

2004

Reviews

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Recommended Citation

Duffy, W. Keith; Lei, Elizabeth Vander; and MacCurdy, Marian (2004) "Reviews," *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*: Vol. 10 , Article 11.

<https://doi.org/10.7290/jaepl10zjck>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl/vol10/iss1/11>

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REVIEWS

Phifer, Nan. *Memoirs of the Soul: Writing Your Spiritual Autobiography*. Cincinnati, OH: Walking Stick P, 2002.

W. Keith Duffy, Penn State Capital College

Nan Phifer looked around the room, and a calm settled over everyone. Her eyes looked a bit tired—from travel no doubt—but she managed a warm smile. She gestured to the handout she had distributed and in a soothing voice said, “Now, in the middle of each empty picture frame you see here, I’d like everyone to write the name of a person who influenced you to become a teacher. This could be someone in your immediate family, a teacher from your past or present, a student you’ve had, or a famous author you’ve read and admired. It could be anyone.” Like the rest of the group, I started tentatively at first, jotting one name at a time. But, slowly, my memories, the people who influenced my teaching career, came flooding back: my dissertation director Sue, my old cooperating teacher Mr. King, my mom, my TA directors Donna and Elizabeth, my personal rhet/comp superstars James Moffett, Lad Tobin, Wendy Bishop. Before I knew it, the page was filled, and I was still writing.

The 2004 CCCC in San Antonio had just gotten underway. I sat at a conference table surrounded by a dozen colleagues; we were all attending the annual AEPL workshop where Nan Phifer was graciously illustrating how she runs her memoir workshops in connection with the University of Oregon. The writing activity we were eagerly engaged in is just one of many presented in her book, *Memoirs of the Soul: Writing Your Spiritual Autobiography*.

Phifer’s book is geared mainly towards beginning authors who know little about the writing process. Her carefully phrased prompts, instructions, and examples ask writers to begin at the surface of their existence and to burrow deeper and deeper into their hearts and minds. With each chapter, she challenges would-be memoirists to take another step inward, to inch closer to their own souls. In many ways, Phifer’s book is like a deep-sea diving expedition—or an archeological dig—where the depth of the self is revealed layer by layer, league by league, chapter by chapter.

It begins disarmingly enough. After a brief explanation of the writing process—brainstorming, drafting, peer review, revision—Phifer asks writers to examine specific artifacts, events, people, and places of significance. Many prompts in the first few chapters skim the surface only. Writers are directed to consider the people in their lives who have been important to them (alive or dead, young or old), places where significant events occurred (homes, parks, sanctuaries), objects they would be sorry to lose (handmade gifts, awards, books), and important activities (both physical and intellectual) (21-22). In each chapter, Phifer provides writers with specific prompts to follow (“A place I remember well is . . .” “My pulse quickened when . . .”) and tells writers to draft quickly without regard to form or convention (32-42).

The scratching of pens and pencils slowly quieted. Nan spoke up in a cool, reassuring tone: "When you are finished filling in the frames, take a sheet of tracing paper and place it on top." I did so, and the blackened squares and hastily scrawled names of my teaching influences blurred through, but I could still read them. She continued, "On the tracing paper, as you read each name, think about your relationship to that person. What part of yourself responds to that individual? What did you learn from that person? What did the person teach you? What in yourself do you ascribe to that person? In each frame, I'd like you to write that quality, that element of yourself, that you associate with that person." Again, I began writing tentatively. This was no easy task; the focus had changed from the external to the internal. And Nan wasn't only asking me to write about myself, but to examine my internal relationship to those whom I identified as teaching influences. This was going to take some thinking. . . .

As a teacher of writing, I've occasionally used memoir-type writing assignments like Phifer's in both first-year and advanced-writing classes. (One of my perennial favorites is having students write their own literacy histories.) Because of my semi-familiarity with memoir pedagogy, I admit that I was a bit ambivalent about the introductory chapters in *Memoirs of the Soul*. Though the examples of student memoirs that Phifer includes are often moving, her initial prompts (such as drawing a Valentine-shaped heart and filling it with the names of significant people) seem rooted in the same expressivist—and often sentimental—pedagogy that I myself have been criticized for using in the writing classroom.

However, around chapter 8 and 9 ("Adolescent Angst" and "Events that Shape the Course of Your Life" respectively), I found my misgivings shift ever so slightly. It is here that Phifer asks writers to do some hard work in confronting themselves, their choices, and their experiences, and to name their disappointments and frustrations, while revealing themselves as people who are not always in control. Some of my own research into the spiritual aspects of teaching writing have revolved around issues of imperfection, self-confrontation, and control; so, not surprisingly, my interest in her book was ignited when she guided me to write about "A time when I did not feel in control," "A time I realized my life would be different," "A time I felt humiliated," and "A time when I disappointed myself" (65-73). It was then I realized this wasn't necessarily the warm-and-fuzzy book it appeared to be. Clearly, a "feel good" pedagogical approach can play an important part of self-revelation when writing a memoir. But if would-be memoirists are willing to also do the difficult work of self-confrontation in writing and share it with others, this is when a manuscript can really come to life. As an author and experienced workshop leader, Phifer clearly acknowledges this.

"Now, I'd like you to examine all your notes and write a paragraph that describes why you became a teacher. When you are done, I'm going to ask you to get into groups of two and read your paragraph to your partner. When you share, wait until the person is finished reading, then make one positive comment about the paragraph and ask one question about something that was not mentioned or elaborated on." Nan's directions were clear. Having had ample time to brainstorm, I quickly got to work. In my paragraph, I mused that I have a tendency to gravitate toward that which feels difficult; if I feel a sense of resistance, if I feel uncomfortable, or if an act feels like a challenge or obstacle, I believe I am being called to pay attention to it. Teaching falls into this category for me. Because

teaching is such a social act—and because I am by nature rather reserved and private—I’ve often characterized teaching as a challenging task that forces me to stretch. This is a difficult, but important, realization. After reading my short narrative aloud to my partner, I glanced quickly around the room and saw everyone engaged in each other’s stories.

Ultimately, the real guts of Phifer’s book are revealed in later chapters: “Evolving Ideas About Religion,” “Confronting Crisis,” “Flip of the Compass,” and “Inner Peace” (chapters 16–21). This is where Phifer asks the beginning memoirist to examine—and sometimes question—deeply held religious beliefs. She acknowledges that our approach toward religion is not static; it is in flux as we learn and grow and change. Likewise, she asks us to face calamity, our own despair and agony, feelings of loss, and being lost. Of course, Phifer is careful to balance this deep and sometimes troubling self-confrontation with love and understanding: “How do you reveal the quality of tenderness in yourself and the quality of patience? What was your source of courage? Where did you find hope?” (140). She also challenges us to ponder the ways profound disruption can lead to inner peace.

As mentioned, Phifer packs her book with a great many excerpts by writers who have attended her workshops: traditional students, single mothers, ministers, musicians, teachers, grandparents. These samples provide the beginning memoirist with more than just models, however; Phifer presents these individuals as comrades, all of whom are cultivating the habit of introspection, all of whom are traveling down the same path. She also sprinkles little breadcrumbs for the reader along the way, pinches of advice and insight from famous writers and thinkers, like William James, Blaise Pascal, Franz Kafka, and Paul Tillich. Additionally, the last few chapters provide a suggested reading list, tips for using the book in different academic environments (such as first-year composition classes and high school English classes), tips for using the book in a writing group or alone, and suggestions for preparing a final copy of a memoir (including ideas on revising and proofreading).

Having seen Nan Phifer in action, I don’t think there’s anything quite like attending her writing workshops, but her book is a fair alternative if a trip to Oregon is out of the question. ☺

Daniell, Beth. *A Communion of Friendship: Literacy, Spiritual Practice, and Women in Recovery*. Studies in Writing and Rhetoric 21. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2003.

Elizabeth Vander Lei, Calvin College

In recent years, the field of composition and rhetoric has taken interest in the relationship of spiritual faith and writing (see, for example, essays by McCrary; Perkins; and Rand published within five months of each other in 2001). This scholarly interest has only intensified since 9/11, as students and teachers alike try to understand and respond to a world in which spirituality seems to matter more, both locally and globally. For many of these scholars, Beth Daniell’s pioneering work has served as both insightful guide and inspiring example.

Daniell's earlier work gave us peeks at her research into the literacy and spiritual practices of six women who are members of an Al-Anon group in Mountain City (names of the women and the town are pseudonyms). Daniell throws back the curtain on this research in her new book, *A Communion of Friendship: Literacy, Spiritual Practice, and Women in Recovery*.

A Communion of Friendship, part of SIUP's Studies in Writing and Rhetoric series, is bound to shape future research on spirituality and literacy in at least three significant ways. First, Daniell crafts a "little narrative" of the ways that literate practices help the Mountain City women accomplish the spiritual goals they have set for themselves in Al-Anon. While Daniell explicitly cautions readers to resist generalizing from these literacy and spiritual practices, they do contradict literacy theories that assume literacy looks the same and produces the same effects in all times and all places. Second, Daniell carefully considers the nature of the literate and spiritual practices of the Mountain City women, introducing us to the ways that literacy and spirituality, intricately intertwined, help these women "form and re-form" themselves. Finally, in her deliciously self-deprecating description of her research process (Chapter 2) and her astute analysis of the ethical issues inherent in research such as hers (Appendix X), Daniell acts as a trail-savvy guide for future researchers, pointing out dangers (practical, theoretical, and ethical) and encouraging them toward productive paths. And, happily, *A Communion of Friendship* is infused with good will and sparkles with Daniell's signature quick wit and adroit phrasing, making it a pleasure to read.

From the outset, Daniell makes it clear that she intends to describe the literate practices of six particular women: Tommie, Catherine, Jennifer, Lilly, Judy, and Jill. Her project is definitely "not, then, about the literacy of abstract, theoretical women. It is not about the literacy of women in general, or of American women, or of white women, or even of women who are or have been married to alcoholics" even though these six women fit all these descriptions (1). Rather, Daniell sets herself the task of creating a "little narrative," in the Lyotardian sense, that describes "particular persons reading and writing in one specific place and in one time for one purpose" (24). Daniell organizes her description of their literate practices into three chapters, one on writing, one on reading, and one on the peculiar political power of vernacular literacies.

Daniell begins her chapter on the writing practices of these six women with two disclaimers. First, for them, as for most of us, writing does not exist as an autonomous literate practice: authors read and re-read what they've written, they share it with others, they talk about it, and they listen as others respond to it. And second, literacy and spirituality entwine in complex ways that resist unraveling. While for these women writing often serves as a catalyst for spiritual exploration and personal spiritual development, Daniell cautions that we should not, therefore, infer that literacy necessarily produces "spiritual insight or higher forms of cognition" (42). This is a fine line, one that Daniell walks with grace. She describes the writing that the Mountain City women do at three key phases of their Al-Anon experience: inventorying their actions and beliefs (completing Al-Anon's fourth step), creating solutions for problems in their lives, and using language to shape their world. In each section of this chapter, Daniell weaves together the individual stories the women tell about their literate practices, contextualizing these narratives with reference to scholarship on confession and healing, identity negotiation, and power. In all this, Daniell emphasizes the pervasively social nature

of both literacy and spirituality, concluding that the plaiting of literacy and spirituality produces a peculiar kind of power for these women, enabling them to “name and claim” their lives.

In her chapter on the reading practices of the Mountain City women, Daniell finds that their reading practices, too, are intensely social. These women share two kinds of reading material: program literature—that is, council-approved publications of AA and Al-Anon—and recreational reading material such as novels and magazines. The women read and re-read program literature for purposes of identification and personal growth. At Al-Anon meetings, only AA and Al-Anon publications serve as springboards for group discussion. The women tell Daniell that they read, re-read, and discuss program literature both to develop themselves as “moral and spiritual agent[s]” and to track their progress toward this goal. The Mountain City women read aesthetic material, too, seeking a temporary break from the intense self-focus required for recovery. Even in this reading, though, they read books that address their daily concerns and ones that model positive social relationships. It may be that their source for books shapes the content of their reading. Daniell discovers that Lilly, program sponsor for several of the women, is an enthusiastic book lender; many of the books the women read come from Lilly’s library. Perhaps the most important feature of their reading is the intensely social nature of their response to what they’ve read. These women discuss what they’ve read with each other, giving them an opportunity to articulate their beliefs on a wide range of issues and building the community of friendship that sustains them as they change their lives through spiritual practice.

From these interviews, Daniell concludes that we have thought about the power of literacy exactly backwards. Using Sylvia Scribner’s three metaphors for literacy, Daniell notes that scholars most often think of literacy as that which people use to function in the world: to read instructions or to write a purchase order. Then, for those who achieve a higher level of literacy, often through advanced education, literacy serves as a source of political or economic power, allowing the educated to interpret legal documents or craft persuasive financial reports. Finally, for the most literate, writing serves as an aesthetic or creative outlet, an avenue of self-expression that most often takes the form of accepted literary genres. But, for the women she interviewed, Daniell argues, aesthetic or creative literacy that the women express in social, non-academic settings serves as a catalyst for spiritual growth. This spiritual growth, in turn, fosters a sense of spiritual power, an ability to act based on thorough self-knowledge. Finally, this spiritual power helps them imagine new ways they can function in the world, applying for a job at the local grocery store or beginning a new course of study at the university, for example.

When we consider the intensely, inherently social and spiritual nature of these women’s literate practices, according to Daniell, we think better about the nature and function of literacy. We understand better how literacy empowers when we dismiss distinctions between oral and written: “The women who talked with me come to voice by means of the talk that goes on in response to their reading and writing. This is, I argue, literacy for power” (140). Furthermore, Daniell argues that we must acknowledge that for at least some people, spirituality plays an important role in literate practice and vice versa: “When whole areas of people’s lives are closed off as unworthy of academic attention, the academy misses important information” (150). And finally, and perhaps most importantly, Daniel

challenges us to consider the ways we listen to what others have to say, that is, the ways we sponsor the literate practices of others. Noting the influence of Freire's Catholicism on his pedagogy, Daniell claims, "Being treated as if one is worthy, as if one's life is important, as if what one has to say is significant and deserving attention, as if one is—yes—a fellow child of God allows some people, even the most silenced, to come to voice and, in so doing, to see the world and themselves differently" (148).

It is this challenge that has lingered with me and has shaped my pedagogy in the first-year composition course I'm teaching this semester. I find myself pausing to ask students what they know about academic writing, questions such as what a bad thesis looks like, why it is so much easier to write a bad thesis than a good one, or how writers know when they're working with a bad thesis. And I find myself genuinely curious about their answers. Maybe it's a coincidence that I find myself enjoying the teaching, the students, and even (on some assignments anyway) the grading more than I have previously. Maybe. Regardless of the cause of my nearly-one-semester-long satisfaction with English 101 after reading *A Communion of Friendship*, I am left with a profound sense of gratitude, to the six women who shared their stories with Daniell and to Daniell who has brought their stories to us. ☺

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Weldon, Michele. *Writing To Save Your Life*. Minneapolis: Hazelden Information Education, 2001.

Marian MacCurdy, Ithaca College

The relationship between writing and healing has been recognized since pre-classical times. Prior to Plato's exile of the poet from the Republic, writers and theorists saw "the word" as a way to heal both body and soul. However, once the philosophical and scientific tide turned away from the power of language to effect positive change, writing and healing became more a part of popular culture and less a legitimate area of inquiry within the academy. That all began to change with the publication of Alice Brand's groundbreaking *Therapy in Writing* over twenty years ago and Peter Elbow's innovative expressivist pedagogy that placed the writer rather than only the written at the center of the enterprise. The last few years have seen a burgeoning interest in writing and healing coming from multiple disciplines. Given the evidence that writing can attenuate the symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis and asthma, among other illnesses, the medical profession has begun to include writing and healing in its professional curriculum. James

Pennebaker's original studies demonstrating the beneficial effects of writing on immune system functioning have generated much interest in the area of experimental and clinical psychology, and several new articles and books on writing and healing within composition studies have demonstrated that writing about difficult subjects is a natural and inevitable process that will occur whether requested or not. Until relatively recently most of the publications on writing and healing took the form of self-help books and articles that presented exercises and plans for writing, some of which have been innovative and popular. However, in the last few years several significant publications on writing and healing (see reference list) have begun to change the nature of the conversation and provide an interdisciplinary base where psychologists, medical professionals, literary critics, compositionists, and journalists, among others, can share perspectives.

Michelle Weldon's *Writing To Save Your Life: How to Honor Your Story Through Journaling* was published in 2001 by Hazelden Publishing and Educational Services, a division of the Hazelden Foundation, an organization that provides information, education, and recovery services for people afflicted with chemical dependency. The purpose of the book is to provide a guide for those who wish to use writing to "work through"—to use Dominick LaCapra's terminology—their painful experiences. Weldon, also the author of *I Closed My Eyes*, the story of her recovery from her difficult divorce, is a journalist who has written a great many by-line articles and essays for such publications as the *Chicago Tribune* and *West Suburban Living*. Her interest is in helping people break free of their pre-conceived notions of "correctness" and "appropriateness" and write what they feel and what they have experienced for themselves. This is not a book that will show how to get published or how to write a memoir that will appeal to others. It is a book that offers advice and guidance to those who are beginning the writer's path but who find their own pain in the way. Weldon offers Shakespeare's advice from *Macbeth*—to "give sorrow words"—and argues only by acknowledging that pain can anyone find rhetorical and perhaps personal freedom. She then offers a process for how to begin to use writing to heal "mind, body, spirit," as stated in the Foreword, coauthored by a psychologist and a therapist.

Weldon begins by setting out the process of writing, including internal and external hindrances to that process, and then provides examples from her life and writing of that process. Nineteen chapters describe the process of getting started, "igniting your power," dealing with internal and external critics, finding quiet time, using humor, knowing when not to write, etc. While some of these chapters seem redundant, they do include separate exercises, many inventive and helpful, designed to help the reader embrace a stage of the work. For example, her exercise on place can help writers get beyond labels to clear descriptions:

Take me somewhere. It can be a place that was special to you in the past or is special to you now. Tell me about every nook and cranny of the room, about every quadrant of space. . . . Think about every detail and every sense—hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, feeling. By writing what you alone know, you are telling a story that is yours alone. So tell it in your own style. (119)

However, the third exercise in this section, while perhaps providing necessary verification for the writer, will take the writer away from those very necessary

specifics and into the pitfall of labels, the bane of the writer's life:

List all the reasons why you are the only person to tell your story. Write that it is true. Write that you are intelligent and talented and that your story is worth telling. Write every positive adjective you can think of to describe who you are and why you are the only person to tell this story. (119)

The role of isolated author is a difficult one. Without positive feedback—sometimes obtained in a writer's group or a class—writers must find ways to be their own coaches, and certainly this exercise can provide that. But Weldon does not differentiate between those exercises that further the author's text and those that further the author's motivation. Weldon's commitment to her readers is clear, but her text has certain limitations that may prove frustrating to a reader who attempts to implement each of these steps.

Weldon calls her process "scribotherapy," apparently without knowledge of the term "scriptotherapy" that Suzette Henke and others have used. This is an example of the insularity of many practitioners in this field who see themselves as discovering the seemingly undiscovered but, in fact, well trod land. This process of writing and healing, indeed, occurs in cancer survivor groups, AIDS workshops, medical humanities workshops, summer camps for kids, prisons, and college writing classes around the country. Weldon offers the practitioner's perspectives that can help a budding writer, especially one struggling alone, with how to put feelings into words. She makes her position quite clear: "I am not a medical doctor, psychologist, therapist, social worker, researcher, sociologist, or psychiatrist. I am not qualified to tell you scientifically how and why your spirit, body, and soul will be healed by writing. . . . I can only tell you it does work. . . . I am a person just like you, with aches, sighs and laughter in my heart. . . . I can tell you the truth: Writing has helped to save my life" (7-8).

Weldon's conversational writing style provides access points for readers. She illustrates her points by ending each chapter with one of her essays. For example, she ended her chapter entitled "Everyone's A Critic," in which she argued that we should write for ourselves, not others, with an essay entitled "Average Is Ok With Her" that talks about her struggle against the pressure of judgments about her children. These examples, while interesting to read, demonstrate the limitations of using journalistic prose to represent personal essay or memoir writing. The audience of this book is, presumably, those who have been touched by trauma and who need help to represent it in ways that help them move beyond it. However, many of Weldon's essays appear more journalistically public than personal which can provide a disconnect for the audience enticed by her book's title. Her chapter entitled "Open the Door" discusses how difficult it is to write about painful subjects that feel hidden, maybe even buried. I had expected Weldon's end-of-chapter essay to address a moment in her life when she made that move to "open the door," but she did not. The essay, entitled "Where Imaginary Friends are Always Welcome" describes Weldon's and her own children's use of childhood imaginary friends to release the imagination. This seems rather tame stuff for a book whose title is *Writing To Save Your Life*.

As the authors of the Foreword make clear, Weldon is passionately committed to helping writers discover their stories. Her personable tone and energy are appealing and undoubtedly helpful to those just starting out on the path. This enthusiasm, however, also can cause discomfort when inexperience puts writers

at risk. In one workshop she urged a young woman to read a piece aloud that described events so painful that some in the class wept. Then, when one class member spoke a dismissive criticism, the reader was crushed, and the teacher did not know what to do. She, therefore, now exhorts her readers to write only for themselves, not for publication (unless they absolutely “must”). For me, this does not address the original problem—class management—which must be dealt with by anyone who stands at the head of a writing workshop.

The field of writing and healing has many entry points. It invites theorists, scientists, psychologists, humanists, writing professionals, doctors, and journalists. It embraces children, college students, and adults whose lives are touched by trauma. While *Writing To Save Your Life* may not present its subject with the depth and precision of some other sources, Weldon’s compassion and energy help make her book a clear, practical, passionate invitation to discover the healing process of writing. ☺

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