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Stepping Beyond, In, and With *JAEPL*: Twenty Years of Hope

Kristie S. Fleckenstein

*"The very least you can do in your life is to figure out what you hope for.
And the most you can do is live inside that hope. Not admire it from
a distance but live right in it, under its roof."*

Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal Dreams*

In *Animal Dreams*, a complex narrative of place and identities, Barbara Kingsolver speaks to the human need to live inside hope. Twenty years and twenty volumes of *JAEPL* attests to that need, for, rather than admire hope "from a distance," the journal "live[d] right in it, under its roof" (306). Throughout its pages, via articles, style, and spirit, it embodied as well as articulated the dreams and aspirations of its parent organization. In this retrospective honoring the journal—helmed initially by Alice Glarden Brand (Volumes 1-3), then by Kristie S. Fleckenstein and Linda T. Calendrillo (Volumes 4-15),¹ and currently by Joonna Smitherman Trapp and Brad Peters (Volumes 16-ongoing)—I mark three intertwined hopes and tropes that have circulated throughout *JAEPL*'s pages.² First, we have longed to define and validate ourselves as a legitimate field of study by *stepping beyond* the accepted parameters of literacy studies and, by so doing enrich, if not transform, teacher-scholars, classrooms, and students. Second, we have at the same *stepped in*, aspiring to connect not only to each other in the spirit of community but also to "the inner landscape of the teaching self" (Palmer 4). And, third, we have *stepped with* the larger discipline within which we situate ourselves, returning to literacy studies writ large to nurture and celebrate the shifting center of reading-writing education. As the pages of *JAEPL* reveals, we have lived inside these hopes for two decades, hopes that resonate to disciplinary change and teacher-scholar's dreams.

Posted at eye-level, the black and white sign warns us to close the door firmly, else inquisitive, possibly hungry, bears will wander the halls uninvited. So, as Linda and I step from the Alpen Inn into a mist-layered June morning, we double check the latch, ensuring that the yoga devotees in the second-floor common room will not rise from their surya namaska to salute unexpected wildlife rather than the more traditional sun. Lightly jacketed against the night's lingering chill, Linda and I stretch, loosening tight quads, hamstrings, calves, and shoulders. Cupped within the calloused palms of the Rockies, the pre-dawn YMCA camp around us drowns in silence: no Frisbee games on the green, no engines growling, horns honking, or voices calling. Just silence. Pausing a moment as we face the east, almost as if to offer the breaking dawn our own sun salutation, an obeisance to the day's hope. Finally, in wordless accord, we

1. Peter Elbow guest edited the final volume in Fleckenstein's and Calendrillo's tenure as co-editors: Volume 15, "Pictures of the Believing Game."

2. Editors' note: Readers are invited to browse the *JAEPL* archives and revisit the articles this essay reviews. Go to: <http://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl>.

step beyond the safety of the lodge with its modern plumbing and comfortable beds, its balconies and electricity, to slip into a stillness lambent with possibilities.

In “Contemporary Composition Studies: Steps Beyond,” Brand chose as the theme for her inaugural issue of the fledgling journal a hope central to the AEPL’s identity: a longing to define and validate a scholarly and pedagogical focus that extended beyond the accepted parameters of traditional composition, literary, and language arts education. Echoing the call to go “Beyond the Cognitive Domain”—the rallying cry of the 1991, 1992, and 1993 Conference on College Composition and Communication interest groups that served as the precursor for AEPL—the first issue spotlighted *JAEPL*’s desire to “step beyond” conventional approaches to composition studies as a means to enrich teachers, research, and students. In her editor’s message, Brand makes this aim explicit, declaring that this journal is “for thinking-feeling instructors who learn and teach, so to speak, to the beat of a different drummer” (v). That trope of launching off into *terra incognita*—of stepping beyond the security of the known dimensions of composition studies—became a common metaphor throughout the journal’s history as the titles many of its 15 themed volumes indicate. If the first issue stakes out “stepping beyond,” the second issue reaffirms this hope, emphasizing the value of “Writing, Teaching, and Thinking in the Borderland,” claiming that “borderland” as *JAEPL*’s home territory, underscoring not just the ability to step beyond but also the necessity of stepping beyond. Subsequent issues, such as Volume 6’s “Between the Words: Reading and Writing the Unknown,” or Volume 7’s “At Risk: Teaching and Writing outside the Safety Zone,” as well as Volume 10’s “Leaping into Uncertainty: Teaching and Learning beyond Logic and Reason” likewise carry forth the hope of stepping beyond traditional boundaries to legitimate this new terrain. At the same time, the individual articles in these and other volumes manifested the hope of the “beyond” by mapping the specific contours of the landscape comprising *JAEPL*’s borderlands, as the journal’s attention to spirituality—one key landmark in this new landscape—illustrates.

“There are dreams, hopes, and yearning which possess our lives, calling us away from the usual round and the common tasks,” mystic and religious leader Howard Thurman reminds us, and establishing the academic and pedagogical salience of subject matter denigrated by the discipline of literacy studies constituted a crucial dream, hope, and yearning (45). *JAEPL* acted on that desire by calling readers away from “the usual round and the common tasks” and providing sustained attention to content rarely acknowledged in traditional academic venues, such as spirituality, or, as Parker Palmer defines, “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). Brand and Richard L. Graves note that in the early interest groups, “many didn’t know what or where the domain was. But . . . they knew important things happened there,” and one of the important things happening consisted of inquiry into the oft-scorned phenomenon of spirituality (1). That inquiry initiated in the early 90s carried over into the pages of almost every volume of *JAEPL* for the next twenty years. Articles explored Western and Eastern spiritualities in their many guises, establishing “the heart’s longing

to be connected with the largeness of life” as a focal issue—if not *the* focal issue—for K-12 and postsecondary education. *JAEPL*’s very first volume signals this hope, concluding with Martha Goff Stone’s “Mastery: Or, Where Does True Wisdom Lie?” Here Goff introduces the value of Zen teaching practices, which, predicated on the art of “wait[ing] properly,” can balance Western teaching practices, characterized as a “mountain-climbing approach to wisdom” wherein all energies are fixated on moving toward a goal (89). Goff’s argument about the blending of Zen and Western practices acts on the assumption that such an argument is worth making; it begins the process of validating spirituality in education as a laudable subject area, one worth exploring. Volume 2 (“Writing, Teaching, and Thinking in the Borderland”) makes this claim ever more boldly; it builds on Goff’s beginning by paying particular attention to mapping the intricacies of spirituality in five of the volume’s ten essays. Signaling both the topic’s depth and range, the essays highlight the importance of spirituality in different configurations for prison classrooms (Trounstine), composition teaching (Papoulis), meditation (Kalamaras), Freirean liberation theology (Ferry), and students’ spiritual diversity (Buley-Meissner). Subsequent issues maintained a consistent attention on spirituality with individual articles providing everything from the “alchemy” of an individual’s spiritual identity with his or her institutional identity (McCurrie 1) to an argument concerning writing-to-learn’s dependence on a “spiritual source of creativity” (Kearney 76). Through such an abiding emphasis on spirituality, *JAEPL* worked to establish the richness of this subject for educational endeavors and to validate its salience for teacher-scholars regardless of grade level, student demographic, or institutional type.

Spirituality illuminates the hope of stepping beyond, just as the provocative list of possible topics of interest—such as “intuition, inspiration, insight, imagery, meditation, silence, archetypes, emotion” and so forth—similarly underscores that hope. “For educational reform and cultural transformation,” James Moffett protests in *The Universal Schoolhouse*, “nothing should be off the map,” and *JAEPL* serves this goal by taking nothing off the educational map (17). Published in every volume as well as periodically revised and expanded throughout *JAEPL*’s history, the list of potential topics includes as well a reminder that any of this inventory is only suggestive, not inclusive. Promising subjects are never “limited to” a catalog, no matter how elaborate, but instead exist in any step beyond the borders of entrenched academic interests. In their innovative re-design of the *JAEPL* cover in Volume 16, co-editors Trapp and Peters state this aspiration visually and verbally. The “simple star” on the top right of the cover “at its core presents that scintilla of creativity that keeps teaching fresh and inventive” (vii). Here lies the hope for educational reformation and transformation that characterizes both *JAEPL* and its parent organization. Here, too, lies a second dream: stepping into, as well as beyond, our newly mapped territories.

*“Your dreams, what you hope for and all that, it’s not
separate from your life. It grows right up out of it.”*

Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal Dreams*

*The morning-mist long burned off, the morning jog washed away, and the pre-dawn
yoga practice still a road not taken, I drift back to the lodge from a 20-minute directed ramble*

in the bright afternoon Colorado sun. Meeting Linda by chance at the lodge's south door, we join other ramblers, who, like us, have returned for the second half of an afternoon workshop. One becomes two, then four and five, clustering together with our words tumbling over each other as our feet find their sure way to the second floor. With the sun streaming in from the west window, more than 35 kindred spirits in tennis shoes, flip-flops, and an occasional bare foot sit in a circle in a circular room, close enough to touch each other, skin heating skin, a flow of mutual energy and interest dissolving separations between institutional affiliations, geographical positions, ages, races, and genders. "So what did you bring back with you from your ramble?" the facilitator asks, leaving us to determine how we might interpret that "what" and how we might share it. Voices respond, at first tentative, and then with rising confidence until a lull brings us to a brimming silence. In that pause, Linda rises and steps into the circle. Saying nothing, she places at the center a smooth, oval rock, bringing into our common space a trace of the mountains beyond the windows and gesturing to its significance for her. As she sits, my heart flutters, bidding me to step more fully into the circle around and within me.

While stepping beyond is a foundational hope of *JAEPL*, one that circulates throughout its two decades of publication, it is not the only hope important to the "field" we call AEPL. Even as we stepped beyond—perhaps even because we stepped beyond—we also by necessity, stepped in, hoping through that movement to connect individually and collectively. In committing to non-traditional academic pursuits, to teaching and researching from unconventional perspectives or methodologies, we risk alienating ourselves from the larger discipline, becoming a stranger in a less than hospitable land. Such is the peril of stepping beyond. Palmer acknowledges the pain of communal betrayal, the "pain of people who thought they were joining a community of scholars but find themselves in distant, competitive, and uncaring relationships with colleagues and students" (21). He likens this pain to dismemberment, the result of "being disconnected from our own truth, from the passions that took us into teaching, from the heart that is the source of all good work" (21). To create a home, a safe zone, for the many who felt homeless within or dismembered by the larger discipline, *JAEPL* fostered stepping in, vigorously pursuing a kind of intellectual and emotional outreach. Brand in her editor's message for the first issue, articulates the spirit of welcome intrinsic to stepping in: "Feel free," she urges, "to recommend individuals whose interests intersect with ours but who may not be affiliated with the Assembly" (viii). Evoking the spirit of James Moffett, one of AEPL's charter members, Brand's invitation resonates with the belief that "to be spiritual is to perceive our oneness with everybody and everything and to act on this perception" (Moffett xix). The articles in *JAEPL* reveal this hope for such oneness, first, through articles that dismantle pernicious binaries and, second, through articles to draw us to cherish the inner life: our own and our students'.

Regina Paxton Foehr and Susan A. Schiller in their introduction to *The Spiritual Side of Writing* emphasize the need for community, advocating fellowship through sharing ideas. Through such intercourse, they assert, we "can create connectedness to each other and represent a search toward truth" (ix). Palmer reinforces the need to share, for, he warns, without it, we forget who we are, "with unhappy consequences for our politics, our work, our hearts" (20). Sharing ideas reminds us, re-members us, connects us.

But for *JAEPL*, the key is not just sharing any ideas; it is sharing ideas that forge bonds that foster an ecumenical vision of teaching and learning. This hope manifests itself in *JAEPL* through contributions that aim to heal divisions—for example, those caused by binary thinking.

Rather than East vs. West, emotion vs. intellect, belief vs. critique, conscious vs. unconscious, image vs. word, or spiritual vs. secular, the pages of *JAEPL* hearken to Howard Thurman's gentle reminder that "there must be a unity deeper than the area of conflict" (103). Palmer concurs, advocating a deeper unity: "to chart that [teaching] landscape fully, three important paths must be taken—intellectual, emotional, and spiritual—and none can be ignored. Reduce teaching to intellect, and it becomes a cold abstraction; reduce it to emotions, and it becomes narcissistic; reduce it to the spiritual, and it loses its anchor to the world (4)." The hopeful agenda of a "deeper unity" begins in *JAEPL*'s very first issue with Derek Owens, who, in "Earthworm Hermeneutics," exposes "what's wrong with binary thinking that wants either to preserve final boundaries or transgress (through exclusion) 'all' of them" (9). Relying on a "worm motif," Owens argues for an approach that neither reifies nor eliminate binaries. Rather, he advocates respecting boundaries by tunneling beneath them to assist the "rise and fall of boundaries" but "without seeking to contain or restrict the variation on the surface" (11). Constructing boundaries is human, he says, so our charge is to "imagine newer, richer ways of articulating whatever boundaries we seek to build with and over the old" (9).

That agenda is forwarded in different ways throughout *JAEPL* but is especially evident in the articles that burrow beneath the mind-body binary to transform those boundaries without sacrificing variety. Thus, Volume 1's Tim Doherty in "Strictly Ballroom" draws on Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, especially bodily-kinesthetic knowing, to emphasize "moving words" (18). He argues for a pedagogy that shifts "student awareness of thoughts and feelings into and out of somatic and linguistic action" (19). Fifteen years later in Volume 16, Sara K. Schneider similarly builds on Gardner's bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, advocating in the K-12 classroom "playful choices" and detailing different types of learning that can guide those pedagogical choices. Doherty's and Schneider's efforts to reconfigure the mind-body binary is complemented by articles that further this agenda, this hope, by introducing yoga, the quintessential practice melding mind, body, and spirit. Contributors like Geraldine DeLuca in "Headstands, Writing, and the Rhetoric of Radical Self-Acceptance" find in yoga the inspiration and the tools to wed curriculum with students' bodies and minds, not by practicing it necessarily in the class but by mining its experience and precepts for pedagogical guidance. Christy I. Wenger in "Writing Yogis" goes even further in reshaping the mind-body binary by introducing yoga in the writing classroom, especially through *pranayama*, or focused meditative breathing. Such techniques help students embody their writing (24-25). Judith Beth Cohen in Volume 12 likewise recovers the "missing body" in higher education, highlighting how her practice of yoga changed her teaching. Seeking, like Wenger, to redress the separation of mind and body, she brings strategies derived from her practice into the classroom to change how her students learn. From Owens to Doherty, from "earthworm hermeneutics" to "moving words," *JAEPL* has fostered sharing ideas to help us re-member, a process that feeds into the second form of stepping in: attending to one's inner life.

Hope grows out of the life lived, Kingsolver muses in *Animal Dreams* (136), which includes the life lived beneath the skin, “the place where intellect and emotion and spirit and will converge in the human self” (Palmer 11). If connecting as a community is an abiding hope of *JAEPL*, then connecting to and with oneself is an equally abiding hope. Moffett explains that we as a group might have a “common goal or desideratum, but,” he continues, “each person starts toward it from unique circumstances and conditions in which he or she is enmeshed, like the spirit fallen into and involved in matter so idiosyncratically that only certain paths or means will work” (9). Education, he notes, consists of “finding for oneself what these are,” a process that relies on plumbing one’s inner life (“Soul School” 9). Palmer agrees, contending that one’s inner life is the “landscape of the teaching self” from which the good teacher emerges (4). *JAEPL* exemplifies the hope self-connecting—of stepping into the circle of self—by inviting teachers to explore in a variety of ways the life inside. Making that invitation explicit in Volume 14, Gina Briefs-Elgin takes as her starting point a particularly low point in a teacher’s inner life: burn out, or the “dull ache” that makes us feel as if we are just trying to “get through the day, to get through until we can retire” (36). She seeks for this inner miasma a “refreshment at the root,” finding it in Eastern mystical traditions which help dispel the shadows darkening a teacher’s inner landscape. Important to Briefs-Elgin’s essay is not just the solution to teacher burn out, but the singular attention that the essay places on maladies that strike the inner life. Effective teaching—healthy teaching—requires care for that inner life.

Kami Day in “We Learn More Than Just Writing” similarly accepts as a given the importance of a teacher’s inner life, but she extends that value to students’ inner lives as well. She brings to bear on both a classroom technique based on the collaborative care intrinsic to the Quaker Clearness Committee, a group of trusted advisors brought together to help an individual explore a life problem or issue (4). Day uses the Clearness Committee to guide peer review, encouraging students “to develop awareness of their own inner teachers” as they connect with each other, underscoring that we write and teach in accord with this inner life (9). Reinforcing the value of the students’ life within, Gesa Kirsch in Volume 14, inspired by Mary Rose O’Reilley, asks how classroom spaces might be created that “allow students the freedom to nourish and sustain an inner life” (56). She recounts her effort to share her own vulnerability as a means to establish trust, to risk new pedagogical practices—such as moving class outdoors on a cold March day to walk in silence—all in the service of “stirring the spirit within” (Thurman 48). The need to step in, to connect to the life inside remains a steady hope and focus throughout the pages of *JAEPL*.

“We in composition studies are just beginning to grasp the potential of the inner experience that helps writing develop and to legitimate the writing that helps our inner experience develop. And this means nothing less than the mind in its whole humanity,” write Brand and Graves. By stepping in, *JAEPL* sought to establish a circle wherein we could connect to each other and to our inner lives and thereby sustain the dream of stepping beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries. At that same time, stepping in became an initial move for stepping with the larger discipline in the hope of transforming it.

"Right now I'm living in that hope, running down its hallway and touching the walls on both sides."

Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal Dreams*

The sun long gone, the dark mountains press against the windows, a denser enduring presence against the falling night. The afternoon's circle of chairs now rings the perimeter of the common room, pushed back against the walls and windows, leaving the dimly lit center open and ripe for new movement. Voices buzz, and laughter—basso profundo guffaws, earthy chuckles, an infectious giggle—rumbles through the room. Amidst the murmur and hum, Benny Goodman suddenly launches into "Swingtime in the Rockies," bidding congregants to practice a different kind of asana: jitterbugging AEPL style. On this, the last night of the conference, we celebrate with a gathering, a dance as non-traditional as the perspectives we espouse. Not immune to Goodman on clarinet, Harry James on trumpet, and Gene Krupa on drums, Linda and I look at each other, and grin. "Can you lead? If you can lead, I can follow." Hooting like loons, we begin, stepping with each other (and occasionally on each other) as we step with (and on) our fellow jivers who move to their own rhythm around us. With bodies, with humor, with faith, together we greet the darkness in the hope that tomorrow we might continue to step with classrooms, institutions, and loved ones.

JAEPL provides a venue for articulating the aspiration of stepping beyond, of defining and inhabiting new territory, new thinking, and new feeling for education. It provides a venue for articulating the desire to step in, to connect with one another and with one's own inner world. But JAEPL also provides a venue for the culminating dream of both stepping beyond and stepping in: stepping with, where, as Kingsolver expresses, we run down hope's hallway and touch the walls on both sides (306). Stepping with brings what is at the margin—the periphery—into the center, thereby changing what constitutes both margin and center. Even as JAEPL pushed against the parameters of traditional education, it also selectively embraced those traditions. Such practice aimed not to reiterate those traditions but to transform them, engaging in a process of "putting ourselves back together, recovering identity and integrity, reclaiming the wholeness of our lives" (Palmer 20). Stepping with underscores the necessity of changing traditional paradigms, not rejecting them whole cloth. Articles anchoring themselves in a key aspects of disciplinary traditions—subject matter, scholarship, pedagogy, or methodology—remind readers that we are not outside a discipline; rather, we are stepping with a discipline as a means to spark a sea change for that discipline. Only by reiterating with difference do we hold on to the hope of transforming the old and refreshing the new. Thus, Catherine L. Hobbs and Keith Rhodes in separate articles turn to classical rhetoric, rescuing from scholarly obscurity the ways in which that the past resonates with JAEPL's twenty-first century hopes. Hobbs in "The Architectonics of Information" illuminates the "lateral thought processes and everyday logic" of classical rhetoric to discover "off-beat, out-of-time connections that may prove enormously productive, if surprising and unsettling" for this digital age (49). By turning to classical rhetoric, Hobbs steps with, uncovering the value of the non-traditional in the traditional as well as the value of the traditional in the non-traditional. Rhodes in "Plato, Gorgias, and Trickster" performs

a similar service, taking the Jungian archetype of the Trickster and applying its “healing attention” to rhetoric. As he exams the history of rhetoric, he does not replicate it for the present day; rather, he recovers the “Trickster’s dialectical value” for rhetoric and for writing pedagogy, stepping with the conventional and unconventional, suggesting changes in both. Perhaps the most enduring example of the hope of stepping with lies in the multiple instantiations of Peter Elbow’s the believing game throughout *JAEPL*, ranging from individual articles to a themed issue focused on the believing game.

The believing game itself embodies stepping with, joining as it does the critical approach of the academy with the power of believing. As Elbow explains, “careful thinking or reasoned inquiry” relies not solely on Cartesian doubt; it relies also on belief. Or more precisely, it relies on the combination of what Elbow calls “methodological doubt and methodological belief” (255). While our modern era, and the academy especially, might be dominated by need “to criticize everything . . . to find flaws or contradictions, this is only a half of what constitutes effective thinking” (257). Necessary as well is a “systematic, disciplined, and conscious attempt to *believe* everything no matter how unlikely or repellent it might seem—to find virtues or strengths we might otherwise miss” (257). Both doubt and belief are integral to careful thinking and reasoned inquiry, a stepping with that changes how we think in and out of the academy. *JAEPL* contributors have followed Elbow’s lead and extended the believing games in ways that reiterate the traditional with a difference. Thus, C. Jan Swearingen in “Doubting and Believing” draws on the dialectic of doubting and believing to articulate an academic model wherein “faith—in a higher being or God—and belief—in commonly held doctrines, concepts, and values” work “hand in hand with reason and the intellect” (17). Such a model that steps with doubt and belief changes not only academic thinking but, potentially, academic curricula. Kym Buchanan and Perry Cook in Volume 17 extend the believing game to pre-service teacher and science education, finding it an apt strategy in addressing “entanglements of learners’ motivations and reluctance” (32). With the Dr. Seuss children’s story *Green Eggs and Ham* as pedagogical inspiration and tool, the co-authors engage their very different students in the “Trying Trio,” or productive behaviors including “admitting ignorance, taking risks, and making mistakes” (32). Stepping with the believing game, the co-authors conclude, constitutes the “spirit of good teaching,” and they initiate a grassroots process of change on the level of the individual student (40).

Warned by the black and white sign to “enter quietly,” I slip into the hot, dimly lit room, a faint smell of sandalwood lingering in the air. With heat prickling my skin, I collect my props: a blanket to cushion my errors in balance, a strap to compensate for the limitations of an arthritic body, and blocks—two soft ones to elevate my hips and two hard blocks to support my knees. Unrolling my mat, pulling out my water bottle and towel, I situate myself in the back of the room, smiling greetings to familiar faces. Then, with the help of my props, I sit cross-legged as best I can, place my hands, palm down, on my knees, and begin to breathe. Miles away from the Rockies, rooted in the sandy soil of the Florida panhandle, I inhale and exhale with mindfulness, hoping with each breath for the strength to invite change, the patience to wait for change, and the joy in welcoming change.

Such are the lessons of *JAEPL*. It is hope—for our discipline, our community, our calling as teachers—that characterizes the pages of *JAEPL*. It is hope that urges us in myriad articles to step beyond a well-charted academic territory to enter unknown lands; it is hope that leads us to step in the circle of self and other, finding support and the resources for resilience there; and it is hope that draws us to step with, to align ourselves with tradition in order to transform tradition. Without that faith in possibilities, we lack the “the courage to keep one’s heart open in those very moments when the heart is asked to hold more than it is able” (Palmer 11). So it is with hope that *JAEPL* launched into production twenty years ago, and it is with hope that *JAEPL* looks forward to another twenty years.



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