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Spirituality and Composition: One Teacher's Thoughts

Cover Page Footnote

Irene Papoulis teaches at Trinity College, Hartford. She has published articles on composition theory and pedagogy.

Spirituality and Composition: One Teacher's Thoughts

Irene Papoulis

At the 1994 Conference on College Composition and Communication [CCCC] I attended a half-day workshop entitled "Revisiting 'Spiritual Sites of Composition,'" a follow-up of the "Spiritual Sites of Composition" session at the 1992 CCCC. Both the workshop and the session were fascinating in their open acknowledgment of the existence of religion and spirituality at a conference as secular as the CCCC. Until attending that first session in 1992, I would not have imagined that anything to do with the word *spirit* would ever be taken seriously in the field of composition. I had read James Moffett's "Writing, Inner Speech, and Meditation" a few years before, but had thought of it as an exploration of matters that could never be acceptable in the field at large. However, listening to the papers in that 1992 session (published in the May 1994 issue of *College Composition and Communication*) and participating in the 1994 workshop, I realized that the idea of addressing spirituality as a part of composition theory was not necessarily so farfetched. I was both intrigued and disturbed by that realization. In this essay I want to tell the story about how my thinking about spirituality and composition has evolved.

On one hand, something about the atmosphere at that 1992 session made me want to run from the room. People were talking about recovery and empowerment, intuition and meditation, spirituality and an "inner source." While I was attracted to all those subjects, a part of me felt resistant to the thought of connecting them to my work as a college teacher. After all, I thought, I teach logical discourse and theoretical analysis; I expect my students to make explicit statements and use well-supported arguments. The words I was hearing, in contrast, sounded fuzzy, undefined, embarrassingly vague. Bringing such words into the classroom could cause great damage, I thought, and this thought grew out of my fear of what William A. Covino (1994) calls "the abbreviation of inquiry that constitutes American magic consciousness" (p.121). Spirituality could be misinterpreted as a kind of dangerously deceptive magic, I worried; it could encourage students to be less thoughtful, to be satisfied with easy and illogical answers.

On the other hand, I felt deeply engaged and excited to be in a room with well over a hundred conference-goers interested in spirituality. I felt a kind of faith in the value of spirituality, which I defined as an intuition about something beyond the physical world. That intuition does not necessarily have to do with what people call God, I told myself; instead, it could simply be a way of digging deeper into the experience of being a living body, and therefore was something my students could surely benefit from. Furthermore, the whole idea of spiritual-

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ity, however one might define it, somehow *felt* right to me. In spite of (or perhaps because of) my upbringing in an atheist family, I had always been interested in spiritual matters. I had tried meditating, and I even trusted, in certain moments, that there was some transcendent purpose to our lives, a purpose that I could not perceive rationally but that I might intuit. Becoming better able to articulate that vague sense of purpose, I thought, could help me as a writer, and if it could help me perhaps it could help my students as well.

Those two parts of me circled each other as I sat in the 1992 spirituality session, and my curiosity about the tension between them led me to sign up for the 1994 workshop. There, my cautious excitement grew at the thought of spirituality as an acceptable subject for composition theory, while my doubts remained. I realized that the spiritual had not been as separate from my teaching life as I might have expected. After all, I am an adherent of what is called expressivist pedagogy. I am fascinated with the process of using various kinds of freewriting to gain access to personal insights that otherwise would remain untapped. When people freewrite, they do not know in advance what they will say. Reading their own freewriting, they often exclaim, "Where did *that* come from?" Could I take a small leap and call the source of their ideas *spiritual*? Or would it in fact be a giant leap, a shift to an entirely separate plane?

The secular part of me would agree with the latter question and say that the word *spiritual* has nothing at all to do with expressivist pedagogy. The spiritual exists *outside* the mind; the insights accessed by freewriting, in contrast, though they can seem mysterious, are generated by the mind. Freewriting, the secular part of me would insist, is a psychological, not a spiritual experience. It taps into the unconscious, yes, but the unconscious, though its insights are at first obscure to the conscious mind, is grounded in the individual, not the beyond.

Yet, the part of me that is drawn to the idea of the spiritual does not want to leave it at that, the place where most people I know in composition would want to leave it. Spirituality seems, well, fun—intriguing, scary, and exciting. Furthermore, I have a vague sense that there is something I can learn from spirituality that could help my teaching.

I imagine that most leaders in the field of composition—Patricia Bizzell, for example—would frown at the thought of spirituality as a part of composition theory. It is irrelevant, I imagine Bizzell saying, to attempt to explore the mysteries of spirituality, when our goal in the classroom should be instead to teach students to negotiate among different discourses and perspectives. Inviting students to explore their own narcissistic intuitions, she might continue, promotes self-indulgence. Besides, she might assert, the idea that insights come from a spiritual place is simply not worth considering, since it is unprovable.

I choose to focus on Bizzell (1992) as an example of a leader in composition theory for a specific reason. In spite of her emphatic anti-expressivism, she alludes to the notion that our minds are governed by mysteries. In fact, in a moment of self-revelation in the concluding chapter of her collection of essays, she says something that makes a faint gesture toward the spiritual:

We postmodern skeptical academics say that values from mysterious—transcendent and universal—sources do not exist, or at least

are not available to historical beings. I can acknowledge the presence of a mysterious element in my own thinking while at the same time bracketing it off, saying I cannot explain its influence on the rest of my argument. (p. 282)

This last acknowledgment is quite surprising to me as a follower of Bizzell's work. I would not have expected her to point to a mysterious element in her own thinking, since she usually explains her ideas, and her sources, in analytic detail. Having brought it up, though, she immediately rejects the mysterious nature of her values; she even implies that to stop and pay closer attention to that origin would be counterproductive. Yet her *mystery* seems close to my *spiritual*, especially as she defines it as "transcendent" and "universal."

Those in composition theory who, like Bizzell, have a social constructionist or, as Berlin called it, a "social epistemic" perspective tend to eschew any talk of the mysterious sources of ideas. Imagining such mysteries, after all, could lead to conceiving of a world beyond language, or of a transcendent self, which is what such theorists reject. They prefer to believe that what we might intuit as an individual *self* is instead composed of language. "From the epistemic perspective," Berlin (1987) tells us,

Language forms our conceptions of our selves, our audiences, and the very reality in which we exist. Language, moreover, is a social—not a private—phenomenon, and as such embodies a multitude of historically specific conceptions that shape experience. . . . Knowledge does not exist apart from language. (p. 166)

There is no place here for the question of spirituality, except as a fantasy generated by language. Spiritual knowledge, in the sense of knowledge that transcends language and even, potentially, transcends the knower and the material world, can only be considered self-delusion to an epistemic rhetorician.

In that case, Bizzell's acknowledgment of the existence of a mysterious—even, perhaps, a nonlinguistic—source of her ideas causes her to teeter on her social-constructionist foundation. I want to give her a little push, and ask what would happen if she did not bracket off the mysterious source of her thinking. What would happen if she tried to probe the mystery?

Bizzell does not, at least thus far in her published work, seem to wish to get onto this course, but it is precisely that course that those of us who are curious about the notion of "spiritual sites of composition" would like to pursue. To do so, we have to pay more attention to a source of knowledge that is not, at least at first, available to the conscious mind. What if Bizzell put aside a psychological explanation of such knowledge, at least for a moment, and called it spiritual? Doing so would mean that she would have to acknowledge a connection between herself and something outside herself, something that she could not perceive explicitly. She could call that something *God*, or she could call it a *source*, or she could view it as an energy, or an undefined consciousness. I would say, after reading her "Foundationalism and Anti-Foundationalism in Composition Studies," that Bizzell would feel most comfortable—though I imagine this line

of thinking would make her uncomfortable in general—viewing the “something” as connected to morality, to values, to a sense of virtue. What would be the reason to attribute the source of those values to something *nonmaterial*? None, perhaps, Bizzell and most composition theorists would say, but I want to play with the idea anyway, just for a moment longer.

Something nonmaterial. What does that mean, exactly? It sounds vague; it is vague; but it is something that many in the overflow crowd at the 1992 Conference on College Composition and Communication and the overflow workshop at the 1994 conference were yearning for, attracted by, wanting to hear more about. Why? Perhaps because the nonmaterial is a condition in which discourse can give way to something that feels more grounded in our physical and subjective—and not our linguistic—lives. The yearning for such a condition is inappropriate in the nonfoundational world of composition studies that is defined today in most of our journals and books; in order to satisfy it we might have to abandon many of our current assumptions about the competing discourses that make up who we are.

Writing this, I can feel my social constructionist friends cringing. The yearning I describe is, to them, an illusion, a function of the refusal to acknowledge the perhaps painful fact that there is simply no foundational basis to my existence. My language, in its vagueness and humanism, sounds fuzzy and therefore, to them, wrong: misleading, dangerous. Nevertheless, I want to keep pushing my question, and James Moffett gives me more reason to do so. His recent book, *The Universal Schoolhouse: Spiritual Awakening Through Education* (1994b), is a tantalizingly radical exploration of what a commitment to spirituality could mean if we genuinely incorporated it into our educational system. An honoring of the individual's own unique quest, even a reverence for it, is what Moffett refers to when he uses the term *spirituality*. To him, group solidarity is a natural outgrowth of an atmosphere in which the personal quest of the individual is deeply respected. “Spiritualizing education,” he tells us:

. . . is intended to include everyone, however they feel about other worlds or otherworldliness. . . It energizes [our] efforts with a life force common to everything but working through each of us in a particular way characteristic of our individuality. . . . It calls us back from surfaces to essences. . . .

Spirit compares to breath, unseen but felt, experienced from moment to moment with every respiration, representing the life force that animates us and the rest of creation, uniting all things within it. . . . (pp. 19–22)

Moffett is using his own spiritual vision to inform a wide-reaching view of restructuring American schools. His willingness to apply that vision to his otherwise secular work is fascinating, especially to someone like me who is, thus far, so hesitant about any wish I might have to grant spirituality a place in my teaching. I am intrigued by Moffett's matter-of-fact tone, and also by his sense that part of the problem with American education has to do with “depersonalization”—

a lack of connection to oneself, and thus, paradoxically, to the rest of humanity. I am also drawn to the way he shrugs his shoulders at the idea of otherworldliness. Maybe my definition of spirituality as being connected with something beyond the physical realm is *too* mysterious. Maybe I would do better to think of spirituality as connecting to my own breath and to the mysterious energy of the body.

Could college composition teachers benefit from bringing such energy into our classrooms? Do we feel the lack of connection to humanity that Moffett describes? I think some of us do, and I think that lack is something that spirituality could help us with. What would a connection with the life force that is manifested in our breathing, in our individual physical bodies mean to our teaching? Perhaps it would point us away from the rigidity that can come from a too-strict insistence that discourse is all we have. This might make us more open to our students' unique experiences, in that we would focus more on encouraging them to explore and articulate barely-intuited material instead of being satisfied with more predictable ideas. If a spiritual orientation encourages students to write about their deepest insights—thereby being as honest as they can—perhaps we have a moral obligation to allow our work as teachers to become, in some way, spiritual. As I think of morality, I think again of Bizzell, who, in her discussion of values, admits that she is in fact attempting to put forth a very specific morality—albeit one of tolerance and good—to her students.

... I must see all my classroom work as deeply imbued with my moral values. I certainly do not go into class and announce that we will now commence indoctrination into the following table of laws. Yet everything I do in the classroom is informed by one or another element in my world view, thus potentially conflicting at every turn with other elements in the students' diverse world views and, because of my institutional position at the head of the class, potentially undercutting their values. (1992, p. 284)

In this I agree with Bizzell, and most people in composition would agree, I think, that our teaching is informed by our own historical, political, and moral perspectives. My interest in spirituality, then, and even my struggle to define it, could be seen as my way of attempting to understand and articulate my own moral values, most prominently my belief in teaching students that honesty about their deepest intuitions is crucial to their intellectual development.

The papers given at the 1992 "Spiritual Sites" session explored the moral values that are fed by spirituality. Reading those papers, I understand the potential popularity of the subject: Spiritual mystery is quite intriguing. Daniell, with her discussion of writers who learn to trust their insights whose source is mysterious; Campbell (1994), with her examination of meditation and her remark that "in the spirituality that stems from meditation, the perception of oneness does not erase difference but creates an arena where that difference is not only named and celebrated but ultimately loved" (pp. 249–250); and Swearingen, in her description of her workshops for women on creativity and spirituality, are imagining the kind of classrooms that acknowledge spiritual mysteries and attempt to

explore them. As Moffett (1994a) said,

I know, the university feels it shouldn't play doctor or priest, dirty its hands with therapy and its mind with religion. But if it has real live students on its hands, its hands are already dirty. And the time has come for intellectuals to quit confusing spirituality with superstition and sectarianism. (p. 261)

The thing that may dirty the hands of writing teachers these days is the existence of a nonlinguistic space, a space outside of discourse. As I examine my ambivalence about spirituality, it occurs to me that the belief in the omnipotence of language, a belief that is virtually unquestioned by composition specialists, may in fact not be absolute. There is something so clean about the belief that language is all we have. If students' selves are made up solely of language negotiations, our job is exclusively to help them manipulate and ultimately control the multifaceted languages that make up who they are. However, after years of hearing this perspective on language and also of using it to inform my composition classes, I feel bemused. I cannot help feeling that language alone is not enough.

The deepest reason for my own attraction to the idea of spirituality, I think, is that it offers a promise of a nonlinguistic reality. I have sensed that reality all along, both in myself and in my students, and I have tried to conceive of it as a product of the language that has conditioned and socialized me, but I continually resist doing so. This resistance helps me define what I mean by "spiritual." It combines both my initial thought that spirituality is somehow nonmaterial and Moffett's idea that spirituality comes from an awareness of the energy of breath and the body. My sense is that to the extent that my students and I embrace a spiritual, nonlinguistic reality, our writing will improve: our language will become more honest, and, paradoxically, more socially useful. Moffett explores this paradox—being outwardly more effective by turning inward—in his work, and I want to examine it too. The more deeply honest I am in writing about my inner experience, the more it can connect with the reader's deepest experience, while my more superficial stories seem narcissistic and self-serving. This seems to be true when I am writing about an academic subject—my most quirky experience of, and hunches about, an idea—as well as more traditionally personal ones.

Freewriting is a place where writing teachers can make immediate use of the nonlinguistic. When writers write privately, nonstop, and without premeditation, they uncover material that can often seem to come from a place beyond the conscious mind. The more I think about it, the more I want to call that place spiritual, especially in Moffett's sense, the sense in which one focuses on the breath, on energy. It is important to me as a writing teacher to respect that kind of spirituality in my students and to use freewriting as a way of tapping into it. Seeing the insights elicited by freewriting as having an origin outside the psychology of the author, outside the self altogether, seems potentially freeing for writers, who can leave themselves open to ideas without worrying at all about controlling the process, at least at the generative phase of writing.

However, I cannot finish an essay about spirituality, even one that explores

my ambivalence about the subject, without addressing the current political context of those who profess to want to connect religion with education. I must point to the violence and hypocrisy of the religious right, whose views are infecting school systems across the United States with deeply conservative politics. However, I do not want to conclude, simply because of my disgust with those views, that spirituality must be a reviled subject or taboo among educators. As Stephen Carter points out, our current association of religion with the political right is a switch from the climate during the civil rights movement, when prominent religious leaders tended to side with the left.

At the moment, though, and in part because of the current national climate, I would caution against bringing any discussion of spirituality into the classroom. Students taking a required composition course, certainly, do not need to hear about the potentially spiritual nature of freewriting. Instead, discussions about spirituality among trusted colleagues are what I advocate here, discussions which help us to clarify our own aims as writing teachers. By defining a technique I use often—freewriting—as a spiritual exercise, I can better focus and trust my own deep-seated belief in it as an invaluable tool in any writing.

Those who attended the CCCC session and workshop were an extremely heterogeneous group. They ranged from those, like me, with a strong but non-denominational interest in spirituality, to members of organized religious groups who want to find ways to include their actual religious orientations in their classrooms. The question of the role of religion, in addition to spirituality, in teaching is one that deserves to be addressed explicitly in the composition community. Two organizations have recently been founded to explore it, one affiliated with the CCCCs—The Association for Rhetoric, Writing, and the Transcendent—and the other affiliated with NCTE—The Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning. These organizations raise interesting questions, for example: Should we allow discussions of religion and spirituality an explicit place in our classrooms? Or are these subjects private matters that have no place in the academy? Can our own religious orientations inform our teaching in useful ways? What place does spirituality have in the teaching of writing? Is the *other* of spirituality potentially empowering for student writers? Can *spiritualizing education* be a way to fight cynicism? Such questions deserve a place in the composition community, and I am no longer afraid of the answers. ☺

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