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To the Contrary

Beth Daniell

To celebrate the 20th anniversary of the *Journal of the Assembly for Advanced Perspectives on Learning*, the editors of JAEPL have issued a call for papers wherein they charge researchers committed to AEPL's founding principles with taking a retrospective look at their work on writing in community settings, writing to heal, writing to raise spiritual consciousness, service learning, embodied writing, writing as self-counseling, writing for meditative practice, and so forth. They ask, in addition, for discussion of the effect that this kind of research has had on one's subsequent scholarship and teaching and on that of others as well. Since some of my work falls into this broad category, I'm trying to respond to that call, though the task is not as easy as it sounds.

My 2003 book, *A Communion of Friendship: Literacy, Spiritual Practice, and Women in Recovery* reported on how a community of women in Al-Anon used literacy as part of their spiritual practice. For those unfamiliar with organization, Al-Anon is designed to help family and friends of alcoholics. Al-Anon encourages its members to practice the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous as a way of coping with and rising above someone else's drinking.

The particulars of how I came to do the research for this book appears in Chapter 1, "A Dais for My Words." But I can summarize: As I wrote a dissertation critical of Great Leap, or Great Divide, theories of literacy, I began to question why the scholarship on literacy seemed to leave out spiritual and religious uses of reading and writing. Historical studies like those by Goody and the Resnicks took up the connection between literacy and religion. But otherwise only a few brief comments occurred in the scholarship I was reading and then in a cursory way. Of course, by the last decades of the twentieth century, when the bulk of research on literacy was taking place, religion seemed to be off the radar in much of the humanities and social sciences. Surely, I thought, this motive for reading and for writing could not have disappeared altogether. Perhaps, I surmised, it was more important in contemporary times than academic studies indicated. Exploring this gap stemmed not from any brilliance on my part, but rather from what my mother used to call my contrariness—the tendency to argue with, to find fault with, and so forth.

The research for *Communion of Friendship* has influenced, perhaps even determined, my subsequent scholarship and pedagogy. As I have considered this essay for JAEPL, I realize certain key insights not only brought me to that research but have continued to influence my work.

1. *We must be able to employ persuasion just as strict reasoning can be employed on opposite sides of a question, not in order that we may in practice employ it in both (for we must not make people believe what is wrong) but in order that we may see clearly what the facts are* (Aristotle, 1.1)

What my mother called "contrary" is seeing weaknesses, omissions, and contradictions in prevailing opinions, especially those offered with certainty by authorities. The problem for my southern mother was that I tended to question or object aloud. For much of my life I saw this tendency as a character flaw, a "besetting sin." In gradu-

ate school in the early 80s, as I discovered rhetoric, I found a Greek name for what I was doing: the *dissoi logoi*—contrary propositions, differing theses, opposing opinions. According to rhetoricians from ancient sophists to Kenneth Burke, *dissoi logoi*, or counter-statements, help people think through a proposed solution, figure out what they really think, see arguments that counter their own position, and recognize the fallacies and incomplete reasoning in others' arguments. What I also came to realize is this approach is how I make my living—examining things from a different perspective and teaching students to do the same.

The most exciting reading of my first year at in the Ph.D. program at Texas was Pat Bizzell's article on "Cognition, Convention, and Certainty"—not just because she showed that writing was more than a set of skills for classroom use, but because she was taking issue with what seemed the accepted version of composition research. Bizzell was the first scholar in composition and rhetoric I read who made explicit the claim that language—thus also writing—is connected to identity and culture. As a southerner and as someone who had taught minority students, I felt Bizzell's article resonate deeply with me.

2. The nature of oral and written language and the interplay between them is ever-shifting, and these changes both respond to and create shifts in the individual and societal meaning of literacy. The information to be gained from any prolonged look at oral and written uses of language through literacy events may enable us to accept the protean shapes of oral and literate traditions and language, and move us away from current tendencies to classify communities as being at one or another point along a hypothetical continuum which has no societal reality. (Heath 116)

The following year I began reading intensively on literacy. Goody and Watt, Olsen, Havelock, and Ong offered a theoretical perspective that separated orality—language and thought—and literacy—language and thought—but proved attractive because it explained, well, everything. The Havelock-Ong Great Leap theory said, in essence, "become literate and your intelligence takes a great leap into to western European academic language forms and into western syllogistic thought. Not only you, but also your culture will become more advanced." Despite occasional paternalistic praise, Ong depicted "orality" as the unvalorized side of a binary. I found it troubling that Ong's categories called people I had known all my life "oral," thereby deeming their thinking faulty. Work by Heath, Chafe, Basso, Akinnaso, Scribner and Cole, the Resnicks, and others pointed to specific instances that contradicted the Havelock-Ong theoretical statements, thus calling into question their orality-literacy dichotomy. My dissertation argued against the Ong version of the Great Leap theory as well as its underlying ethnocentrism, claiming rather that relations among speech and writing, culture, cognition, identity, and rhetoric are more complicated than presented in Ong's description. Because Father Ong had once been president of the Modern Language Association and because by all reports he was a very nice man, people in English departments were, to put it mildly, surprised that a graduate student would take on his ideas.

Communion of Friendship continued the argument that written and spoken language are intertwined in complex ways, as Heath says. In addition, here I argued for the spiritual uses of literacy. I countered the misinterpretations that came from merely reading Al-Anon literature without attending meetings where people glossed various passages

and interpreted Al-Anon teachings in light of their own experiences (27-28). As I wrote the final chapter, “Literacy Lessons,” which focused on the pedagogical implications of the research, I began to see with more clarity the importance of class discussion. What Lilly, one of my research participants, said of the group discussions of Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide* applies as well to the classroom: “I loved watching what people liked. And we talked a lot about it.... The more conversation we added about it, the fuller everything got, because there were so many ways to look at one poem...” (*Communion*, 121-122).

Consequently, in my writing classes I began to focus more and more on discussion—not just about the readings and the ideas, but also on strategies, plans, and lessons learned about writing, putting everyone’s ideas on the board. My favorite comment on student evaluations included this comment: “Dr. Daniell is so accepting. She lets everyone talk.” My response was “No, honey, Dr. Daniell makes everyone talk, but she’s subtle about it.” In my administrative work and in my Writing Across the Curriculum outreach, I have continued to point out the complex and unconscious relations of talk and text.

For example, in a presentation at the 2014 WAC conference I contended that using WAC strategies can enrich class discussions by helping teachers go beyond “guess what’s in the professor’s mind” questions. In WAC circles, this is hardly a groundbreaking idea. But calling on the research Mary Lou Odom and I are doing with WAC classes in our college at Kennesaw State University, I could claim that both students and teachers at our place think writing augments discussion, and students say they understand the material better by hearing their peers’ ideas. My talk concluded by advising that incorporating what students say in class or on discussion boards into our lectures and assignments shows that professors value student contributions.

Perhaps I would have come to these beliefs about the connections between talk and text anyway, but I think I got there sooner by being contrary about the Havelock-Ong literacy-orality binary both in my dissertation and in *Communion of Friendship*.

3. *Women’s stories have not been told.* (Christ 1)

When I was reading intensely about literacy in the 80s, the literate—whether reader or writer—was assumed to be male and white, as indeed all subjects were until near the end of the twentieth century. Even while anthropologic and linguistic research clearly showed literacy influenced by race, culture, economics, and politics, all too often the discussion omitted gender. There were few exceptions: In Heath’s *Ways With Words*, the literates were not abstractions, but rather actual humans who sometimes occupied race and gender not fitting the traditional model. Heath discussed the literacy of women, even in fact the literacy of women of color. See, for instance, the Trackton mothers decoding the letters about the shots required for first-grade, or the school teacher praying at church, elaborating on the prayer she had written ahead of time. In *Reading the Romance*, Janice Radway portrayed women readers as agents in their own literacy. Allowing her research participants to speak for themselves, Radway interpreted their reading of romance novels as a way to claim private time away from the demands of family life. While critics of romances point out that the content of the books keeps women “in their place,” the literate practice of Radway’s readers turned that message on its head.

In preparing for the interviews with the Al-Anon women, I was lucky enough to run across Ann Oakley's chapter, "Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms." Oakley says there that "[W]hen a feminist interviews women... it becomes clear, in most cases, the goal of finding out about people is best achieved when the relationship between interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own identity the relationship" (41). Using this sentence as a guide, I purposely structured the time with the Mountain City women as informal exchanges (see *Communion* 17, 20-23, 35-36). Because of the information I was thus able to glean, literacy can be seen in *Communion* in its private and spiritual uses, embedded in conversations that continued for years. Like Radway's readers, the Al-Anon women who talked with me used their literate practices as a way to claim space for themselves, as a means to spiritual and emotional growth.

So having spent a decade researching and writing about women's literacy, I said "Yes" immediately when Peter Mortensen asked if I might be interested in working with him on a collection pulling together new research on women's literacy. The result was *Women and Literacy: Local and Global Inquiries for a New Century*. While some of our contributors were established researchers, others were still in graduate school or early in assistant professorships when we accepted their pieces. Almost all of these scholars are now known for their research into women's literacy. We have been delighted to see books come out of our contributors' projects. What struck Peter and me as we read the proposals was the variety of research methods employed by these scholars—archival, ethnographic, interview, demographic, oral history—used to offer glimpses of literacy in the lives of actual women. Some of our contributors, like Kim Donehower, Rhea Lathan, Katrina Powell, and Charlotte Hogg, investigated the literate practices of women with whom they had family or cultural ties and thereby told women's stories that had not been told.

Telling women's stories is still my project: to a promotion and tenure committee, where I served as the only woman; to a department chair who has ignored scheduling general education courses on the basis of gender (guess who gets the easiest schedules!) rather than on the principle of sharing work equitably; to a dean who needed to be told that I was making less money than male colleagues who had responsibilities for far fewer teachers and students than I. And I continue to tell women's stories in my scholarship. In the last few years, in a series of CCCC panels with Roger Cherry and David Jolliffe that have focused on rhetoric, I have included women's rhetoric—for example, the use of rhetoric by women on opposite sides of the Komen Foundation-Planned Parenthood controversy and the difficulties of using Aristotle's notions of ethos to examine women's rhetoric. My Kennesaw colleague Letizia Guglielmo and I have written on the changes in women's political speech and writing; our argument is that women who speak out on behalf of women's causes are supported these days by other women using social media.

4. Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed comes as much from his Catholicism as from his Marxism. (Berthoff, CCCC, 1988)

After I left graduate school and began to look consciously for connections between literate and spiritual practices, a panel at CCCC explored the implications of Freire's work for composition. After the presentations, the first question, posed by Ann Berthoff,

reminded the audience of at least 200 that Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed had its roots as much in his Catholicism as in his Marxism. Christian images are to be found throughout the book—dying to be reborn, sacrifice, and so forth, and reading *Pedagogy* as a graduate student, I had noticed them all. I didn't bring the subject up in class, first, because nobody else did and, second, because I had already figured out that talking about religion in an academic setting was simply not done. But here was Ann Berthoff articulating in public what I had suppressed. Her comment gave me the courage to write about the relationship between literate and spiritual practice. Two things came of this over the next two or three years. The first was writing a grant to return to the place I now call Mountain City to ask the Al-Anon women I knew there about their experiences of literacy and spirituality. The second was a panel at CCCC with Jan Swearingen and JoAnn Campbell called *Spiritual Sites of Composing*, which turned out to be far more successful in drawing an audience than any of us had imagined. From that panel grew a symposium published in CCC in 1994.

Later, writing about my research while simultaneously teaching a seminar on literacy, I once again became contrary, observing that it wasn't just Havelock and Ong offering what Lyotard calls a "grand narrative," but Freire as well. The Great Leap theory offers a narrative in which composition teachers can become, according to *The Postmodern Condition*, heroes of cognition or knowledge (31). Composition scholars had taken up the other narrative Lyotard names. Seeing themselves as heroes of liberty and speaking of their students as if they were the peasants Freire taught in the culture circles in the back country or in the cities of Brazil began to tire me (Lyotard, 31). Yes, there are American students who are oppressed, as I said in a CCC article called "Narratives of Literacy," but they only rarely attend universities where their professors are writing about pedagogy of the oppressed. The students in the U.S who are oppressed are most often in public schools, community colleges, prisons, or in women's or homeless shelters, and the teachers of those students seldom have vitas of multiple pages and rarely have the institutional support to go to national conferences to talk about their students.

Near the end of the Narratives article, I said that perhaps in America we had missed Freire's actual narrative, his real message, because we were too focused on his Marxism, ignoring his Christianity. I suggested that perhaps Freire's narrative was rather a story that called us to be "laborers in the vineyard" (402-03). This reference to Matthew 20: 1-16 led to the next phase of my scholarship. Not long after "Narratives of Literacy" appeared, Elizabeth Vander Lei called me up asking if I would be interested in being part of a symposium on Christianity and rhetoric.

This is how I came to work over the next decade with Elizabeth, Anne Gere, Tom Amorose, and, for a few of those years, David Jolliffe, whose work as the Brown Chair of Literacy at the University of Arkansas finally had to take precedence. The association with this group led to conference presentations, meetings among the five of us and then the four of us, a conference on Rhetoric and Christian Tradition (note: no definite article because we do not consider Christian tradition to be one thing), a Special Interest Group at CCCC, and finally to our jointly-edited 2014 collection *Renovating Rhetoric in Christian Tradition*. Here scholars examine the role of rhetoric in the expansion of Christianity, the formation of denominations, the work of women in various Christian groups, and teaching religiously conservative students. The name of the SIG has

changed to indicate inclusiveness. Our SIG "Rhetoric and Religious Traditions" now has a permanent place on the CCCC program, as well as a set of officers that are younger than the founders. Hearing those young scholars talk about their projects both humbles me and simultaneously makes me proud. Among others, Heather Thompson, Emily Cope, Michael-John DePalma, Jeff Ringer, and T. J. Geiger are teasing out connections among religion, spirituality, rhetoric, literacy, sexuality as they explore hitherto unseen issues with various research methods that gather concrete data on how undergraduates work to negotiate the difference between their religion and the academy. These scholars are presenting at conferences, writing dissertations, and beginning to publish their findings, as Geiger recently did in *College English*. Jeff Ringer's and Michael-John DePalma's collection *Mapping Religious Rhetorics* has just been published.

This is where my work is now—chapters in both collections mentioned above and a *College English* review of Vicki Tolar Burton's brilliant book *Spiritual Literacy in John Wesley's Methodism*. Because *Spiritual Literacy* argues that, following Wesley's precepts of spiritual and literate practice, early Methodists changed eighteenth-century rhetoric by endowing working-class men and *women* the agency to speak in public, my co-author Letizia Guglielmo and I use this book as a source in our exploration of the changing ethos of women speakers. It all ties together. As I anticipate with some joy retirement from administration and teaching, I look forward to continuing the search for the next gap, the next neglected topic, the next connection among literacy, rhetoric, spirituality, religion, and women, to the next issue where my position is to the contrary.

The readers of this essay have noted, I hope, the number of colleagues who have invited me to write or speak and who have accepted my invitations as well. There are many others not named here who have shared their time and expertise—my own professors, rhetoric and composition colleagues from graduate school, Clemson University, and KSU in addition to editors, peer reviewers, students. Which brings me back to where I started questioning what appeared as an over-emphasis on cognition in composition: Yes, literacy does have to do with thinking and with problem-solving. Literacy is nonetheless social. Rhetoric is social. Always connected to a rhetorical situation, human language rises out of identity and culture, and its development depends upon who is allowed to speak or write, about what, how freely, and in which forms. It all ties together.



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