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Perspectives

From Introspection to Action: Connecting Spirituality and Civic Engagement

Once in a long while, magic happens. You teach a writing class where everything clicks. Students are engaged; they write regularly; they tell you that they like to write. Like to write? You begin to wonder whether you've heard right. These are students in a business college, majoring in accounting, finance, marketing, computer science—majors they chose precisely because they do *not* like to write. Still, they come to class regularly, bring new writing to each session, and listen to each other's work with interest. More than half the class has a perfect attendance record by the end of the term. They tell you that they enjoy reading each other's writing, and that you, as the teacher, are "the lucky one" because you get to read *all* the essays while they only hear a sample during each workshop. And they are right: you can't wait to read the next set of essays to see what topics they've tackled, what inspiration they've found, what journeys they'll take you on. Surely, you tell yourself, you have lost your mind after many years of teaching. Or does magic really happen?

Magic is a word I used in that class on a number of occasions, not to invoke it (although I'm starting to suspect that it had that effect), but to discuss with students the nature of spirituality—the sense of magic, inspiration, and wonder one can experience at different moments in life. Such moments make good topics for writing, at least in a creative nonfiction course, because they are, by definition, memorable and poignant.

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In this essay, I explore the connection between spirituality and civic engagement. More specifically, I suggest that spirituality—broadly defined to include *mindfulness*, *introspection*, and *reflection*¹—can play an important role in enabling rhetorical agency. I draw examples from a creative nonfiction course in which students composed powerful essays that captured moments of significance for them, and perhaps for their generation. I propose that by allowing spirituality and contemplation to become a source of creativity, insight, and discovery, we enable students to become more willing to engage with the complex social, cultural, and political issues of our times. I highlight students' responses to contemplative practices and argue for their relevance to a serious commitment to writing, civic engagement, and social responsibility.

Contemplative practices, I contend, can enhance creativity, listening, and expression of meaning—key goals of most writing courses. They do so by inviting students and teachers to practice mindfulness, to become introspective, to listen to the voices of others—and our own—and to the sounds of silence.² Writing, like contemplative practice, involves aspects of the unknown: we do not know, before putting pen to paper, what we will write, how language and sentences will unfold, where we will end up with an essay or argument. To be sure, some writing is more focused and goal oriented than others; some arguments are very predictable and structured, and yet, there is an element of unpredictability in all writing. Writers must make choices regarding tone, voice, development, evidence, and ethos—choices that can be enhanced if we acknowledge the creative, at times mysterious, powers of writing. Peter Elbow speaks of “three mysteries at the heart of writing:” one, “from no words to words;” two, “figuring out what we really mean,” even when we lack the right words to express what we mean; and three, “words that give” meaning to readers more easily than others (“Three Mysteries” 10–21). Elbow focuses on how we move from the unknown—no words—to the known, the writing unfolding on the page or screen.

In recent years, composition scholars have touched on the nature of spirituality in a number of contexts: the rhetoric of preaching (e.g., Moss; Mountford), of silence (e.g., Belanoff; Elbow, “Silence”; Gere; Glenn), of listening (e.g., Ratcliffe), of recovery (e.g., Daniell), of sustainability and the natural world (e.g., Herndl and Brown; Killingsworth and Palmer; Owens; Weisser and Dobrin); and two edited volumes explicitly explore spiritual aspects of rhetoric and writing studies (Bizzell; Foehr and Schiller). These scholars point to the importance of contemplation and reflection for civic life, social responsibility, and ethical decision making. They do not, however, focus explicitly on the power

of contemplative practices as a source of knowledge, insight, and creativity in the writing classroom—the aim of this essay. In *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*, Cheryl Glenn makes that very point: “I am hopeful that further research on rhetorics of silence will be rooted in the classroom” (159). Glenn invites rhetoricians to explore silence as a powerful strategy for making meaning and tapping into inner resources: “That the silence of religious contemplation might enrich rhetorics of silence seems clear. How such a link might be made remains an invitation” (158–59). In many ways, then, this article responds to Glenn’s invitation by exploring how contemplative practices can enrich a writing classroom and the intellectual life of students.³

Still, many scholars, myself included, continue to be deeply skeptical, even suspicious of the term *spirituality* because it has been, or can be, closely aligned with organized religion, which in turn, has often been oppressive and discriminatory.⁴ In “Teaching Lives: Thoughts on Reweaving Our Spirits,” the late Wendy Bishop expressed her ambivalence toward spirituality, an ambivalence that resonates strongly for me. She writes: “*Spirituality* is a troubling word to me. I tend to shy away from spirit even as I’m drawn to it” (129). Like Bishop, I worry that exploring spirituality in the classroom can easily turn into an anti-intellectual enterprise that defies analysis, critique, and debate—the exact opposite of what higher education sets out to do.⁵

Contemplative Practice and Spiritual Autobiography

Given my reservations, it was more by chance than by design that I decided to add spiritual autobiography as one assignment to a creative nonfiction course.⁶ What I discovered is that reflection and introspection, two aspects that the assignment introduced, can become a powerful force, leading students to serious and sustained writing, thoughtful inquiry, and deep engagement with a variety of topics. In other words, contemplative practices can achieve many of the goals that scholars and teachers in rhetoric and composition set out to accomplish. Since that time, I have introduced reflection, introspection, and spiritual autobiography in several other classes and come to appreciate the serious student engagement and thoughtfulness these elements can add to a writing course.

There are many approaches to integrating contemplative practices into the curriculum; some of these include writing, drawing, painting, movement, observation, walks in nature, and meditation—all designed to focus the mind, step back from everyday activities, increase concentration, and enhance learning.⁷ I have found Dan Wakefield’s book *The Story of Your Life: Writing a Spirit-*

tual Autobiography (a trade book written for adult writers) particularly useful. Wakefield defines spiritual autobiography as stories that explore the human quest to find meaning in life. Such stories include components of intellectual, physical, emotional, and religious journeys; they look at life “as a whole, and in relation to the whole creation” (8).

Four aspects of Wakefield’s approach are of interest. One, he emphasizes the *human voice* as a means of accessing memory and making meaning. By reading stories and listening to one another, we connect voice and memory, body and mind, heart and soul. Two, Wakefield uses simple *drawing exercises* to tap into memory, such as sketching the floor plan of a favorite room from childhood or drawing a symbolic map of one’s life journey. These exercises are further enhanced by narrating the drawing to an attentive listener, thus combining the power of storytelling with other creative activities. Three, he emphasizes the *sacredness of story telling* as a basic human need—the need to be heard, to make sense of the world, to connect with others, to survive. Four, Wakefield establishes the “*right to reticence*,” allowing writers the option to remain silent when work is being read aloud or when responding to the writing of others. This right to reticence is a critical component in any course that asks students to probe the depths of their souls and establishes an atmosphere of trust and respect (a practice common in many writing workshops).

What is worth noting about the principles Wakefield proposes is that they invoke several composition scholars’ theories of writing development. For example, Elbow makes the case for emphasizing the spoken word, the sound of the human voice, and the reading of texts in class. He explains: “Intonation *embodies* in language a rhythm and melody of meaning—a nonverbal experience of meaning” (“Three Mysteries” 17). These principles also invoke what Sondra Perl calls “felt sense” in the same-titled book. She encourages writers to attend not only to their words but also to their bodies to see whether they have caught the meaning of what they intend to say. She articulates an approach to writing that emphasizes reflection, attention, and mindfulness—all important components of contemplative practices.

From Spiritual Autobiography to Civic Engagement

When introducing spiritual autobiography into a creative nonfiction course, my goal was to create a rich and stimulating context in which students would take writing seriously, begin to think of themselves as writers, explore their creative processes, engage in deep reflection, and make connections to their personal beliefs, intellectual life, and future goals. I wanted to provide space

and opportunity for students to explore the different dimensions of their lives—intellectual, spiritual, and creative, among others. Through this process, I assumed, students would come to recognize the challenge of pursuing a meaningful path in life, living peacefully in a world of conflict, and having the courage to imagine a future that holds promise—large idealistic goals to be sure, but ones worth pursuing, I would argue.

When I introduce reflection and contemplation in my classes, I ask students to write about topics that are meaningful to them, topics they would consider spiritual in some sense. I emphasize that spiritual autobiography does *not* have to be religious in any sense but can include experiences in nature, experiences when students discover something about themselves or others, or moments that stand out as magical, inspiring, meaningful. I ask students to be mindful during the semester, to observe the world around them carefully, to listen to others with attention and respect, and to write about their observations, thoughts, and reflections. I point out that these skills are first and foremost important for writing vivid pieces of creative nonfiction, but at the same time, they can be very valuable in the world of personal and professional relationships (a fact that business-minded students appreciate).

Because I assign spiritual autobiography as one assignment in my creative nonfiction course,⁸ I invite students to help me figure out what exactly the terms *spirit* and *spirituality* might mean. I ask them to write about these terms, trying their hand at their own definitions before we begin the assignment. I am always intrigued by the richness and depth of what students have to say. Here are three representative reflections: Natalie (not her real name) writes:

Spirituality is the connection we have with something higher than ourselves. It is the belief and hope we have in a superior being or entity. An entity which has no beginning and no end. It is faith that hard work pays off, and dreams can be fulfilled. Spirituality is what we turn to when we often have no other choice, and out of desperation we pray, or chant, or plead. Spirituality can be expressed as trust and expectation when the outlook is grim. It is being aware of that which cannot be physically seen or heard. Spirituality is awareness, consciousness of yourself, and your relationship to your surroundings. It is meditation, silence, prayer, wishing, and desperation. Spirituality cannot be neglected. It is the source of all inspiration and discouragement.

What I find remarkable about Natalie's definition is that she identifies the concept as encompassing a wide *range* of emotions and life experiences—from energy and joy to despair and sadness—and as a *source* of deep-seated knowledge and inner wisdom. A second student whom I call Josh offers this definition:

Spirituality is brought out through language and communication between people. It is intangible but powerful at the same time. It is what creates emotion and has a synergistic effect when it is brought together. When someone says that another person is spiritual, it is fair to say that they focus on things out of the realm of the five senses and find strength in things that you can't put your finger on. When someone has lots of *spirit*, it is usually associated closely with joyous energy that comes from an unknown source.

Josh points to spirituality as an energy source that can provide inspiration and motivation and connect us with unknown sources of insight and power—important facets for any writer. A third student, whom I call Jenna, explains:

Spirituality is losing yourself in the stars. Lying under a starry sky, recognizing that you are a part of something that is bigger than yourself. Countless diamonds glistening and dancing on a stage of darkness, shining in their light to see the world below. Allowing yourself to become absorbed in this dance, everyday cares pushed aside, leaving behind the clarity of day and understanding that everyone has something in common in the night. Spirituality is seeing the beauty of everyday life and appreciating it.

In this poetic definition, Jenna invokes day and night, light and darkness, and imagines herself connected to others and the universe. These examples are only a few of the many rich, open-ended, nuanced definitions students offer when asked to write about the term *spirituality*. What these descriptions have in common is that they identify spirituality as a powerful source of knowledge, wisdom, and energy. It is this source of insight that I ask students to connect with when working on *all* their writing assignments throughout the course. That is, I ask them to explore what spirituality means to them and reflect on meaningful events and people in their lives, to narrate their life journey, and to reflect on their values, commitments, and beliefs (which can be rooted in religious tradition but do not have to be).

There are several noteworthy outcomes of incorporating spiritual autobiography into a writing course. For one, students are more likely to make excellent topic choices. Gone are the usual stories of drama, adventure, tragedy, and death—topics that students often assume make the best choices for autobiographical writing. Even without screening topics (something I have occasionally done in the past) I do not receive accounts of drunken nights, sexual conquests, or car crashes.⁹ When explicitly asked to write about meaningful experiences in their lives (which need not contain any action whatsoever), students are willing to explore moments in their lives that held importance

for them. For instance, one student described sitting with her grandmother on the front porch of her family's cabin, watching an early morning sunrise over the lake, and feeling connected to nature and the long line of ancestors who have spent time in this place; another described the road he traveled between his divorced parents' houses every week and the process of coming to terms with the different roles he played in each setting; yet another described the experience of finding a peaceful moment, on a vacation away from his turbulent home, a moment when he could enjoy the smell and taste of a cinnamon bun and a view of the ocean—one of the rare moments in his childhood when he felt completely at ease, connected to nature, his senses alive.

Two, most students tend to select topics that lead them to engage with serious social, cultural, and political issues. Because they are given the opportunity to write about meaningful, spiritual events in their lives, students appear more willing to explore their beliefs, values, and goals in life. They are able to look at themselves and their world unflinchingly and explore challenging topics with larger social and civic implications. For instance, many students choose to address a wide range of important topics in their last two papers, a personal essay and a piece of reportage¹⁰:

- the coming-out story of one student's sister, as well as that student's own journey in examining her own values and reconstructing her belief system;
- homelessness, causes of homelessness, and our complicit condoning of such causes;
- the lot of minimum-wage workers, their struggle to piece together a living, often under adverse conditions, such as working a double shift;
- our simultaneous dependence on and disdain for street hawkers and vendors, who charge marked-up prices for service and goods that can make our lives easier;
- gender roles and body image, the influence of marketing campaigns, and their effects on men and women in contemporary society;
- the discrepancy of incomes between the wealthy and the working class, as portrayed through the eyes of a caterer;
- this nation's long and painful history of destroying Native American culture and tradition, coupled with the concomitant degradation of our environment.

Looking at this list of topics, some scholars might suggest that students are simply moving “beyond the personal” in their writing, a phrase that suggests a natural progression from personal topics to those of broader, public interest. That phrase, however, implies a hierarchy I find problematic; that is, I do *not* think that there is a linear progression from personal narratives to other kinds of writing (as many first-year syllabi and text books imply). Rather, I contend that the personal goes hand in hand with the cultural, social, political, and spiritual dimensions of our lives. That is, the best writing integrates many aspects of our lived experience. Because I ask my students to choose topics that are meaningful to them, and because contemplation, reflection, and close observation become a focus of the writing course, it is perhaps not surprising that most students choose challenging, complex topics of cultural or political significance for their final assignments.¹¹

I contend that by inviting students to reflect on what is meaningful to them we encourage, perhaps even challenge, them to engage the world with depth and thoughtfulness. A similar challenge—to ask students to become civically engaged—was issued by a group of university presidents in 1985 to a generation of students characterized by the national media as self-centered, self-absorbed, and singularly career-minded. The result of that challenge was the formation of Campus Compact, the national organization for service learning, and the concomitant fast growth of service-learning programs across the country. Clearly, there are many avenues to fostering civic engagement and social responsibility; contemplative practices are one such avenue, a powerful one at that.

Three, most of my students become excellent listeners and mindful observers of the world around them. While I have always used reading aloud in writing courses, I have never used this approach as consistently. I model reading aloud brief passages during almost each class meeting—excerpts from published authors and from student journals and work in progress (always with their permission) and ask students to do the same—to read passages from peers whose work inspires them, from authors they admire, and from their own work in progress. We discuss the purpose of reading aloud and listening actively—to hear a writer’s voice, to hear nuances in language, and to hear the narrative unfold. The results are significant: many of my students become adept at identifying different features of language, such as images, sentence structure, word choices, metaphors, alliteration, narrative structure, description, and dialogue. They notice many aspects of language and meaning that become the focus of our workshop discussions. I have found that the level of

explication and interpretation improves greatly compared to discussions based on texts read only silently. Elbow explains why this might be so.

Intonation is a complex topic in linguistics, but I'm content to put my case here in the simple terms I use with first year students: We hear more intonation and thus hear more meaning in writing when the words, phrases, and clauses "lie beneath the fingers" of our mouth and ear—that is, when they are inviting and comfortable to speak aloud.

If this is true, the pedagogical consequence is equally simple. When students have the repeated experience of reading their writing aloud, they are more likely to write sentences that are inviting and comfortable to recite—and thus to hear on the page. ("Three Mysteries" 19–20)

Finally, students make great strides as writers; they begin to enjoy writing and to take themselves seriously as writers. They write regularly, read each other's work, and revise their writing in depth. They develop a passion for their work and a desire for serious engagement with the topic at hand. They submitted their work for publication and, on several occasions, decided to edit and illustrate a class anthology representing their best work. By the end of the semester, many of these students become intellectually, civically, and spiritually engaged writers.

The outcomes for me, as the instructor, are equally satisfying: I read interesting, thoughtful, serious student writing. I am genuinely curious about what students will have to say, where their explorations will take them, and what insights and reflections will move them. I encounter students who project palpable energy and excitement, which in turn energizes me; together, we become a serious intellectual community.

Readers might wonder, What happens in the classroom that enables students to take the assignments seriously and explore the spiritual dimensions of their lives? I do not think that there is anything in particular I *do* in the classroom except *create a space* where students can take contemplation and reflection seriously, a process that can enable powerful writing. How instructors get to such a place will depend on their own teaching philosophy, engagement with civic issues, familiarity with contemplative practices, comfort with silence in the classroom, and rapport with students. I explain to students that what I ask them to do—take introspection seriously, listen to their own voices and visions, and probe the depths of their soul—is a difficult and challenging task, one rarely undertaken in college. In order to facilitate that process, I emphasize courtesy, respect, and careful listening as the norm for classroom interactions. As the semester progresses, we create a tradition of presenting

work in progress with an emphasis on deep listening, not instant critique. We listen to each other's work so that we can learn about each other's life journeys, dreams, and hopes for the future. I also use exploratory writing in class as a way for students to discover what is at the edge of their consciousness, what is waiting to be explored, what will emerge on the page.¹²

Some Reservations

So far, I have argued for the power and importance of contemplative practices in the teaching of writing. Now I want to turn to some serious reservations I continue to have about bringing spirituality into the classroom. I remain concerned that as the teacher, I might be asking students to go places in their writing that may create discomfort for them or, as Mary Rose O'Reilly suggests, that may be "associated with childhood shaming, hypocrisy, or patriarchal oppression" (13). The concept of spirituality has different connotations for different students; some freeze up at the mere thought of the term, others embrace the notion easily and project their religious, at times conservative, values onto the world around them. For instance, one student from a conservative Christian background immediately used the discourse of her church and family when I introduced spiritual autobiography as one of the genres to be written that semester (which made me cringe). However, since I was the one who had brought contemplative practices into the classroom and asked for open-mindedness and respect from all class members, I was determined to model this behavior (and avoid cringing). It turned out that this student was very insightful about her religious beliefs and able to stand back, asking questions about the values she had taken for granted. In one of her essays, she employed the metaphor of a road trip to reflect on the passengers she had picked up and dropped off on her life's journey (friends, family members, teachers, coaches, church members), as well as on the luggage she carried along or left behind (her changing beliefs, values, and commitments). Writing a spiritual autobiography allowed this student to examine her religious values and the people who shaped her life; it invited her to explore a topic that is typically off limits in academic circles.

Another student voiced despair about her "stalled spiritual journey." Rather than embracing the values of her family and religion, this student discovered how few of these values still shaped her life as a senior in college. That discovery led her to some serious soul-searching, and she questioned some of her decisions during the past four years. As she put it, she was headed down a "dead end" street and didn't quite know how to turn around, when to turn around, and how to reconcile the person she had become with the person

she had been earlier in her life. This student engaged the topic of spirituality deeply and showed evidence of intellectual growth, yet I could not help but feel that I was responsible for setting up the context which led her on a troubling journey of doubt.¹³

In this case, I had to remind myself that education, in the best of cases, leads students on journeys of discovery that can be life-changing; there is always the chance that we will touch students in profound ways. I came to realize that it was important for this student to examine her changing values, and that many other courses in her college curriculum (e.g., psychology, sociology, ethics, literature, philosophy) could have just as easily sent her on the same quest to explore—and question—her life’s goals and values. This student showed courage in exploring her spiritual journey, and despite the pain and sadness she encountered, she appreciated the opportunity to reflect on her life, future goals, and changing beliefs.¹⁴

Concluding Thoughts

I want to reemphasize that I do not propose that we promote religious discourse in the classroom, a move that could seriously stymie discussion, intellectual inquiry, and the advancement of knowledge (although a deeper understanding of diverse religious traditions certainly would benefit students who will work in an increasingly global context). My goal, instead, is to suggest that contemplative practices—mindfulness, reflection, and introspection—have the potential to foster writing development, intellectual growth, and civic engagement—goals that I consider essential to higher education. Contemplative practices can connect us to others, to nature, and to the larger universe, thereby inviting mindfulness into academic study. Such practices open up a space for reflection, insight, and discovery and allow us to bring intuitive hunches and creative insights to bear on academic topics. By introducing contemplative practices as a source of knowledge and insight for writing, and by inviting students to connect the intellectual and spiritual aspects of their lives, we enable them to become more willing to tackle the complex social, political, and ethical problems that their generation is likely to face.

Reflection and contemplation also create a space where we can know deeply. These practices can help students discover the power of writing as a tool for discovery, insight, and understanding, as well as the excitement and satisfaction that come from serious intellectual engagement—goals that many writing teachers hope to achieve but too rarely realize. If we can inspire a passion for writing in our students and help them understand that contemplative

practices can lead to thoughtful, deliberate, and caring decision making, then we can say that we have made a real difference, perhaps even a radical difference, in the education of our students. Just as importantly, contemplative practices can become an invigorating, rejuvenating force in instructors' lives: they can help us get in touch with our hopes, visions, and perhaps long-lost dreams and bring new energy into our classrooms. Contemplative practices allow for a deep commitment to civic and social issues because they emerge from the heart, not just the mind, and reflect our search for meaning in life and our hope for making a difference.

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Notes

1. I use these terms somewhat interchangeably to indicate the range and variety of activities that can encompass contemplative and spiritual practices. For a more detailed discussion of the origins, nuances, and different uses of these and other terms—*silence, reflection, meditation, contemplation, reverie, and metacognition*—see Pat Belanoff's thoughtful article on the topic. For a detailed discussion of reflection as a classroom practice, its theory and history, see Kathleen Yancey's book on the topic.
2. In "The Fruit of Silence," Marilyn Nelson explains one of her course goals this way: "All I try to do is help my students understand that there is something valuable, something important, to be found in silence. I try to teach them some ways they can listen to silence" (2). See also Elbow ("Silence") and Gere on the uses of silence.
3. Contemplation and reflection are, to some degree, part of all major world religions and wisdom traditions and have long played a critical role in education. Scholars in rhetoric and composition have examined the intersection of rhetoric, religion, and spirituality. Kenneth Burke, for instance, examines religious discourse as persuasion in *The Rhetoric of Religion*. James Moffett, in the *Universal Schoolhouse: Spiritual Awakenings through Education*, takes a more radical approach. He suggests that education should not be a required, government-sponsored activity, but instead should emerge from learners' needs; be self-directed; address body, mind, and spirit; and be supported by peers, mentors, elders, and access to learning resources.

4. Along these lines, JoAnn Campbell observes that “because religious groups have historically suppressed differences, with tragic consequences, in the name of a single path to God, any technique used by religion seems suspect to some” (249).

5. In many ways, the academy fits me well—intellectual engagement, the life of the mind, and scholarly reading and writing are central academic concerns while body and soul, spirit and affect are held at bay, viewed from a distance, often with distrust, at times with disdain. I have absorbed the academic skepticism of all things spiritual and have had to do some serious soul-searching before finding the courage to introduce spiritual autobiography in a writing course.

6. After attending a workshop on the writing of spiritual autobiography, I decided to try this assignment *once* in *one* writing course.

7. The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society offers many resources for integrating contemplative practices into the curriculum—seminars, conferences, faculty retreats, articles, syllabi, and access to a network of peers. See the center’s website: <<http://www.contemplativemind.org/>>.

8. Other assignments in the course are more typical fare for creative nonfiction writing—a childhood memoir, a portrait of an important person, a personal essay, a piece of reportage, regular journal entries, and exploratory writing.

9. To be sure, such events can shape spiritual journeys in important ways. I realize that my list of “topics to be avoided” reflects my own bias. In my experience, violence and juvenile behavior do not make for good topic choices for autobiographical writing, especially when the writer does not have much distance—in terms of years and accumulated life experience—to reflect on these events. Yet I recognize that many highly regarded autobiographies contain stories of just such accounts (e.g., Russell Baker’s *Growing Up*; *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as told by Alex Haley).

10. These assignments ask students to reflect on issues of concern to them and include fieldwork, observations, interviews, reflection, and research.

11. Readers might ask, Are students simply figuring out what the teacher wants? I do not think so because from the beginning of class, I ask students to write about what is meaningful to them. When they ask me, “Is this what you want? Is this the right topic?” I turn back the question—along with the authority to choose a topic—by asking them whether or not that particular experience was meaningful to them. Only they know the answer, and I encourage them to select topics that resonate deeply with them.

12. Students keep a writer’s journal in which they write three to five times a week. Specific journal exercises that encourage mindfulness and contemplation include a very detailed description of something students observe; keeping a list of brief moments from daily life that make them wonder, pause, reflect (e.g., a solitary walk

through the snow to a late afternoon class; hearing the voice of a relative on the phone; seeing a dead pigeon on the sidewalk; listening to a story on the evening news; encountering someone during a service-learning project); standing or sitting outside in complete silence for five minutes and writing about that experience; describing a seashell in great detail and then following the thoughts that emerge from describing the object, and more. Students read some of these journals in class and develop others into drafts of essays.

13. Some writing teachers have the courage—and create the space—to invite students to explore painful, sad, even traumatic experiences in their lives, something I admire but tend to shy away from myself. See the special issue of *Journal of Advanced Composition* 24 (2004) for many thoughtful articles on “Trauma and Rhetoric;” Berman’s *Risky Writing*; and Anderson and Maccurdy’s *Writing and Healing*.

14. I was reminded of the fact that as teachers, we are not our students’ counselors, friends, or confidantes. If we see troubling behavior or serious depression in students, we need to work with the campus staff who are trained for just such purposes (e.g., advisors, therapists, peer counselors, resident assistants, health care providers, priests, rabbis, and student affair personnel). This need for intervention by professionals has become particularly evident in the wake of the Virginia Tech tragedy in April 2007 and the shooting at Northern Illinois University in February 2008.

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