic Engagement." *College Composition and Communication*. Forthcoming.
- O'Reilly, Mary Rose. *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998.
- Palmer, Parker J. *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997.
- . "The Heart of a Teacher: Identity and Integrity in Teaching." *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*. 29.6 (1997): 14-21.
- . *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004.
- Murray, Donald M. *Learning by Teaching: Selected Articles on Writing and Teaching*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1982.
- Perl, Sondra. *Felt Sense: Writing with the Body*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 2004.
- Perl, Sondra, and Mimi Schwartz. *Writing True: The Art and Craft of Creative Nonfiction*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006.
- Reeves, Judy. *A Writer's Book of Days: A Spirited Companion and Lively Muse for the Writing Life*. Novato, CA: New World Library, 1999.
- Royster, Jacqueline Jones. *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2000.
- Williams, Terry Tempest. "Why I Write." *Writing Creative Nonfiction*. Ed. Carolyn Forché and Philip Gerard. Cincinnati, OH: Story P, 2001. 6-7.
- Walker, Gayl. "Reclaiming the Artist Within." *Jamison* 103-11.
- Wakefield, Dan. *The Story of Your Life: Writing a Spiritual Autobiography*. Boston: Beacon P, 1990.