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Paul Heilker

Virginia Tech, pheilker@vt.edu

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Coming to Nonviolence

Paul Heilker

7⁶⁹. Today marks my 769th daily offering of Buddhist wisdom on my blog. To be more precise, every day, for the last 769 days, I have posted a quotation from the American Buddhist nun, Pema Chödrön, on a Tumblr account that links to my Facebook page. Here's today's :

3 September 2014

The awakened life isn't somewhere else—in some distant place that's accessible only when we've got it all together. With the commitment to embrace the world just as it is, we begin to see that sanity and goodness are always present and can be uncovered right here, right now. Pema Chödrön (*Living Beautifully with Uncertainty and Change*, 116)

Chödrön is the author of a number of popular books, including *The Places that Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times* and *Taking the Leap: Freeing Ourselves from Old Habits and Fears*. I stumbled upon her work in what I describe to friends as a “crystal unicorn bookstore” in Olympia, Washington, when I was in town for my niece's wedding. It was an incredible discovery, and I have been sharing her wisdom with people ever since. Her words help me, and it certainly helps me to share them with others as well. My blog is a tiny karma engine: my daily posts allow me to begin each day by freely offering a gift of unalloyed good to the universe and to my fellow travelers on the planet. Another way to look at it, as folks in 12-Step programs say, is that “You have to give it away to keep it.” In either case, there is no denying that I am personally helped a great deal by sharing Chödrön's wisdom with others. It is difficult to say, though, how much these posts help others. The numbers would suggest they have little direct influence. The blog has all of 14 followers, and while I have 446 Facebook friends, only about six of them ever “Like” or comment on the Chödrön quotes when they show up in their feeds. But those 20 or so potential daily readers interact with a great many others over the course of their days, so perhaps there are wider concentric circles of influence, especially over a longer haul. I like to think so, anyway.

What I see in these daily posts in miniature, then, is what I seem to have always been about, what I seem to have been doing my entire career as a scholar and teacher of writing—that is, writing spiritually, composing (my) spirituality, writing about spirituality—although I would not have described it as such until, well, this morning, when I sat down and opened up this file. But as I look back and connect the dots, I see it has always been there. And as I look forward, I see that the connection between writing and spirituality has now become the overt focus of my scholarly efforts and what I hope will be my legacy. It is both disconcerting and liberating to say that, at once both an odd realization and a relief.

My awareness of this process begins with my training and work as a graduate teaching assistant during my M.A. program at Colorado State University in the mid-1980s. The broader orientation, mentoring, and instruction I received in writing pedagogy at CSU were tremendously helpful. Every day as I teach, I hear helpful things coming out of my mouth that I can directly attribute to Kate Kiefer, Steve Reid, Jean Wyrick, Bev

Atchison, and many other colleagues in that program. But what I am equally grateful for in retrospect, although I would not have said so then, is the extreme narrowness and rigidity of the genres we were allowed to teach our students at that time: the description essay, the comparison/contrast essay, the definition essay, the causal analysis essay, and the like. These assignments not only calcified single modes of development as pure, self-contained textual forms, but more importantly, they valued only *logos*, dismissing students' emotional connections to their content as irrelevant and unworthy of discussion, or worse, as a corruption that needed to be excised. It rankled from the get-go. I thought there was something wrong with me. I could not, for the life of me, figure out how I was supposed to write (and how I was supposed to help others write) about anything meaningful, anything worth talking about, without talking about how these matters affected us emotionally. But then again, when I was a new GTA at Colorado State, I was also hurtling toward the end of a decade of drug and alcohol abuse, fueled, I now recognize, by a culture of American masculinity that made it exceedingly difficult to be me—to be, that is, a decidedly emotional dude. My mother's great gift to me is the ability to weep at the drop of a hat, but it was decidedly not OK—is still decidedly not OK—to be a weepy, emotional male in our culture. My only recourse at the time, the very height of my coping mechanism, was to medicate myself daily with powerful combinations of drugs and alcohol in an attempt to obliterate those troublesome, persistent *feelings*.

So I am grateful, then, that the hyper-restrictiveness of those required genres and the *logos*-only nature of academic discourse were so in my face, so utterly offensive and intolerable at the outset of my career, because they made me immediately begin to seek a better, more whole, more humane way of expressing myself and trying to help others express themselves. I needed a form of analytical, scholarly nonfiction that wouldn't force me to cut myself in two, to forego half of my nature and experience, to excise the affective and emotional from my thinking and writing. I turned first to the exploratory essay. I took to heart Ross Winterowd's challenge that "if the essay is to serve as the kind of writing through which students realize their full potential as liberally educated beings, they, and we, need an expanded conception of what the essay is and what it can do" (146). I went to Texas Christian University and studied the exploratory essay closely with Gary Tate and Jim Corder for my dissertation. I worked up what I called a rehabilitative theory and pedagogy of the essay as a form of writing that transgresses disciplinary and discursive boundaries in an attempt to recover an undifferentiated unity of life, to address whole problems of human existence.

I was fortunate enough to publish that work as a book for NCTE in 1996 (*The Essay: Theory and Pedagogy for an Active Form*), but it is difficult even now to assess the influence it may have had on other teachers and scholars. Do we look at the sales figures? *The Essay* has sold only about 2000 copies over almost two decades, and most of those surely went to university libraries with blanket orders for NCTE titles. Years later, many of those copies may well have gone to the remote storage facilities of those libraries without ever having been checked out. The book is now out of print, although the odd copy still continues to sell, apparently, since I keep getting royalty checks (the two I received in 2014 have been for \$2.16 and \$2.12, respectively). Do we look at the reviews of the book? As far as I know, only one rather brief review was ever written, which I uncovered

as I laboriously constructed the dossier for my tenure case. Do we consider the number of times it has been cited? A search of the Thompson Reuters Arts and Humanities Citation Index database returns zero hits, but a quick Google search on the title suggests that the book has been cited 67 times. Still, since we typically review the literature on our topics to point out the flaws or gaps in our predecessors' work and thus make room for our own contributions, these 67 citations would more likely than not be working to demonstrate the book's *negative* influence, holding it up as an example of "what *not* to think and what *not* to do with the essay in writing and writing instruction."

I must content myself, then, with the occasional note that readers have been kind enough to share with me over the years. I've printed out those emails, archived them, and pull them out on rainy days to remind myself that my work has been stirring enough to make a few people, at least, reach out across the void and tell me so, such as Dana Morgan—"the book has been a strong influence on my teaching"; Anne Laskaya "I am writing just let you know how much I've appreciated your book on *The Essay*"; Pegi Taylor—"Congratulations on such a thoughtful and helpful book"; Elizabeth Hodges—"Personally and professionally, I think *The Essay* is a tremendous book"; and Kara Siegl—"Hi! I'm your newest fan. After finishing your book about the essay, I dared myself to contact you." Moreover, I take heart knowing that any real, substantive effects the book has had will be manifested in the educational experiences of the students fortunate enough to study with actively engaged scholars and teachers of writing such as these. Over the last 20 years, that could be quite a few students, I suppose, and some of them, too, may have gone on to become writing teachers . . .

Personally, the strongest effect of my doctoral work on the essay was that I became emboldened enough to use the essay as a vehicle for my own scholarship. I began sending out exploratory essays as manuscripts to the editors of journals and scholarly collections in the field. These editors frequently offered confused but sympathetic responses to the odd artifacts in front of them, and they frequently rejected these explorations outright as "too subjective," not serious, or not rigorous. But sometimes they warmly embraced my weird, little essays, and even those rare bits of encouragement were enough to help me begin talking freely about the personal and emotional aspects of my professional functioning. I came to foreground the personal and emotional quite candidly in my scholarship as overt issues of consequence in our discipline. As I wrote in one NCTE collection, "I want to discuss this unfortunately and unnecessarily taboo topic and help prepare new teachers for the personal and emotional aspects of their careers, a preparation I did not have and which cost me dearly . . . This personal, emotional reality is the single most important thing I have learned as a teacher" ("What I Know Now" 74, 80).

About the same time, I also began taking up the challenge to write directly about spiritual matters in a professional context. I think here of smart, brave editors like Regina Paxton Foehr and Susan A. Schiller. They both held positions of leadership with the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning at the time, and their collection *The Spiritual Side of Writing* urged me to be brave, too. The chapter I wrote for their book, "The Rhetoric of Spirituality in Popular Meditation Books," was, looking back, a watershed moment for me, a kind of coming-out party—as well as an affirmation that AEPL embraced the same values that my chapter described. I wrote, for instance:

There is more to the universe—more to the ways we can think about it, be in it, and respond to it—than just logic and rationality. But logic and rationality are the *only* forms of thinking, being, and responding we are conditioned to value and teach in academia. Spirituality is an alternative, *complementary* way of thinking about, being in, and responding to the universe in which we live. It is a kind of thinking, feeling, and being that is very rarely, if ever, valued, taught, or practiced in academia, but which is nonetheless an essential form of problem-solving and thus an integral part of the liberal education of a well-rounded individual. (109)

That chapter was also a very successful merging of the most advanced theoretical thinking in my scholarly discipline (at that time) with a fuller accounting of my lived experience. It was a major step forward in my quest to feel whole in my writing. In that piece, I used social construction theory to argue that the quality, terms, range, goals, conventions, and grammatical/rhetorical structures of conversations about spirituality are the sources of the quality, terms, range, goals, conventions, and grammatical/rhetorical structures of an individual's reflective, spiritual thought (111). What I recognized in the conclusion of that chapter served as a springboard for further scholarship and teaching: "Spirituality, I now see, is something that I *do* with language, both internally and externally. And so I have had the happy realization, for instance, that my teaching and my thinking about my teaching are important ways I can think spiritually and "do" spirituality" (117).

But as I reflect here on what influence, what effects *my* embracing of the personal, emotional, and spiritual in *my* scholarship and teaching might have had on *others* in the field, I find it impossible to guess. These were brave moments for me, and I would like to think they might have inspired others to make similarly brave moves in their own scholarship and teaching, but there is no way to know, really. These were, after all, small pieces in small publications read by a small number of people who were already favorably inclined to these matters in the first place, or else they wouldn't have been reading these books. That's not false modesty; that's a realistic assessment. But I am increasingly inclined to think on a more cosmic or absolute level about such things, I guess: if these texts helped even one writing teacher move even slightly closer toward a perspective, a decision, or an action that helped him/her write (or his/her students write) in a more fully human way, then that is work well done.

For myself, the most important outcome of my chapter in the Foehr and Schiller anthology seems to have been that in writing that piece I came to understand and talk about popular meditation books as a "concrete embodiment and enactment" of spirituality, to understand and talk about writing as embodying and enacting a way of being in the world. It was about this time (late 1997) that I came face to face with a very different way of being in the world from those I knew, because this is when I learned that my son, Eli, was autistic. Becoming educated about autism, learning how to parent an autistic child, learning how to advocate on Eli's behalf to his teachers and other caregivers, and other similar matters quickly grew to command the time and energy I might have otherwise spent on reading and writing scholarship in my field.

This dynamic continued for a decade, really. During this period, old friends were kind enough to ask me to contribute pieces to their edited collections, but those texts did not constitute any great advancements in my thinking so much as render new variations

on my familiar themes. But during this period I was also, however, engaged quite deeply on a daily basis of exploring how to understand my son, who, among other things, has a distinctive rhetoric, a fascinating way of using language, an unusual way of being in the world through language. In 2008, as a result of these circumstances, I vividly recalled something Jim Corder had said in passing in a lecture when I was doctoral student at TCU and that had clearly been percolating in my thinking ever since, though at an inarticulate level: “Each [of us] is a rhetorical creation. Out of an inventive world (a past, a set of capacities, a way of thinking) [. . . we are] always creating structures of meaning and generating a style, a way of being in the world” (152). And following Corder, who defines rhetoric here as a way of being in the world through language, through invention, structure, and style, I came to understand that autism itself is a rhetoric, that autism is a way of being in the world through language, through invention, structure, and style—an argument I explicated with Melanie Yergeau in “Autism and Rhetoric” in *College English* in 2011. I will note here that this piece seems to have been picked up and used in a number of graduate courses in composition theory and pedagogy since it was published (based on the number of Google hits that point toward students’ blogged responses to the piece). I am pleased to know that our ideas on autism and rhetoric remain in circulation—and again, if these ideas move even one person even slightly closer to a perspective, decision, or action that allows them to treat some other person in a more fully human way, I would consider mine a career well spent.

But what has happened of late is that this idea—that rhetoric is a way of being in the world through language—has come to completely dominate my thinking. As I wrote in *Writing on the Edge* in 2011,

The implications of this concept are just now beginning to impress themselves upon me, and they are everywhere, and they are immense. If rhetoric is a way of being in the world through language, then discourses are ways of being in the world through language, through invention, structure, and style. And if discourses are ways of being in the world through language, then their constituent genres are ways of being in the world through language . . . ways of emerging into the world. (19)

In that essay, in an attempt to render just how important this concept is, just how personally critical this idea is, I invoked my history as a recovering alcoholic, telling the story of how a rhetoric of spirituality that I learned in a 12-Step program saved my life when I was a graduate student at Colorado State:

I sit, miserably at first, and listen to people talking about God, and honesty, and acceptance, and control, and selfishness, and fear; I learn, very haltingly, to begin talking about change, and pain, and growth, and healing, and faith the way that they speak of such things; and I begin, quite reluctantly at first, to read and write the texts that make me a member of this community. For instance, I am invited and compelled to write in new genres like the 4th Step, a rigorously honest inventory of those I have wronged and how I have done so, combined with a probing analysis of the part I have played in how others have wronged me. And I come, over time, to inhabit a new way of being in the world through language. And this new rhetoric, this new form of invention, structure, and style, this discourse and its constituent genres, saves my life by fundamentally altering how I am in the world. (23)

I concluded that essay with a series of questions for writing instructors, myself included. If genres are ways of being in the world through language, “When students take up your writing assignments, the genres you assign, how do they need to be in the world? How does the assigned genre require them to emerge into the world? How does it require them to exist in the world?” (30). And my own answers to these questions were unsettling, to say the least. It has become abundantly and painfully clear to me that the primary—and sometimes the only—way that academics (scholars and students alike) can be in the world is through adversarial violence, that is, through the symbolic and sublimated warfare of argument.

This is not a new idea, of course. In 1980, in *The Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson noted that “Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people” (4). And their very first example is “the conceptual metaphor [that] ARGUMENT IS WAR”:

It is important to see that we don’t just talk about arguments in terms of war. We can actually win or lose arguments. We see the person we are arguing with as an opponent. We attack his positions and defend our own. We gain and lose ground. We plan and use strategies. If we find a position indefensible, we can abandon it and take a new line of . . . attack, defense, [or] counterattack . . . Try to imagine a culture where arguments are not viewed in terms of war, where no one wins or loses, where there is no sense of attacking or defending, gaining or losing ground [. . . T]his is the ordinary way of having an argument and talking about one. (4)

In war, alas, the ends can justify the means, and thus we come to the kinds of scorched-earth public discourse we can find almost anywhere in American culture, where opponents face off on television or in the comments section of webpages and attempt to annihilate each other with ever louder, ever more vicious, monologic, vitriolic, hate speech.

Thus, 30 years into my career (with 20 more to go, I hope), I have come to believe that we cannot effectively re-imagine the human condition as less violent using the same discursive tools that created our currently hostile conditions, that we cannot bridge our deep disagreements and schismatic worldviews using the same schemas of discourse that constructed today’s antagonistic realities. To create a less hostile and violent future, we need less hostile and violent discourses, and we need to teach these alternative ways of being in the world to students. I expect to spend the next two decades explicating just what this might mean. Some obvious starting points include the work we have already done on dialogue, intercultural communication, negotiation/mediation, conflict resolution, Rogerian rhetoric, and feminist alternatives to traditional argument, to name just a few. But the goal, once again—just as it was back when I was a GTA at Colorado State—is to find more fully human ways to express myself—ourselves—in writing. I am right where I have always been, it seems.

Even so, I have begun reading work in Peace Studies, and in the first text I read, Johan Galtung defines violence as follows: “violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations . . . Violence is here defined as the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual, between what could have been and what is” (168). In what ways, I am called to wonder, does language use and instruction, especially writ-

ing instruction, reduce/inhibit/prevent someone from reaching his or her full human potential? In how many ways, and to how great a degree, is writing instruction therefore violent? From this perspective, I have been coming to nonviolence since I first began thinking critically about my work as a writing instructor, since I first balked at the radically truncated “humanity” forced upon my students via the comparison/contrast essay, since I first took up Winterowd’s challenge to use writing as means to help “students realize their *full potential* as liberally educated beings.” In my scholarly work to date, my goal, I now realize, has been to reduce the violence I do to myself, the violence I do to my experience as I attempt to render it, the violence I do to my humanity in that process, and the violence I do to my colleagues and students, as well. If any of these efforts have helped even one person move the tiniest bit toward a less violent way of being in the world themselves, it has been a career well spent.

I recognize, of course, that I am consoling myself in what might be construed as a mid-life crisis (of conscience): *Oh my god! I’ve put in 30 years of hard work and I have nothing, NOTHING concrete to show for it.* Perhaps. Given all my references here to “back when I was a grad student,” I can easily see how this might read like a mid-life crisis in print. But I have long known that I would not likely see overt and clear results for the work I do. Hell, *any* writing teacher knows *that*. We simply *must* believe in the “virus theory” of influence: that if we are lucky, we infect our students with ideas and aspirations that can lay dormant for a very long time before becoming fully functional, perhaps for years after they have left our classes, but once functional in a person, those ideas and aspirations can come to infect/affect other people in an increasingly large chain reaction. We also have to believe in the long haul. Teaching writing is an act of faith.

There is an apocryphal story about Jim Berlin that goes like this: “If you really want to make a difference in the world,” he is supposed to have said, “Then get out of teaching. Go man the barricades.” Again, perhaps. But I will end here by suggesting that we will only really change the world by laying down the tools with which we built it and coming to nonviolence. Changing the world begins with our next gesture, however small, to the next person we encounter, with the next thing we say or write, especially as a teacher.



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