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## Understanding "Spirit" in the Writing Center

*Lynn Briggs*

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A trend beginning in academic literature that takes its cue from popular literature is the turn toward an examination of "spirit." The authors who are doing this are selling books "literally by the millions" (45) and are feeding what Paul Heilker calls a "collective hunger" (107). This need is not only felt outside of the academy but within it, although the idea of including "spirit" in the academy is highly controversial. I will not offer a broad argument for including spirituality in academic endeavors—this has been done elsewhere (see Foehr and Schiller or O'Reilly). Instead I will provide a synthesis of what some of the popular and scholarly literature says about spirit, and then narrate a writing center story in which the writer's text served as a vehicle for a transformation of the people involved. I'll follow this with an analysis of the experience grounded in the literature on writing and spirit.

Many of the most cited popular spiritual writers see education, growth, and learning as essential tasks for the spirit. Thomas Moore proclaims that "education is an 'eduction,' a drawing out of one's own genius, nature, and heart" (59). James Hillman describes the experience of "growing down" in *The Soul's Code* as the process of recognizing one's own "genius," fulfilling destiny's call, answering the "daimon," or recognizing the purpose for which one's soul has chosen one's life (14). While not widespread, the connection between spiritual learning and the academy is nonetheless being felt. In Foehr and Schiller's *The Spiritual Side of Writing*, Foehr explains how academic authors are "blend[ing] discussions of their disciplines with a consciousness of the spiritual nature of the self" (44). The connection between spirituality and pedagogy is neither new nor practiced only by educational outsiders. As Christopher Ferry demonstrates, "education for critical consciousness" that "Freire describes in various texts . . . is profoundly spiritual" (148), and "Freire's pedagogy emerged and continues to evolve from a historical consciousness that unites the sacred and the human" (154).

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However, the notion of “spirit” is often resisted in the academy. Heilker notes that the introduction of “spirit” into education can result in “attacks from both the political left and the political right” (108). “Spirit” is sometimes associated with cultures that are suspect, including organized, even fundamentalist religion on the right and new age practitioners on the left. When I refer to “spirit,” I mean it in neither a fundamentalist nor new-age way, although perhaps practitioners of fundamentalist and new-age religions seek and find some of the elements of “spirit” as it is defined here. When I say “spirit,” I refer to a sense of transcendence of self and an awareness of the patterns of sense in the universe. This awareness of sense has been described as “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi) as “clicking” or as the “aha” experience (Frankl 140). Wendy Bishop describes it as “getting-connected-with-a-world-bigger-than-I-am sense” which “points to experiences larger than affect and larger than mind” (129).

Popular (Dyer; Campbell; Fox; Hillman; Moore) and more academic writers (Damasio; Foehr; Frankl; Graves; Hillman; Schiller) offer a variety of definitions for what is “spiritual” My own synthesis is something like this: *for a meaningful life, people must be able to see and feel daily events as experiences that connect them to themselves, to others, and to larger forces in the universe. Sensing these connections is a potentially transformative event, and many events that transform do so because they have brought connections into focus.*

In “Man’s Search for Ultimate Meaning,” renowned psychiatrist and philosopher Viktor E. Frankl describes the ways that people make their lives meaningful, which he sees as a spiritual act. He says that the “three avenues that lead up to meaning fulfillment [are] . . . First, . . . creating a work; second, . . . encountering someone . . . Most important is the third avenue . . . by changing ourselves” (141-142). These three avenues often intersect in the writing center—writers bring work they have created into a setting where they plan to encounter someone and change themselves (even if the change is only to be a better writer). The writing center is a site where people can use the texts they have created to make transformative connections. Such connections can lead to what Richard Graves calls “[m]oments of grace,” which are “invariably moments of healing” (18). Both Graves and Mary Rose O’Reilly believe that such healing is necessary, since many writers who visit centers have been scarred by the “stresses and anger” of “everyday [academic] life” (Graves 18), where writers are convinced that they are not only “bad writers” but “bad thinkers” and “unworthy people.” The healing provided by such connections in the writing center is essential for learning, since learners can be thwarted by a wounded spirit. O’Reilly argues that stories can have healing properties, and so I offer a “healing story” (O’Reilly 24) which is also a story of healing in the writing center.

Diane was late for her appointment at our Writers' Center. Before Diane's arrival, the Responder who had been assigned to Diane's appointment asked me if she could leave early, since apparently Diane was going to be a no-show. I acquiesced, too busy with my own project to actually consider the situation. Five minutes later, Diane arrived. Diane said she had told "the person who took the appointment" that she would be late, and she really needed to see someone "today." I looked around—the other Responders were all working with writers. I tried to catch someone's eye to see if she was almost done and could take Diane. No luck. So, annoyed that I had to stop writing whatever incredibly institutionally important report I was working on at the time, I agreed to sit down with Diane.

She was writing the last paper for her M. Ed., a narrative on her student teaching experience. Diane (who was about my age) kept referring to her host teacher as "Mrs. Johnson." In it, she praised Mrs. Johnson's teaching skills frequently. However, her tone of voice when she read and the superlatives she used didn't match—Diane used words like "exciting" in her paper, but read these words in a flat tone of voice. Her flat tone when she read the paper was different from the animation she showed when she insisted I meet with her "today."

I found myself a little amused by the way that this mature woman referred to another woman as "Mrs." I asked, almost teasingly, "Did you always call her 'Mrs. Johnson' when you were with her?" I was aware that I was trying to get to the notion of authenticity of voice in Diane's writing—I had a sense of something missing or off, and I thought that it might have to do with the overformalization of her experience.

"Yeah, that's what she had me call her," Diane stated.

"You're kidding!" I replied. "I used to have a rule when I supervised student teachers. I wouldn't give them credit for the experience until they could call their host teachers by their first names. I wouldn't be letting you graduate until you called her . . . ?" my question trailed off.

"Janet. Her first name was Janet, but everyone called her Mrs. Johnson."

"Really? Even in the teachers' room?"

"Yup—even the PE guy. She sort of had this presence," Diane added.

"Like an elegant presence, like Jackie O.?" I asked.

“No,” Diane’s voice got softer and she looked a little mischievous. “Like a bitchy presence, like Miss Piggy,” Diane giggled.

I laughed. “But I don’t get sense any of that in here—I see you as approving of everything she did, although I have to say that the methods you describe aren’t ones that I’d hurry to endorse,” I told her.

“Yeah, I had some trouble with what she did too—but she had this reputation as such a great teacher. Everyone in the program here said so, everyone at her school said so, she even won [a big award] this year,” Diane said animatedly.

“That’s HER?” I replied. I had heard of that teacher and that award. “But you didn’t like what she did in the classroom?” I pressed.

“Not really—I mean, she had really great control, but that was just because she had scared the shit out of those little kids. She had this really rigid system and if anyone missed anything they were toast. I used to try to be overly nice to the kids just because I didn’t feel like she gave them any, well, love,” Diane apologized.

“But your portrait of her is so glowing—I don’t get any sense of your differences here.” I indicated my surprise.

I was beginning to see that my sense of Diane’s inauthenticity was right on target. By this point, I was fully engaged, and we were running over the time for which Diane had signed up and I didn’t seem to care about my other big project any more. I was wrapped up in the connections that Diane and I were making.

“Can you tell me about the kind of methods that you would have used with her class?” I asked Diane.

“I did get to use them when I was teaching,” she said.

She proceeded to tell me about how some things she had done had felt really successful, and that she felt like she got her teaching legs under her in that experience.

“Do you feel like you have to write a glowing report on her, or can you tell what really happened to you?” I asked.

"I can't criticize her in this piece—my professor thinks she's great—but he's never actually seen her with her class. It would be wrong to write what I really thought about her methods," Diane explained.

Then, the right question came from me: "In what ways did she help you succeed?" Diane responded immediately. "Her classroom was so orderly—I never had to wonder what the system was; I never had to struggle to manage kids. She stayed in the classroom nearly all the time and she really allowed me to do what I wanted—even though it was so different from what she did herself. She didn't just make me call her 'Mrs. Johnson' all the time; she called me 'Ms. Wells.'" She stopped and thought. "I could write that, couldn't I—then I would be telling the truth—only I didn't know it was the truth until just now."

Diane's relationship with Mrs. Johnson was painful: She had to endure dissonance as she student taught in a class that was supposed to be "wonderful" but that troubled her. Further, she thought she had to suppress her real opinions and insights in order to write the paper her professor was expecting. In our session, we could have reflected on how very troubling it was that authorities had made it impossible for her to express her truth about her student teaching placement. However, we somehow made a choice not to do this. While we recognized the insidious ways that the system conspired to take Diane's voice and power away, we chose not to dwell on them, but instead chose to move beyond them. By making this choice we were able to connect to and eventually transform each other. Our choice was ultimately optimistic, but not naive.

This choice was at odds with what I usually did in sessions. I had previously believed that in order to solve problems in writing center sessions I had to focus on them, help the writer dissect them, study them. According to this approach, I would have drawn Diane into an analysis of whether she was being silenced by her professor, what the material consequences of writing the paper were, and whether she could own her experience *and* write the paper her professor wanted.

But this approach might've led to a dis-integration of Diane's experience. She might have chosen to reflect with me about what "really" happened in student teaching, and then write a sugar-coated version for her powerful audience. In some instances, I might've considered that a successful session. I might have been pleased if Diane articulated that she needed to make rhetorical choices based on the power dynamic. I might have felt I had helped her be both less vulnerable as an academic writer, and perhaps more reflective as a teacher. But I think what actually happened was better.

It was better because I didn't have to urge Diane to dis-integrate

her experience in order to write what she was “supposed to.” By finding a truly positive aspect of her student teaching placement with Mrs. Johnson, Diane could see her professor’s assignment and bias as sensible. By seeing a way that Mrs. Johnson was a good teacher, Diane was able to connect the three of them—herself, her professor, and Mrs. Johnson—instead of pitting them against her. When that happened, Diane created a network rather than engaging in a tug-of-war.

Marianthe Karanikas makes a practice of encouraging her students to see such connections between people and to develop “compassionate critical consciousness,” an approach based on the work of activist, poet, and philosopher Thich N’hat Hanh. She describes how he teaches that “action springs from neither rage nor terror but from loving kindness” (158). While “rage” and terror” are probably too strong to describe Diane’s feelings about her paper and her student teaching experience at the start of our session, “anger” and “apprehension” are not. If “loving kindness” is too strong to describe her feelings towards her professor and Mrs. Johnson at the end of the session, “benevolent understanding” is not. Diane underwent a remarkable shift in attitude, and was then able to act by writing the paper. She could then write not out of anger and frustration, but out of benevolent understanding for her audience and subject. I believe that the shift Diane underwent was brought about, at least in part, by forces that many scholars are naming “spiritual.”

I don’t think that Diane’s change of perspective would’ve happened if I’d taken my usual problem-focused approach to our interaction. I am not, however, taking credit for Diane’s shift in outlook. It was not my educated mind that planned and executed my pedagogy, but rather, something deeper and somewhat inexplicable, perhaps my “daimon” or “genius” that allowed me to transcend my ego-investment in politically charged, rhetorically focused writing center pedagogy. Somehow I was allowed to shelve the pedagogy I had come to think of as proper and appropriate, and to move in what could have been a frightening new direction had I taken the time to think about it.

Donald Gallehr would likely see a parallel between my successful yet mysterious answer to the question of how to work in the session with Diane and his use of koans, or Zen puzzles for meditation. Gallehr meditates on a koan and waits for an answer. He describes how he “tried to use logic and rational thinking [to solve a koan puzzle] and got nowhere, so I merely meditated, clearing my mind to allow for that wonderful period of peace” (98). While I did not meditate before, during, or after my session with Diane, our session had meditative qualities for me, chief among them my ability to focus and block out my other concerns, concerns, perhaps along with preconceptions, the assumptions each of us bring to a session. Gallehr’s description of finding “right answers” also resonates with how

I felt about my approach with Diane:

Right answers [to koans] often came at unexpected times or were puzzling because they initially didn't make sense. It was as if my "right brain" had found the answer and my "left brain" had to figure it out. In other words, when I couldn't initially explain the answer, it was probably right. Right answers were also larger in scope—holistic rather than atomistic—and appeared suddenly, at unexpected times, usually when I was not focusing on the koan. (100)

Like Gallehr, I couldn't have explained what I was doing in the session with Diane, and the approach I took was certainly unexpected. The results of this unexpected approach in our session were holistic rather than atomistic. Instead of finding a way to tweak the text so that it would be more acceptable to Diane and her professor, we found a way to recast the experience that the text was about.

Naming these interactions "spiritual" moves them a step beyond Leahy's description of "flow" and "liking" in the writing center. Leahy (1995) describes how affective elements of a session greatly influence the work that is done there. There is a key difference between a spiritually understood writing center pedagogy and Leahy's work on the affective element. Leahy frames his attention to affect in terms of "fuel[ing] the writing and revising process" (152); the focus in his approach is largely on the progress of a text. A spiritually understood writing center pedagogy would broaden North's dictum to make "better writers" in that it helps writers see writing as a way to "get-connected-to-a-world-bigger-than-I-am" (Bishop 129). Diane's and my interaction moved the activity of writing "better" past performance; Diane genuinely connected with her audience and believed in her purpose.

By paying attention, by "deep[ly] listening" (O'Reilley 17) to each other, Diane and I made the session a transformative event. O'Reilley describes the transformative power listening can have: "One can, I think, listen someone into existence, encourage a stronger self to emerge or a new talent to flourish" (21). Diane and I encouraged each others' stronger selves in our session. She listened a less-problem-focused me into existence, and I a less-frustrated her. Both of us listened an effective version of the teacher, Mrs. Johnson, into existence.

Our listening changed our relationship markedly between the start of the session and the end. Over this period of time we became comfortable enough to laugh, and so even our playfulness had spiritual roots; our speech patterns even became similar.

My experience with Diane resonates with the geneticist Barbara

McClintock's experience, related by Marianthe Karanikas. McClintock had come across a seemingly unsolvable problem; she said she "wasn't seeing things, wasn't integrating. I wasn't getting things right at all" (159). Then:

For half an hour, McClintock sat and then, in her own words, "Suddenly I jumped up, I couldn't wait to get back to the laboratory. I knew I was going to solve it." . . . McClintock did not remember exactly what happened. "I must have done this very intense, subconscious thinking. And suddenly I knew everything was going to be just fine." (159)

Sherry Swain's experience dancing also parallels my session with Diane. After describing how "a sense of wonder filled her being" (167) a friend explained the experience to her: "You were in 'the zone . . . the magical place that athletes strive to enter—the state in which they can do no wrong.'" In dancing, Swain says, the zone is a place where dances seem "to be animated by one single spirit, one Power" (167). The sense of being animated by a single source was the sense of connection I had with Diane. Even though we had never met before, even though I was using a response strategy that was unfamiliar to me, Diane and I waltzed flawlessly, without discussing our steps or looking at our feet.

Meditative awareness, subconscious thinking, drawing on the right side of the brain, being in the "zone" are characteristics named by authors as "spiritual." An essential element in this spiritual aspect is the trust that McClintock expressed ("I knew everything was going to be just fine") in processes that cannot be controlled intellectually, logically, or rationally. McClintock and Gallehr recognized that some problems could not be solved; their questions could not be answered, by sheer will, diligence, or hard work. In fact, they needed to give up these things, to transcend the strategies that they were taught to use as academics, and to surrender to not knowing.

I had to give up my work, my agenda, in order to work with Diane. Her insistence in having a session suggested a level of hope for the effectiveness of the Center, and a willingness to trust me. She displayed the "hunger" that O'Reilly suggests we must honor in our teaching (1). I believe that these were among the things that disarmed me and allowed me to draw on resources that, whether from deep within me, or from some outside force in the universe, I now name "spiritual." For though the question "In what ways did she help you succeed?" seemed to open up new possibilities for the session, this kind of questioning was not something I'd studied for, carefully calculated, or ever had anyone ask me. Yet, it came to me with sudden and remarkable clarity.

These spiritual forces allowed for surprising change. By the time the session ended, all three of us (including Mrs. Johnson) were different people. Our construction of Mrs. Johnson at the start of the session—as a bad teacher Diane had been bullied into respecting—changed dramatically. By the end of the session we were able to see her as someone who had given us the gift of insight.

Diane and I were also different after the session because of the way that we interacted. I began the session aware of the power hierarchies: I was the Center director and I had more institutionally important things to do than to take over for one of my missing staff members. I was annoyed at my Responder who asked to leave early and at the person who took the message that Diane would be late but didn't make a note in the appointment book. I felt that my duties outweighed this opportunity to make contact. This didn't seem like an environment in which I was likely to engage in a successful response session, much less become connected to a stranger. But Diane needed an opportunity to connect, and she pursued it. By insisting that someone meet with her immediately, she changed the power dynamic. As soon as she began to read her paper aloud to me, I became engaged, focused, and that allowed me to listen to my "daimon," "genius," or "right brain" which changed the dynamic further. We took the session in a direction I had never prepared for intellectually or affectively. We connected as peers talking about her relationship with a colleague. That connection changed my world immediately, and had future ramifications. The connection was probably the reason I risked deviating from my usually problem-focused approach.

During the course of the session with Diane, I went from feeling annoyed and resentful to feeling uplifted and invigorated. Despite my belief that I desired to be open to connections with writers, Diane showed me without intention that I had not been. What I was connected to, I now believe, was my methodology. My goals for sessions were usually affective (I wanted the writer to feel empowered) and intellectual (I wanted the writer to be more rhetorically aware). But what happened was more than that; it was "larger than affect, larger than mind"; it was Wendy Bishop's definition of "spiritual."

I've come rather late to the realization that it is possible and desirable, as the literature on writing and spirit attests, to understand writing center practice from a spiritual perspective and to include in the goals for such practice the possibility of "aha" moments, a sense of connection, and mutual growth. I would like to envision what I help writers do in the Center as "study" in Thomas Moore's sense. Moore says, "The manifestation of one's essence, the unfolding of one's capabilities, the revelation of one's heretofore hidden possibilities—these are the goals of study from the point of view of the person" (59). While I would not

argue that a spiritual understanding of writing center practice is the only way to have engaging, enriching sessions, I would suggest that viewing center pedagogy from this perspective opens up rewarding possibilities for explaining the previously inexplicable sense of “flow” that we’ve all experienced when working with writers.

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