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We Learn More Than Just Writing

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Cover Page Footnote

Kami Day is Associate Professor of English at Johnson County Community College. She teaches composition, including a learning community which she co-teaches with a mathematics instructor, and her research focuses on the cognitive and affective benefits of collaborative writing.

We Learn More Than Just Writing

Kami Day

I am a person who is most at ease in solitude. I have never felt that I'm very good at connecting with people; in fact, I admit fearing those connections. In *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer writes, "Our intense fear of connectedness, and the challenges it brings, is pursued by an equally intense desire for connectedness. . . . For all the fearful efforts we make to protect ourselves by disconnecting, the human soul yearns eternally for connection" (58-59). When I read those words, I knew Palmer was talking about me. I do fear the challenges that come with making connections, yet I yearn to make those connections. I teach writing and study people who write together successfully, and, in my research, I am drawn to projects that explore how people connect. Furthermore, my pedagogy is grounded in collaboration because I believe my students' learning and their lives are enriched by the connections they make with each other and with me, and my life and learning are enriched by those connections as well. Consequently, my research and my teaching force me into relationships and reinforce what I know to be true about the potentially spiritual nature of human connections. Palmer believes that the only way we can "transcend" fear is by acknowledging and fulfilling our spiritual needs (57), and I have come to realize that one of the best ways I can fill my spiritual needs is through my teaching. Moreover, as I have sought a spiritual life for myself, my pedagogy has come to include, more and more, consideration of the condition of my students' souls as well as my own.

Palmer focuses on "inner work," and, through careful reading of his words, I have come to understand the relationship between rigorous self-examination and authentic connection with others. Palmer is a devout Quaker, and his religious beliefs inform his work, but his work, while certainly about spirituality, is not about traditional religion or traditional views of or beliefs in God. The term *spirituality*—a term being used more and more unapologetically in the field of education—gives most academics pause because of its traditional association with religious dogma, but Palmer defines spiritual as "the diverse ways we answer the heart's longing to be connected with the largeness of life—a longing that animates love and work, especially the work called teaching" (5). He asks those who have difficulty with the term *spirit* to use instead the terms *identity* or *self* or *psyche*. Furthermore, he defines sacred as "worthy of respect," and Palmer believes everything is, in some way, worthy of respect (111). "Inner work" concerns formation of the individual soul, authentic connection between the inner and outer self, and then with the outer world, especially as it relates to teachers. The movement that has grown out of his work, particularly out of his

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book *The Courage to Teach*, is called formation,¹ which focuses on rediscovering and listening to the inner teacher with which, Palmer maintains, we are all born.

In response to gentle nudging by *JAEPL* reviewers,² as I revised this essay, I engaged in some of the rigorous self-examination Palmer calls for. I explored the reasons I have been drawn to Palmer's work and to a pedagogy which, I believe, has the potential to nurture my students and me spiritually. My awareness of my own spiritual life did not begin in earnest until about 15 years ago, despite the fact that for over 40 years I was a member of an orthodox religion. For most of my life, I defined *spirituality* in the more traditional way: a belief in and "relationship" with an all-powerful creator, activity in a religious organization, obedience to the commandments of that creator and the tenets of that religion. When I finally left the religion in which I had been raised, my mother asked me, genuinely concerned, "How will you have a spiritual life?" Even then, early in my journey, I could tell her I was beginning to see that spirituality has to do with a way of living in the world that is mindful about how to *be* with other people. About six years ago, when I read Palmer's definitions of *spirit* and *spirituality*, those definitions rang true for me. And even though I am an introvert and always believed I worked best and grew most in solitude, spirituality for me was, ironically, becoming less about personal righteousness and obedience and more about connections with, and responsibility to, other human beings. The reasons for this change are hard to pin down, but I think my education, and my teaching, led me to it.

In 1989, I enrolled in graduate school and began working as an adjunct instructor at a local community college at the same time even though I had no experience teaching in an academic setting. I lectured about writing to students sitting dutifully in rows, and I put grades—including lots of Fs—on first drafts. But teaching in this way was not satisfying or meaningful for me or for my students. As I worked on my master's degree, I used every opportunity to conduct research on composition pedagogy, and I discovered the work of Peter Elbow and others concerning peer response.³ My pedagogy changed quickly; one semester the format of my classroom was traditional, and the next my students were responding to each other's drafts, revising, and acting like a community of learners. I found I could respect and trust them, and they thrived on that respect and trust and developed respectful and trusting relationships with each other. It felt good, and I wanted to know more about teaching writing, so I decided to work toward a Ph.D. in composition at Indiana University of Pennsylvania where

¹The formation movement grew out of the Teacher Formation program, which Parker Palmer, in partnership with the Fetzer Institute, created in 1994 for K-12 teachers (see more on the website at teacherformation.org). More recently, the Center for Formation in the Community College has been established in Dallas, and facilitators are being trained to bring formation to community college faculty and staff. I am a facilitator at my institution, and, in this capacity, I plan and guide retreats and other formation activities, such as book discussion groups.

²I'm indebted to the *JAEPL* reviewers—Kristie Fleckenstein, Kia Richmond, and Betsy Burris—for their careful consideration of my work and for their suggestion that I think about why I came to value connection and why formation principles and my pedagogy were a natural fit.

³See Elbow, *Embracing Contraries*; Elbow and Belanoff, *Writing with Pleasure: A Brief Edition of A Community of Writers*; Ponsot and Deen, *Beat Not the Poor Desk*.

I flourished in a program that fostered collaboration among its students. The connections our cohort formed supported me in the rigors of graduate school, but what seemed more important was that they nourished me spiritually. The year I began my work at IUP was a time of profound change for me (an explanation of which is far beyond the scope of this article!), and one of the changes was *not* that I suddenly yearned for connections but that I allowed myself to recognize that “yearning to connect” Palmer speaks of. My experience at IUP was transformative and led to my desire to study what happens both cognitively and affectively when people work together, so my dissertation became a study of successful academic co-authors. As I listened to these writers talk about their co-authoring, I came to see that they took a nurturing, caring, respectful approach to working together, and that they seemed to consider their process to be a personally enriching, even spiritual, experience which went far beyond producing text. One of the interviewees, C. Mark Hurlbert, who often co-authors with Michael Blitz (another of the interviewees), insists that “[co-authoring] has the capacity to bring love into our lives, to help us open up ourselves in ways we couldn’t do so quickly on our own. . . . There’s a spiritual and affective realm that’s life-affirming and safe”(Day and Eodice 39).⁴

Also, using the knowledge I was gaining through my studies at IUP and my research, I began to create more opportunities for my students to learn from and teach each other, and the only way I can describe how I felt (and feel) some days as I watched my students in their patient work with each other is *filled*. I grew spiritually as I created spaces where students could form caring relationships as they wrote together and responded to each other’s writing. I slowly began to realize that I was more mindful about my spiritual life and that my spiritual life was richer than when I had been involved in a traditionally religious culture. Yes, this awakening began before I discovered Palmer’s work, but formation helped me articulate my spiritual needs—the need for connection, the need to be heard and to listen deeply, the need to teach who I am and be who I am in my relationships with students, colleagues, and all others in my life.⁵ And the possibilities for these relationships in my classroom have been enriched because of ways I have found to incorporate formation principles into my pedagogy

Of course, my relationship with students has also been affected as I have come to see the spiritual nature of authentic connection. Shedding light on the

⁴C. Mark Hurlbert was one of my mentors at IUP and a member of my dissertation committee. In the book he co-authored with Michael Blitz, *Letters for the Living: Teaching Writing in a Violent Age*, he and Blitz ask the question “Can we say that our pedagogies are not about expressivist writing or about entrance to the academy but about learning how to live?”

⁵I do not necessarily think of having a unified self, but I agree with Candace Spigelman as she explains her notion of the writer self: “all selves are a composite of multiple social, cultural, and gendered discursive configurations, the self-who-writes must imagine an agency and individuality that will authorize putting pen to paper or hand to keyboard” (*Across* 4). And in our book, Michele Eodice and I contend that “each person combines a multitude of voices . . . in a unique way” (19). I think formation helped me put the configurations and voices together.

insights I have gained from Palmer's work, Nel Noddings, a mathematics teacher, has helped me understand why I have been drawn to a mindful collaborative pedagogy and what it has to do not only with my students' relationships with each other but also with the student/teacher relationship. When I read Noddings' *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, I will admit it changed my life. In addition to my fears about connecting with people, I have always felt that I do not *care* as often or as much as most other people seem able to do. Noddings' work helped me understand that all people care innately and that I should, and can, care, or at least perform caring acts, just as I ask my students to perform them. By performing caring acts, we can all develop our ability to care. I have often worried that I don't care enough about my students or that they don't know I care about them. But, as I perform caring acts, they believe I care about them, and in the process I care more and warm to their caring for me. Noddings believes that "the maintenance and enhancement of caring as the primary aim of education" is a process that somehow makes us all—students and teachers—better (174).

So how do Palmer's work and formation inform a pedagogy of collaboration and care? Central to formation work is the Quaker institution of the Clearness Committee, and the principles informing this practice have had a powerful effect on my teaching. In Quakerism, the person who will be the focus of the committee calls together trusted friends and associates to help her explore a question or problem in her life. The rules of the committee are strict and must be honored: the committee members carefully and thoughtfully formulate open, honest questions to ask the focus person; questions to which the answers are already known are not permitted, nor are leading questions allowed; the focus person listens and answers but does not defend herself; the committee members may not give advice or try to "fix" a problem proposed by the focus person; committee members must resist the temptation to comfort the focus person should she cry or otherwise express emotion; likewise, committee members must resist the natural urge to affirm if it means attempting to "make the focus person feel better." Finally, participants honor a "double confidentiality": they agree not to discuss what transpired in the committee with each other or with people outside the committee, and they even agree not to bring up the topics discussed with the focus person unless that person initiates the conversation. The committee meets from two to three hours, and, at the end, the members "mirror" for the focus person what they have heard that person say and what they have seen in her body language. Finally, there is a time to affirm, but this affirmation is not about the issues addressed during the meeting (a committee member would not say, "Don't worry, it will be all right" or "I agree with you that your boss was wrong"), but might, for example, take the form of expressions which acknowledge the courage of the focus person in choosing to deal with difficult or painful issues or which reveal how a committee member has been able to identify in some way with the focus person. The focus person is also given the notes that volunteer scribes have taken during the meeting so she can contemplate them later.

These rules (I usually prefer the word *guidelines*, but *rules* is right here) may seem rigid and even harsh in some ways, but they create a safe space in which the focus person is able to listen to and learn from his or her "inner teacher." Palmer asserts that we know the answers to our own questions, but we are not accustomed to listening to and trusting ourselves. The rules also give the focus

person the power to direct the meeting—she or he can slow down or accelerate the pace, not answer questions that don't seem helpful, and ask questioners to rephrase questions that seem leading or rhetorical. I have participated in several Clearness Committees, once as the focus person, and I can attest to the power of this activity. Like many people, in the past I have sought comforting words to make me feel better about my failures and weaknesses. During my committee, I was amazed at how liberating it felt not to be affirmed, not to be advised or "fixed," but to be given the space to think hard about the questions I was asked and to reach clarity (although not necessarily answers) on some questions that had bedeviled me for a very long time. I have found going back and looking at the notes taken during my committee to be especially helpful—I continue to learn about myself from them.

As I said, the principles of the Clearness Committee have become integral to my pedagogy, and some of the specific rules are now part of peer review activities and my thought processes as I respond to student writing. One of the basic tenets of formation work is that individual growth and awareness must happen in community. When I think of this apparent paradox, I think of Martin Buber's assertion that "spirit is not in the *I*, but between the *I* and *Thou*. . . . Only in virtue of [our] power to enter into relation [are we] able to live in the spirit" (39). Formation is about becoming individually aware as we "enter into relation" with a trusted cohort; consequently, my collaborative pedagogy and formation complement each other. Students are growing and developing—forming—as individual writers, but they do it best as part of a supportive, trusted, respectful group. In Noddings' words, "Small group work may enhance achievement" in a course, "and can provide caring occasions. The object is to develop a caring community" ("An Ethic of Caring" 177). However, some of the rules for the Clearness Committee cannot apply as my students respond to each other's work. I would never discourage my students from comforting each other, and I encourage them to affirm one another since most of them are sure their writing is worse than anyone else's. Also, while I advise students not to discuss each other's papers outside class, I do not try to enforce double confidentiality.

I do, though, spend quite a lot of time giving students practice in asking open, honest questions about their peers' writing, and I do discourage their urge to "fix" their peers' texts. In his article "A Pedagogy of Charity," Kevin J. Porter uncovers a painful reality: as our students "labor to respond to each other's writing, their voices frequently echo the authoritarian voices of past teachers" (577). Students are used to teachers reading their writing in order to find out what's wrong with it and then giving advice or even directions about fixing it. So, mimicking their teachers, students say, "You should add a sentence at the beginning to grab the reader's attention. You should use a quote—that's what I do," or "Your conclusion should summarize the paper," or "You need more details in the story about your accident." Or, taking a softer tack, as many of us teachers do, they say, "You might want to tell us more about how you came to make that decision," or "You could add an example here." Or they might ask a leading question like, "Don't you think your paper would be better if you didn't use so many short sentences?" Understandably, most students dread getting this kind of feedback. These statements and questions *could* lead to substantive revision, but they take the paper out of the hands of the writer, take away the writer's freedom and the privilege of making his or her own decisions about the

paper. And they might also reflect the assumption that the writer has not made conscious choices rather than “presuming that the author is in control of the text and chooses certain strategies for certain effects” (579).

In addition, my students practice making observations instead of giving directions. Making observations parallels the activity of mirroring in the Clearness Committee. In making observations about a peer’s writing, students might simply say, or mirror, what they saw (or heard) in the paper. If the introduction is general and unengaging, instead of issuing a command like, “You need to start your paper with a quote,” a student might say, “Your first paragraph was kind of general, but the quote by Jim Morrison in the second paragraph really got my attention!” Or say the writer takes a position supporting school prayer in the paper and has not acknowledged views other than his own. The reader (or listener) might simply state, “You didn’t include anything about other positions on school prayer.”

Our peer review process differs from the Clearness Committee in that the student whose paper is the focus of the feedback tries not to answer her peers’ questions when initially asked. She writes them down, and she can later think about an observation like, “I had trouble imagining what your teachers looked like” and say to herself, “Oh, yes, including a description would help my reader know my teacher better,” or “I don’t want to include more description of my teacher—my focus is on what I learned from her, not what she looked like.” She thinks about these questions after the peer review session is over, but, like the Clearness Committee’s focus person, she will have notes to review carefully at her leisure as she decides which feedback to incorporate in her revision and which not to use. In some sense, she is playing Peter Elbow’s “believing game”; she is practicing listening deeply to what her peers say, believing for a while that all the feedback she gets is useful rather than explaining why she wrote something or defending her writing choices (*Embracing Contraries*). Later, as she reviews what her peers have said, she can play Elbow’s “doubting game”—looking at the feedback with a more critical eye as she makes decisions about what revisions to make.

So, as my students prepare, often with a great deal of trepidation, to share first drafts of their papers with each other for the first time, we devote a class period to practice in affirming each other’s writing; asking open, honest questions; and making observations. They struggle with the concept, but they admit they like the idea of having the ultimate responsibility for their own papers—learning to trust their own knowledge about writing, being able to decide what to add, delete, etc., instead of being told what to do. Of course, we also talk about giving feedback respectfully and helpfully rather than attacking each other’s writing. First, I explain questioning and observing as feedback techniques. Rule one (for sharing a first draft) is that the writer asks the group a question about his own paper, and the group members write the question down. The writer then reads the paper as the group listens, repeating the reading if asked. At that point, the group members take a few minutes to first write down a positive observation about the paper and then questions and other observations. During this time, the writer reflects in writing on thoughts he had about his own paper as he was reading. Finally, the group members share their honest questions and observations, and the writer takes notes but does not answer their questions or address observations out loud.

For our practice, I use a student paper—one from long ago and far away—or a paper a current student has volunteered for this activity. When we practice initially, I play the role of the writer, and the students are the peer group. Before they start, I put up an overhead with both good questions and observations (like “Why did you choose to begin your paper with a general statement about your topic?”), and both commands or leading questions (like “Don’t you think your paper would be better if you started with a story?”), and we talk about which ones would be appropriate when giving feedback. Each group then gets one copy of the paper, and I ask a question I’d like them to consider about the paper. Next, a volunteer reads the paper to the group, after which the group members take a few moments to write down their observations and questions. Finally, they share these out loud with the rest of the class. We spend as much time as we need sharing questions and observations, and my job is to help them recast leading questions (or suggestions and directions) as honest questions or observations. When the students move to sharing their own papers, they add the steps of sharing questions and observations with the writers; the writers record this feedback to take with them and use as they revise. The students find this process quite challenging, and, the first time (and subsequent times, actually) that they respond to each other’s papers, I circulate, assisting them as they work to respond in this new way. I’ll admit that such response gets easier every time they do it, but they (and I) must be vigilant because sometimes they revert to old habits. Still, their feedback to me about this kind of responding tells me they feel more knowledgeable and responsible concerning their own writing, and amazed at how skilled they become at helping their peers.

When my students share second drafts, they usually write their feedback, and the rules are the same. The students bring in copies of their papers for their group members, and each student receives a response sheet I have created. On the sheet are spaces for the writer’s name, the responders’ names, and one question the writer wants to ask about his or her paper. Occasionally I include a few questions I want to ask (like “What is the main idea of the paper?” or “Did the paper change your mind or cause you to think in a new way about the topic?”). Most of the sheet, though, is blank with ample space for the recorder of the group to write the group’s feedback. Sometimes a class decides they want to exchange papers among groups, but more often they choose to keep their papers within their groups. To begin the process, the group decides who will be the recorder and who will be the clerk, the one who keeps the process going and makes sure the students reach consensus about what questions and observations they want to write on the response sheet. After reading the draft silently and taking notes about what feedback they want to give, the readers collaboratively answer the writer’s question (and mine if I have included any), and then add their own questions and observations (which the recorder writes down on the response sheet) for the writer to consider for revision. The writer must sit quietly—playing the “believing game”—as the group addresses his paper; then he takes the feedback and mulls it over—playing the “doubting game”—as he works to revise the draft.

I add my written responses to the group members’ responses to the second draft, and I work to honor the rules of the Clearness Committee by striving to respond as a human being who respects them, as a reader and not just a teacher. In a wonderful essay about responding to student writing, Russell Hunt relates an anecdote told by Lucy McCormick Calkins. In it, a homesick kindergartener

writes a short story which reads, “The girl is sad/She has no friends.” According to Calkins, “Several children raised their hands with comments like, ‘I like your picture,’ and ‘I like your writing,’ but one small boy understood; he looked up and said simply, ‘I’ll be your friend’”(232). I believe that by responding as one person to another (I often think of it as continuing the conversation), I attend to the souls of my students, to their need for authentic response as well as teacherly guidance.⁶ I share with them my reactions to and feelings about their words, I affirm them and their writing, I ask questions to which I do not know the answers, and I make observations to mirror what I think they have said. I strive to honor what they bring to their writing and to help them discover their “inner writing teacher.” And I invite them to play the believing and doubting game as they consider my feedback as well.

I would like to say a word here about co-authoring. What I have described above I would call collaborative work about writing; students collaborate with each other as they work to develop and enrich their individual texts. But I also ask my students—at the end of the semester when they have been working together for about 11 weeks—to write together, face-to-face, during several class periods set aside for this activity. As students invent, compose, revise, and edit together, they practice the concepts and skills we have worked with all semester, including—and most important—listening to each other respectfully, acknowledging each other’s strengths, and working to assure the success of all members of the group. I hear them (not always, of course, but encouragingly often) asking each other open questions, mirroring what other group members have said, listening carefully, and working to make sure everyone’s voice is represented in the collective voice they create together. The formation principles and practices are conflated into an experience that most students report as deeply satisfying. They often choose to include the co-authored paper in their portfolios because they value the experience of writing it even though they may not consider it to be their best writing.

Finally, reflective practice is another principle of formation; we cannot come to know our “inner teacher” unless we develop the habit of looking carefully at who we are and what we do and find ways to articulate, even if only for ourselves, what we learn from that reflection. Likewise, students cannot discover their “inner teachers” and develop identities as writers unless they are given opportunities for reflective practice, opportunities seldom offered to them in their academic experience. I ask my students to reflect often: on their histories as writers, on their purposes in writing, on what they are learning, on what they would like to learn, on how they think the class is going, on the peer response activities, on their roles in their groups, on the co-authoring process, and especially on their revision processes. They write about the feedback they receive, which feedback they choose to use and not use, why they will use it or not use it, and where they would like their papers to go next. I ask them to be specific about these reflections; as the author, they have the last word in what feedback they will incorporate, but they must be able to articulate their reasons, to talk like writers.⁷ For instance, recently a student chose to begin a paper with an anecdote

⁶I learned this concept from my colleague Maureen Fitzpatrick, who learned it in a graduate course taught by Kate Ronald.

⁷I am indebted to Kathleen Blake Yancey for her work on the value of reflection, and I recommend her book *Reflection in the Writing Classroom*.

told in first person, and one of his peers mentioned that the rest of the essay was in second person. The writer explained in his reflection that he wanted to write the introductory story in first person to convey a sense of immediacy, so the reader could feel as if she was right there in the story. He knew what he wanted to do and why, and the point of view remained as he had written it.

Students are able to develop awareness of their own inner teachers in part because of the connections they make with each other. A sixteen-week semester seems like too short a time to allow for strong relationships to develop, but students who work hard and carefully at helping each other with their writing often develop trusting and respectful relationships that amaze me. One semester, we were preparing to share second drafts, and the class had agreed during a previous class period that they would like to share papers with students outside their groups. As most of the students were involved in piling their drafts on a table (so I could distribute them), I noticed one group making arrangements among themselves. They saw me looking at them, so a spokesperson for the group took me aside and explained that they had all chosen to write about subjects they wanted to share only with their group. These students had known each other for only seven weeks, and yet they were comfortable trusting each other with pieces of themselves.

In another semester, a Somalian student chose to write about female circumcision. She mentioned this practice in passing in her first paper (about moving to the United States), gave it a little more space in her second paper (about Somalian culture), and finally decided to devote her entire research paper to educating herself and her peers about a practice she learned is called Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). Her interest in this topic stemmed from her discovery, soon after arriving in the United States, that FGM is not a procedure practiced world-wide and from her anger at having been subjected to this procedure. When she read her first paper to her group, not much was said about the mention of female circumcision, but by the second paper (when they knew each other better), she was asking her group if she should leave in the section about FGM, and they—three white, middle-class young people—encouraged her to include it and asked her questions about the procedure. None of them had ever heard of it before. By the time she began work on her research paper, they were cheering her on and creating a safe space for her to write about a difficult and personal topic. Students often choose topics they have never written about before, and sometimes these topics are risky; they trust their peers to treat that topic—and the student who wrote about it—with care as they also help the writers express more clearly what they want to say.

I believe that as my students learn to respect and listen to their own inner teachers, and come to care about the success and well being of their peers, their spirits are nourished. Furthermore, I would like to go so far as to say they practice peacemaking. Rosalind J. Gabin,⁸ in her careful exploration of the relationship between *ethos* and ethics, defines ethics this way: “the awareness of others as we speak and act, the awareness of not only our own interests but of the interests of others” (122). She goes on to ask, “Can students develop their ethical capacity to perform ethical actions from which might flow ethical habits?” (129). In her article “What Role Virtue,” Candace Spigelman asks, “Can we—and should we—teach human un-

⁸My late friend and co-author, Candace Spigelman, led me to Gabin’s work in her article “What Role Virtue.”

derstanding and ethical responsibility in the first-year composition course?” (321). And many of us are familiar with the burning question Mary Rose O’Reilley attributes to one of her professors, Ihab Hassan: “Is it possible to teach English so that people stop killing each other?” (9). O’Reilley, Gabin, and Spigelman believe the answer to the questions they raise is “yes,” and so do I. Moreover, J. Elspeth Stuckey, author of *The Violence of Literacy*, makes this bold statement: “We promote greater literacy, or we promote greater humanity” (124), and based on his extensive experience with collaboration, Blitz asserts:

Collaboration requires peacemaking, an ongoing process. It’s simply not possible, I don’t think, to be in perfect harmony through every moment of collaborative effort. So, collaborators have to figure out ways to keep the peace—or to live in conflict, which is far less productive. But keeping the peace cannot mean compromising on the quality of the effort or of the outcome. Keeping the peace, in this context, means placing things like common goals, kindness, civility, creativity in the foreground. It means surrendering a fair amount of ego-requirements, too. So, I guess I would say that one of the greatest values in co-authoring is that it allows for the forging of new bonds of trust and care between and among people. (qtd. in Day and Eodice 172)

As O’Reilley contends, “what happens in the classroom determines the shape of culture and evolution of consciousness” (8), and most language and literature educators would agree. In 1938, Louise Rosenblatt wrote that language teachers fill the essential role of “nurtur[ing] men and women capable of building a fully democratic society” (297). According to composition scholars (and I apologize for simplifying the complex work of these scholars and for leaving so many off the list), teaching writing has the potential to raise our students’ consciousness about environmental issues (Owen), acculturate them to academic discourse (Bartholomae), help them interrogate traditional, Western concepts of gender (Jarratt and Worsham), lead them to greater self-awareness (Elbow, *Writing*), make them aware of oppressive dominant discourses (Myers), and give them the opportunity to question and resist “cultural codes—the various competing discourses—that attempt to influence who they are” (Berlin), to name only a few of the ways students can change and grow as a result of their experience in a composition class. In the past ten years, Gabin points out, “stress has been placed . . . on the power and the politics of discourse.” However, she is optimistic that

the stress is now shifting to cooperation and the ethics of discourse . . . the political aim in composition of empowering students to get what they want from the systems that rule them through powerful discourse is winding down, and that an ethical aim is replacing it—the aim of promoting sounder human relationships through encouraging attention to others and through responsible discourse. (125-26)

A classroom in which formation principles are valued provides a safe but charged space which promotes “sounder human relationships,” one in which students practice kindness and civility, perhaps leading to “new bonds of trust and care.” They feel supported as they take risks, such as examining their own

beliefs and sharing their writing with their peers. They are asked to practice listening to views different from their own, to show respect for a variety of positions and voices, to reflect on their own views and values, and to acknowledge their own intuition and expertise. They have the opportunity to make peace because the focus is not on persuading or convincing or converting their peers and other readers to a certain point of view, but rather on seeing the possibility that several views can exist simultaneously without one being the correct one. In the microcosm of the group within the microcosm of the classroom, students make peace in their “small spheres of influence” (Woolman qtd. in O’Reilly 21).

Palmer asserts that our students often come into our classrooms full of fear: “afraid of failing, of not understanding, of being drawn into issues they would rather avoid, of having their ignorance exposed or their prejudices challenged, of looking foolish in front of their peers” (37). That fear not only undermines their confidence and ability to take the risks necessary for cognitive growth, but it also “shuts down the capacity for connectedness” (40). In using principles of formation to nurture their own inner teachers, students learn to trust their intuition about their own writing, and they get glimpses of—and sometimes revelations about—who they are and what they value. In using principles of formation to connect with each other, they experience “genuine encounters of caring and being cared for” (Noddings, *Caring* 175) and support each other in a “caring community” (“An Ethic of Caring” 177), filling—after perhaps discovering for the first time—a spiritual need. As Palmer says, they find a way to “answer the heart’s longing to be connected with the largeness of life” (5). Students who have, for years, feared sharing their writing and themselves discover they have something to say and become eager to hear their peers’ responses to what they have written. They speak, often with surprise, of the trust they have in their group members and the concern they have for each other. As one student told me recently, “We learn more than just writing.”

As for me, my spirit has been nourished as I have found a pedagogy that reflects who I am and what I care about. Palmer says that yearning for something often brings it into being,⁹ and my yearning for connection has led me to self-knowledge and a number of rich relationships. Coming to know my self and making connections with others are still tasks often fraught with peril for me, but as Palmer says, while we all have fears, “we do not need to be our fears” (57). Asking myself the question “Who is the self that teaches?” (7) has helped me find my own inner teacher and realize that my vocation is in the classroom. In addition, my students often say they can tell I care about them, and my person and my pedagogy are affirmed by that. Both exploring my selfhood and connecting with students and others involve difficult and sometimes painful work for me, but I welcome it as necessary to living a meaningful life. And I have support. As we—my students and I—become more “at home with our own souls, we become more at home with each other” (5). ☺

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⁹Palmer made this statement in a talk at Johnson County Community College on October 29, 2001.

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