A Reflection on Classroom Teaching

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Evoking
and sensitively assessing
writing that probes values and seeks ultimate meanings:
Spiritual Writing

How do we integrate high academic standards with our commitment to emotional and moral intelligence, narration as knowledge, and valuation of spiritual dimensions? To contemplate assessing the ineffable sounds suspiciously like trying to count the angels on the head of a pin. How are we to measure, to assign a grade, to apply mathematical calculations to that which goes beyond rubrics, as all great literature does? Instead of counting angels, do we count goose bumps? Maybe.

To aspire to inspire writing that seeks profound meaning, to ignite writing that bumps up against what we can not measure or even know with certainty and so must expresses through metaphors is surely audacious. Writing that probes ultimate concerns is the kind of writing we dream of reading in our students' papers. Such writing adds meaning to our lives, and when it appears, we critique it with trepidation, for to grade, to weigh such writing requires delicate scales

I read that the state of Michigan is to grade essays via computer. The article said, "Educators don't doubt the computer software's ability to grade spelling and punctuation, ... But they have misgivings about the computer program's ability to evaluate content . . . ." Rightly so!

Most essays, certainly persuasive essays, are easy to evaluate in comparison with grading the kind of writing that does not outline but explores, that ranges into new, sometimes nebulous territory. How would we score the clouds of unknowing? Writing that is spiritual concerns the dimension of depth, not the balance of argument and counter argument. We're getting in deep, feeling our way. Using Sondra Perl's "felt sense," let's grope along.

Spiritual writing is not didactic, it's experiential. As Walt Whitman said, "Logic and sermons never convince. The damp of the night drives deeper into my soul." The writer has felt something, perhaps something incalculable, and by means of literary artistry succeeds in conveying the experience to the reader. We know when this kind of writing is successful, first by the response of our bodies, not our brains. Our eyes lift from the page, and we see something beyond where we are. Our breathing changes.

Have you read aloud to a class the passages from Huckleberry Finn that describe Huck's reflection about "*stealing a poor old woman's nigger that hadn't ever done me no harm.*" Huck decides to quit being the kind of boy he is and "become better." He writes a letter to Miss Watson saying, "*Miss Watson, your runaway nigger Jim is down here two mile below Pikesville, and Mr. Phelps has got him and he will give him up for the reward if you send.*"

Huck feels good and all washed clean of sin and then begins remembering his trip down the river with Jim, talking and singing and laughing. He recalls Jim standing his watch so he could sleep and Jim's gratitude and affection, and then he sees the letter. *"It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself:*

'All right, then, I'll go to hell'—and tore it up.

The listening students stop breathing. The classroom is silent. Students may not yet consciously know what they have experienced, but their bodies know they have experienced something wondrous.

Back when you read the ending of *The Grapes of Wrath,* you were too absorbed to notice that your breathing stopped or you gasped. You had entered a dark barn where a starving man would soon die unless given liquid nourishment. A boy, the man's young son, sobs, "I didn' know. He said he et, or he wasn' hungry. Las' night I went and' bust a winda an' stoled some bread. Made 'im chew 'er down. But he puked it all up, an' then he was weaker. Got to have soup or milk." The boy cries out, "He's dyin' I tell you!"

Ma, Pa, and Rose of Sharon, who is weak from giving birth to a stillborn baby, have no food to give the starving stranger, but, after exchanging questioning looks with her mother, Rose of Sharon says to her family and the man's son, "Will—will you all—go out?" *Rose of Sharon loosened one side of the blanket and bared her breast. "You got to," she said. She squirmed closer and pulled his head close. "There!" She said. "There."* We readers pause. We wonder. This scene exemplifies a characteristic common to spiritual writing: the outward and visible sign of inward grace, in this instance, the sacrament of communion.

Other significant moments call for silence. Such as death. The silence that precedes and follows taps. A hearse rolling by. Shovels of dirt falling onto a coffin. The faces of killed soldiers, shown in silence at the end of the PBS NewsHour. The Anglican Good Friday liturgy proclaiming*, Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit*." *Having said this, he breathed his last.* Silently the congregation, clergy, readers, and choir all kneel. When I taught in a Jewish school, I was struck by the hush, among even raucous eighth graders, that followed mention of the holocaust.

The marvel of birth also renders words inadequate. Parents and grandparents gaze in awe at the new child. The Magi adore wordlessly. Silent night.

How do we teach our composition students to convey an experience so that it will penetrate our souls--so that in silence we can nod, commend, and assess with an A? One of my undergraduate professors of English, Henry Pettit, defined judgment as "A decision of the degree of excellence of a piece of literature. Judgment may be impressionistic, based upon immediate emotional response; or it may be rendered in accordance with a systematic body of aesthetic principles." I propose that we bring forth profound writing by eliciting emotional writing and together consider ways of responding to it.

Truth-Bearing Topics

The first step is to identify meaningful subjects and to elicit the outpouring of experience, as Tom Romano says, the "gush." I guide students to the most significant hours in their lives and then give license to relate all, as if to a loving confidant. I ask the student to relive the experience emotionally, sensuously, intellectually. This kind of account contains the elements to be crafted into narrative that will take us into the same realm and, perhaps, suggest a sense of meaning beyond the mundane event itself. But first I must encourage the initial conscious and unconscious flow of words. When written quickly, without hesitation or self-criticism, they capture the authentic voice of the writer; and once the self-revealing words are on paper, then peer editors and I can gently apply the aesthetic principles that guide inexperienced writers through revision to successful final drafts.

Emotions are the channel I follow to find strong, truth-bearing subjects: love, despair, optimism, joy, hatred, bliss, any strong emotion. I begin by asking questions that identify the most important people in the lives of my students while they write brief answers. I ask, "Who loved you? Whom did you love? Who did you wish had loved you? Whom did you fear? Hate? Who helped/ energized/ discouraged/ rejected you? Who caused problems? Who was an understanding companion? For whom have you sacrificed? Name people for whom have you prayed."

Places locate emotional times. "Where did you feel sheltered/ feel miserable/ feel loved/ experience joy/ grow intellectually/ emotionally/ spiritually? Where did a dramatic event occur? Where did you feel out of place? Where were you injured physically/ emotionally? Where did you recover? Where were you when you were struck with awe/ wonder/ gratitude?"

I turn next to experiences. List your successes. Your failures. When did you feel outrage/ contempt/ try to correct a wrong? When did

you feel uncertain but take a leap? Feel grief/ shame? When were you betrayed? Struggle to forgive someone? Struggle to forgive yourself? What is your obligation? When did you work for a cause? Show compassion? Name your unspoken fear. When did strong emotion keep you awake at night? For what/ whom would you give your life? When did you pray for the presence of God? When did some form of unexpected goodness, a manifestation of grace, change you or your situation?"

My students' pages have become spattered with words like myriad rabbit holes leading deep into their lives. I say, "Circle those subjects you could write about." Frowns of concentration. Swift circle marks. Pauses. More circles. "Does anyone not have a subject to write about? Laughter. If you don't have one, I'll assign one." Hah! The found subjects can be used autobiographically or imaginatively. We may never know whether the story "actually" happened or if it happened in the mind of the writer. Does it matter?

"In only two minutes tell a partner about your subject. Then listen for two minutes to your partner's subject." Talk fills the classroom. I call out when two minutes expire so no one will use the partner's time. Over the din, I shout, "Time is up." The students have found their opening lines and the words they'll use.

Sensuous Description

I've found a strategy that helps my students write sensuously. I ask them to identify the most intense moment in their accounts. We're going to stop the clock in that breath-holding instant to take stock of the sensual scene.

I ask the writers to imagine they are hovering above the scene, looking down on it, and to write the name of the main character, often themselves, in the middle of the page. Around that character, the students name all the objects and surroundings the character could see. Next, the students name sounds, nearby sounds, background noises, and spoken sentences and uttered sounds. From sight and sound we move to the sense of touch beginning with the feelings in the character's own body, the physiological sensations. We move from textures of clothing, to weight of objects, to temperature of items and atmosphere. I ask questions about the air, its motion or lack of motion, its humidity. We next reminisce to remember, or reconstruct, smells of place, things, and bodies. Taste is easy.

I dive deeper. I ask about shadows and things missing. "What did you not understand? What did you not say? What caused an uneasy feeling? What did you not dare to even think?"

As my students write they may glance back at their sensory schemas, but their purpose was fulfilled in the making. The students became aware of detailed sensations that will bring their stories alive for readers. As with the strategy for gathering subject ideas, this overview works as well for fiction as for non-fiction.

"For the next twenty or thirty minutes, write as quickly as you can. Ignore correctness. Make all kinds of mistakes. Skip lines so you'll have room to later rewrite and insert sentences." A writing rush commences.

That's how I do it.

Precise Descriptions

I want my students to convey such detailed, sensory experience that we'll vicariously experience what they felt, smelled, tasted, and hear so acutely that not even a subtle drip of water or distant echo escapes unnoticed. One way students can attune their senses is by reading Diane Ackerman's book, *A Natural History of the Senses.* It will lead them from the mute, but most evocative sense, smell, through vision to "synesthesia, Fantasia, and Courting the Muse." The kind of spiritual writing that arrests our breath isn't ethereal. It's earthy. No matter what the subject, even Elizabeth Bishop's almost dead fish, detailed observation is the means that reveals the grandeur.

. . .

He hung a grunting weight,

stained and lost through age.

he was speckled with barnacles,

fine rosettes of lime,

and infested

with tiny white sea-lice,

and underneath two or three

rags of green weed hung down.

While his gills were breathing in

the terrible oxygen

--the frightening gills,

fresh and crisp with blood . . . .

It is through the juxtapositions of exacting, concrete images that we suggest the abstract, the spiritual and, though surprised are not surprised by the last six words "*And I let the fish go,"* or Huck's decision "All right, then, I'll go to hell." Effective spiritual writing surpasses a

literal account. It suggests truth sensed through facts or fiction that, by means of selective, astute observation goes beyond it.

Phillip Lopate says of Annie Dillard, *Her mind combines qualities not often found together: an almost insatiable curiosity about details of the natural world, science, and thought together with a spiritual appetite, a visionary's or mystic's seeking through religious study and meditation.*

Spiritual writing, like poetry, is experiential, so perhaps the characteristics of good poetry are those we can use to formulate and evaluate spiritual writing. Donald Murray tells us that "*Poetry is not contained in great thoughts, distant visions, but in the materials of our individual lives, the specific, resonating details that will reveal the meaning of our lives and will cause others, when they read of our lives, to discover their own.*"

Peer Responses

To share personal, exploratory writing is to take the clothing off our personas and reveal our naked souls. For me, and possibly for you, showing my soul is even more intimidating than showing my body. To reveal to you my most tender feelings, my longings, fears, most selfish acts, prideful moments, deepest hurts and moments of ecstasy is to make myself fully vulnerable. Before I read aloud, I want you to solemnly cross your heart that you won't laugh at me or condemn me, or exclaim to someone outside our group, "Wait 'till you hear what Nan wrote . . . !"

Until now I have told my students that whatever they write down is right. They needn't worry about doing something "wrong." However, as we prepare to break into small, peer response groups I announce rigid directions and a firm restriction. After listening to the writer read, the listeners must first tell what they like about the piece and next ask a question. As they do this, the reader should make notes for later revision about what the listeners found to be unclear or incomplete. I forbid literary critiquing. Literary critiquing is inappropriate for intimate, revelatory first drafts because the writer is inseparable from the product. To critique spontaneous, heartfelt writing as if it were fiction is harmful to the writer and will stifle further uncensored writing. Critiquing should come later if the writer decides to revise for publication. In addition, I ask the groups to squelch any listener who talks about her similar experience during the time meant for focusing on the writing.

Not unusually a reader's voice begins to quiver. Repressed emotions revive. Tears, including tears of joy may fill the eyes. What is the appropriate thing to do? Allow your own eyes to tear. Wait respectfully. Nod. Murmur encouragement. If the reader cannot regain enough control to continue, I ask, "Would you like for me to read it for you?" and the writer usually accepts my offer. I congratulate writers for

finding and expressing truly significant experiences. Response groups inevitably rally with support at such times. As the term progresses, trust grows among the students that their risky writing will be accepted.

Spiritual Listening

After a response group has, in the usual way, pointed out strengths in the writing and asked questions about it, a yet more sensitive and penetrating form of listening can illuminate underlying significance. I adapt a form of listening that was used in medieval monasteries, the wellspring of western education from which our contemporary institutions emerged.

The writer reads again, slowly and solemnly. This time the listeners write down the words or phrases that resonate within themselves; and after the reader has concluded, the listeners reverently speak the words they noted. Chorus-like, their words shower the writer. Words are repeated. Phrases echo. Hearing this gentle rain of words, the writer becomes aware of underlying intentions, and emotions, and inner strengths that had not been consciously recognized. Listeners give their written words to the writer to remember and ponder.

Participatory listening may lead both the writer and listeners into meditation and a search for meaning, so I provide a page of questions for private, later reflection. Spiritual writing is characterized by quest, by seeking meaning in the ordinary, and sometimes by bearing witness. Think again of Huck Finn and of Rose of Sharon whose stories, though distinct and particular, incarnate something greater, something ineffable.

Editing

When writers are ready to edit and proofread, their peer response groups can take responsibility for listening to each other's first drafts and scrutinizing word choices by checking nouns for specificity and verbs for vigor. Peer editors should note the presence or absence of sensory descriptions that create both visual images and kinesthetic responses. They should check for details that particularize experience and create a sense of recognition and participation. They should read aloud to become aware of rhythms, textures, and sounds. As Mary Oliver says, "A rock is not a stone."

Only when the writer's skills draw us into the narrative do we feel with the narrator, and that is when we experience compassion. We experience what the sages and prophets all taught their followers, that is to "cultivate a habit of empathy for all living beings." Scholar of religions, Karen Armstrong, tells us that the word compassion "means to feel with others, to enter their point of view and realize that they have the same fears and sorrows as yourself." The reader attains an experience of

becoming one with the subject, of absorption, a unity of being like that described by Martin Buber in *I and Thou.*

Temper Effusiveness

We've been looking at ways to empower the writing, but one of the ways in which spiritual writing is sometimes unsuccessful, sometimes make us squirm or feel distaste, is when it is excessive. The writer attributes too much, interprets too much, moralizes and projects. The daisies smile. Birds are members of choirs. Clouds break open and rays descend. These images are not fresh. We know we're being fed stale symbols. It is wondrous, a miracle in itself, that a daisy is a daisy. Instead of drawing a smiley face on it, better to scrutinize its structure and stroke its velvet.

An example of a scene that I regarded as spiritual but one made cloying by blithe narration, I observed in a PBS documentary, The Natural History of the Chicken. The camera showed an idyllic meadow populated by pretty hens and chicks until a hawk circled overhead. Abruptly the flock found cover, except for the wobbly chicks of one hen. The narrator made insipid remarks while the mother hen, her eye on the hawk, ran back to her chicks in the open pasture where she outstretched her wings to cover and shelter her brood. At the moment when the hawk swooped straight toward her, she lowered her head and closed her eyes. These details were powerfully shown by the camera and could, if written, have been "shown" narratively. However, during this filmed documentary, chatty commentary diminished the impact.

Quickly written drafts are seldom mawkish, maudlin, or downright sappy, but they can be. Usually the writer's efforts to instill a message are what surfeit the reader. So that you and I won't have to assess purple passages, let's enlist peer editors to decrescendo the effusive parts.

Writing teacher, Tom Romano, advises writers to suggest the abstract by staying with the concrete. In his book *Crafting Authentic Voice,* he observes that the concrete is the metaphor for what can't be known. And now we're back to the ineffable. The effectiveness with which writers create the concrete, leading to the power of the experience felt by the reader, is in itself what moves the work from flat documentation to something more.

The architect Mies Van der Rohe said, "Less is more." I think of another documentary about birds, Winged Migration. If you saw it, did you notice the scarcity of words? It literally showed, rather than told. It showed something about the will to live and traveling hundreds, even thousands, of miles to go wherever one has to go, about enduring storms and drought and pollution and losses. It suggested something about faith, something best said by the actions of the birds. Martin Buber points out

that “Words serve only as mute gestures pointing to the irreducible, ineffable dimension where God subsists.”

Less is more. Ask your students to trim unnecessary words. Ask each word to bulge with impact. Don’t belabor. Don’t wax didactic. The Reverend Barbara Brown Taylor, who is said to be one of the twelve most effective preachers in the English-speaking world, advises “economy, courtesy, and reverence.”

In an essay on the PBS NewsHour, Roger Rosenblatt commented that in general it’s not a good idea to instill messages into art. The messages tend to overpower the art. Rosenblatt’s comments cause me to think of the manuscripts written by my friend who structures her stories to teach anti-racism. Because my friend’s energy comes from idealistic intentions rather than emotionally emerged scenes and individuals, her characters are almost caricatures, her plots predictable. We sense and resist the hidden agenda. Barbara Brown Taylor recommends that art raise the question in the viewer, “What is this all about?”

Because the documentary about chickens was message-driven, it ignored troublesome thoughts that might raise questions. The plump, pretty chicken is the good guy; the black hawk is the bad guy. The narrator does not ask if the hawk has hungry chicks in a nest who will starve if she does not bring home dinner. The message selected the story at the expense of truth and in so doing reduced the significance of the story. In contrast, the story of Job endures because it includes complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty.

To help students understand what to do, I offer suggestions beginning with simple issues of craft and continuing into what I’ll call issues of attribution. Peer editors could first check nouns for specificity and verbs for vitality, and then see whether the writer’s voice is active. Next, they might strike out inessential words and challenge clichés and platitudes.

Peer editing groups find that content considerations are more problematic than matters of craft and correctness. I suggest to writers that they be wary of slick, simple interpretations, for such interpretations are often inherently didactic and saccharine. The elimination of platitudes and clichés may alleviate simplistic commentary; however, the presence of didacticism can be debatable, and whether sweetness is cloying or not is a matter of taste. Even so, discussion of a text in this light can be worthwhile. Other rhetorical considerations we may encounter are personification and attribution. Personification of non-human things isn’t always convincing, and projections about assumed cosmic purposes can cause readers to recoil. Attribution sometimes arouses doubt. Simply to show the story is probably the safer, more powerful course.

--and yet the quest to find spiritual meaning inherently involves attribution and personification. We look for the significance of the

burning bush. We seek message in the appearance of the dove. We marvel at inexplicable acts of compassion and instances of grace. Barbara Brown Taylor writes: *Without limits, we would have no feel for the infinite. Without limits, we would be freed from our longing for what lies beyond. It is precisely our inability to say God that teaches us who God is. When we run out of words, we are very near the God whose name is unsayable. The fact that we cannot say it, however, does not mean we may stop trying. The trying is essential to our humanity. It is how we push language to the limit so that we may listen to it as it falls, exploding into scripture, sonnet, story, song.*

Assessment

My written responses to the assigned papers are personal, for the student has revealed deep parts of himself to me. I begin by pointing out whatever I find the greatest strength of the paper to be. We all need reassurance and learn from becoming aware of our strengths, as well as our mistakes. I praise aspects I find admirable. I point out an image or anything else I like. I point to what I see as key sentences; and if I reacted to some part of the composition, I mention what I experienced. I ask about aspects that perplexed me and may encourage the student to write more about passages not fully explored. I tell what didn't work for me. If a detail intrigued me, I might suggest opening the paper with it.

Toward the end of the course, I ask my students to assess themselves. They first reread all their papers and report on what themes emerged. They tell which paper was most difficult to write and why. Where do the writings lead? What important subject lurks waiting to be written? What insight has the student gained about herself? Which learned skills will she employ in her ongoing writing? What writing habits and idiosyncrasies has she observed in herself?

Finally, you and I have to face the question of how we are to grade our students' spiritual writing. Standard scales for grading essays don't apply and shouldn't be applied. Content and construction can't be separated, and introspective, emotional writing is too personal to evaluate. In this instance, the person cannot be separated from the product. To give a letter grade would be to grade a soul. We must shelter and support students who diligently follow all the instructions and participate in response groups. Explain to your department head and dean that your course is rigorous and that because of its extraordinarily personal nature must be offered pass/no pass--but, if in spite of your request you must give a letter grade, be grateful that those students who do work through all the steps of the assignments and thoughtfully respond and edit with their classmates usually do write acceptable to excellent compositions.

We must keep in mind the maturity of our students. Are clichés, heard for the second time, clichés? Ideas exhausted by centuries of

philosophical examination may be as fresh as a still-warm egg to a new inquirer and so can be appreciated as growth-producing steps. A sincere search by means of writing is part of what we teach and must be valued. Assessment includes the process as well as the product.

Our role as assessors would be easier if we were infallible. Edmund Wilson wrote of W. H. Auden, "*Mr. Auden himself has presented the curious case of a poet who writes an original poetic language in the most robust English tradition but who seems to have been arrested in the mentality of an adolescent schoolboy."* A New Statesman review of *The Fall,* by Albert Camus, judged, "*The style is unattractive if apt, being the oblique and stilted flow of a man working his way round to asking for a loan.."*

Conclusion:

To evoke writing that probes values and seeks ultimate meanings and to assess it both sensitively and responsibly, guide students first to subject areas where they'll tap into the very quick of their core values and longings. Go to the places in their own lives where they catch their breath, get goose bumps, or sweat. There, encourage impulsive, even effusive writing so individuals' voices will form. Spiritual writing emerges from the first gush of emotion in authentic voice, usually free from contrived excesses.

You and I give ourselves, as well as our students, a tough assignment; and yet, if the students' initial drafts spring from powerful feelings, and if those drafts are heard and examined for both insufficiencies and excesses by peer editors, the final drafts can usually be assessed as satisfactory and may even reach into a realm that causes us to catch our breath, look up, and ponder.

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