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Composition as a Spiritual Discipline

Scott Wagar

I want to claim in this article that it's possible, and indeed even desirable, to see composition and rhetoric as an academic discipline marked by a spiritual *ethos*. I'm not merely talking about the fact that quite a few scholars have written approvingly about spirituality or spiritual practices in the teaching of composition.¹ Instead, my argument is broader: I want to offer a spiritual "lens" on some of the core practices and values of the field *writ large*, including a propensity for self-scrutiny as well as what I call the value of *radical inclusivity*, of continually expanding our purview to welcome what Parker J. Palmer calls the "alien other." In a contemporary societal context where "spirituality," as a concept distinct from "religion," has taken on positive connotations of interdependence, compassion, and self-reflection, a spiritual perspective on the work of composition provides a new way to frame and even reinvigorate the teaching of writing.

A few words are in order first to help set up my argument: about composition's attitudes towards religion and spirituality, and about the contemporary conceptual distinction between the two ideas. Michael-John DePalma (2011) observes that within composition scholarship, religion has often been "treated as an object of interrogation" and suspicion when it might instead be approached with more respect and positivity as a source of meaning and a potential "discursive resource" for students of faith (223). A look at Vander Lei and Kyburz's 2005 edited collection on religion and writing pedagogy reveals a respectful stance toward religious students on the part of its editors and contributors, but the book's title, *Negotiating Religious Faith in the Composition Classroom*, gestures toward DePalma's point and toward the often-fraught status of religious discourses in college writing classes. Teachers have frequently wondered how to "negotiate" their fears that students will inappropriately treat sacred texts tautologically as timeless sources of authority, or invoke religious beliefs in support of intolerant views. By way of contrast, "spirituality" has appeared in composition studies in a more positive light. Teachers have advocated for spiritually-associated practices such as meditation (e.g., Moffett, 1982); for assignments such as spiritual autobiographies (Kirsch, 2009); and for spirituality as a guiding principle in pedagogical activities as seemingly mundane as writing conferences (O'Reilly, 1998). Beth Daniell writes approvingly of how Paolo Freire stirred in his students "...that striving . . . for something beyond ourselves . . . Seeking a connection with God, the universe, the life-force, humankind, one's own higher 'self'; attempting to give life coherence and purpose beyond professional, economic, or personal goals—which is precisely the definition of spirituality" (239). She goes on to note that she does "not mean to imply that this quest is necessarily associated with any formal religion" (239).

1. See, for instance, Moffett, 1982; O'Reilly, 1993, 1998; Berthoff, 1994; Swearingen, 1994; Campbell, 1994; Papoulis, 1996; Kalamaras, 1996; Fleckenstein, 1997; Foehr and Schiller, 1997; Briggs, Schunter and Melvin, 2000; McCurrie, 2003; Kirsch, 2009. Not a few articles on spirituality have appeared in the pages of this very journal.

What makes possible this contrast between disciplinary views of “religion” and “spirituality” is, I argue, the universalistic flavor that “spirituality” has taken on in contemporary public discourse. As religion scholar Robert C. Fuller notes, in the 20th century the term “religious” came to be associated with formal membership in religious institutions and belief in institutional creeds, while “spiritual” came to refer to “the private realm of thought and experience” (5). Spirituality eventually became construed as “a universal human capacity for transcendence” that need not entail religious membership or belief in a deity (Bregman 8). Much commentary has been devoted to the “spiritual but not religious” or “SBNR” phenomenon (e.g., Mercadante, 2014; Smith and Snell, 2009; Fuller, 2001), and indeed it’s now even comprehensible for avowed atheists to publicly argue in favor of spirituality (e.g., Harris, 2014; de Botton, 2012; Comte-Sponville, 2008). Scholars have shown, however, that in practice “spirituality” continues to correlate and overlap with “religion” in the lived experiences of those who profess spiritual identities (Ammerman, 2014; Bass, 2012), and Diana Butler Bass observes that “spiritual *and* religious” has become a widely embraced self-descriptor for Americans.

In any case, as sociologist Nancy Ammerman affirms, “[s]pirituality talk has clearly entered the national vocabulary [in the United States]” (23). Although definitions of spirituality vary, a common connotation is illustrated in a brief remark by *Atlantic* writer James Fallows, in the context of an early-2011 media debate about whether incendiary political language had helped motivate a shooter who wounded U.S Representative Gabrielle Giffords and left six others dead. *The Atlantic* solicited online suggestions from readers for promoting a more civil discourse; when characterizing these reader comments during an appearance on National Public Radio’s *The Diane Rehm Show*, Fallows used the word “spiritual” to describe themes of “capacity for self-doubt” and “recognizing . . . the humanity in the other side” that emerged in the suggestions (“Encouraging”). Neither the host of the program nor the other panelists remarked on Fallows’ choice of descriptor, suggesting that “spiritual” has not only become widely acceptable but has even taken on ethical associations of humility and empathy, with implications for our speech and behavior toward others.

It’s in this spirit (so to speak) that my argument in this article should be understood. While I’m in strong agreement with views such as DePalma’s which suggest we need to find ways to respect religious students’ identities, my concern here is not so much with religion as with this contemporary “spiritual moment” and its implications for composition studies. Spirituality’s current status as holistic, inclusive, and ethical offers a framework through which we might usefully understand our work as writing teachers and scholars.

Composition as Spiritual

The “secrets” of good teaching are the same as the secrets of good living: seeing one’s self without blinking, offering hospitality to the alien other, having compassion for suffering, speaking truth to power, being present and being real.

Parker J. Palmer, Foreword to Mary Rose O’Reilly’s *Radical Presence* (13)

To my mind, Tenzin Gyatso (His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama), and Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh have been two of the best contemporary articulators

of a spirituality compatible with, but not requiring, formal religious or metaphysical beliefs of any kind.² (Within English/composition studies, Thich Nhat Hanh has also been cited as a significant influence by bell hooks as well as Mary Rose O'Reilly.) As the Dalai Lama writes in his 2012 *Beyond Religion: Ethics for a Whole World*, "For all its benefits . . . in bringing people together, giving guidance and solace, and offering a vision of the good life which people can strive to emulate—I do not think that religion is indispensable to the spiritual life" (16). The Dalai Lama suggests that spirituality has two levels, the most fundamental of which is "basic spiritual well-being—by which I mean inner mental and emotional strength and balance"; this fundamental level "does not depend on religion but comes from our innate human nature as beings with a natural disposition toward compassion, kindness, and caring for others" (17). Using a simple metaphor of water and tea, the Dalai Lama writes that this first level of spirituality is the necessary one (water); tea—here compared with formal religion, the second level of spirituality—can be made in many different ways, but always has water as its base. The water can exist without the tea, but not vice versa. For the Dalai Lama, the first spiritual level, but not the second, is necessary for a wide-ranging ethics.

And in many ways it's really ethics that I'm talking about here. Thich Nhat Hanh puts the matter succinctly in 2012's *Good Citizens: Creating Enlightened Society*: "There is no barrier dividing the ethical and the spiritual—they are one" (117). For Nhat Hanh, an ethical spirituality is not abstract but pragmatic: "It's so important that whenever we reflect on the subject of a global ethic, we always do so in terms of the practice. Our basic practice is the practice of generating the energy of mindfulness, concentration, and insight. Insight will bring compassion, love, harmony, and peace" (97). In other words, subjective practices of self-reflection are part and parcel of a more ethical way of being in the world. Here is a key paragraph from the Dalai Lama, words well in accord with Nhat Hanh's:

I believe that an inclusive approach to secular ethics, one with the potential to be universally accepted, requires recognition of only two basic principles . . . The first principle is the recognition of our *shared humanity* and our shared aspiration to happiness and the avoidance of suffering; the second is the understanding of *interdependence* as a key feature of human reality, including our biological reality as social animals. From these two principles we can learn to appreciate the inextricable connection between our own well-being and that of others, and we can develop a genuine concern for others' welfare. Together, I believe, they constitute an adequate basis for establishing ethical awareness and the cultivation of inner values. It is through such values that we gain a sense of connection with others, and it is by moving beyond narrow self-interest that we find meaning, purpose, and satisfaction in life. (19, italics in original)

So, vis-à-vis composition, in making my argument here I could, instead of using "spiritual," say that the field has an *ethical ethos*. And indeed some of my readers might prefer that alternative. However, I have particular reasons to argue instead for a *spiritual ethos* of the discipline, not the least of which are the explicit concerns for compassion

2. I'm not the only one to find the work of the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh significant: they were listed respectively as the number one and two "Most Spiritually Influential Living People" for 2013 on a list published in *Mind Body Spirit* magazine by the prominent "esoterica" book shop Watkins of London ("Watkins' Spiritual 100 List").

and interdependence shared by the spiritually-informed ethics of the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh.³

In making my argument, I turn to Joseph Harris's 1997 *A Teaching Subject: Composition Since 1966* because of *A Teaching Subject's* influence as one of the prominent histories of the field—but also exactly because Harris's work has so little to say explicitly about spirituality.⁴ That is, I think that a work with little self-evident connection to spirituality is especially useful for demonstrating the ways in which spirituality has been implicit in composition's history. I realize that Harris himself might resist a reading such as mine. However, I don't actually think "reading" is the proper term here, because I'm not attempting to show a spiritual subtext in Harris's own work, but rather to point more toward currents in composition that can be productively understood through a spiritual lens.

Growth, Voice, and Expression: The Personal and the Social

Notably, the very first chapter of Harris's history of the discipline is centered on *growth*. Harris uses the 1966 Dartmouth Seminar as a focal point for discussing what was for many teachers "a kind of Copernican shift from a view of English as something you *learn about* to a sense of it as something you *do*" (1, italics in original); Dartmouth becomes known as the point when composition became the "teaching subject" of Harris's title. In particular, he cites theorists such as James Moffett who advocated a "growth model" focusing on authenticity in student writing rather than on, say, mastering genre conventions of literature. Harris critiques what seems to him the excessively individualistic focus of Moffett et al., believing that "[t]he question of where this [valorized] sense of self came from in the first place [i.e., culture, society, institutions, etc.] was not seriously addressed" (16). But Harris also suggests that "it needs to be said that in many ways the aims of the growth theorists were radical ones" in their challenge to elitist, "top-down" views of English teaching as well as in their suggestion that "looking closely at the talk and writing of students" constituted "serious work in English" (17). In focusing on Moffett as a key figure and growth as a key concept, Harris, in my view, demonstrates that some sense of spirituality was inherent in the making of composition—for Moffett, as Harris points out in his next chapter ("Voice"), was by the 1980s moving even further in the direction of focusing on inward aspects of composition, "arguing for writing as a form of 'discursive meditation' much like the spiritual exercises of Loyola and the practices of Zen and yoga" (30).

In Harris's "Voice" chapter, Peter Elbow is, unsurprisingly, another key figure under examination. I dwell for a moment here on Harris's critique of Elbow because Harris

3. It seems important to acknowledge here that the spirituality I'm advocating isn't free-floating or ahistorical; it is most certainly influenced by Buddhist perspectives in particular. Nhat Hanh suggests that a "Buddhist contribution to global ethics . . . is a practice that can be accepted by everyone, regardless of whether or not you believe in a god" (*Good Citizens* 2), and while I agree, and would argue that this spirituality requires no assent to metaphysical propositions, I imagine that Nhat Hanh would concede (if he agreed to a label at all) that he is spiritual *and* religious.

4. Harris released a new edition of *A Teaching Subject* in 2011, mostly unaltered except for new chapter postscripts and a new "coda." My references here are to the original 1997 version of the text unless otherwise noted.

raises complaints of a sort that will be familiar to readers of David Bartholomae's early-1990s dialogue with Elbow, complaints that are now part of the history of composition studies.⁵ Harris contrasts Elbow's model of writing and writing instruction with Moffett's, noting that Elbow's work grew out of a group-therapy context instead of Moffett's meditative background, but Harris suggests that both teachers were part of a movement whereby "[w]riting . . . begins to be valued more as a form of self-discovery or self-expression than as a way of communicating with others" (29). Respectful of the way Elbow is "given to working through the ambiguities and tensions in his valuing of voice," Harris nevertheless believes that Elbow's approach "uses the social to foster the personal" even though Elbow claims that the inverse is at least as true (31). And so Harris, who admits to a political edge in his own vision of teaching writing, ultimately finds approaches such as Elbow's wanting in fostering a sense of the social in students (25).

But this is not the only way to understand voice. The proudly Elbownian Mary Rose O'Reilley (writing prior to Harris) flatly argues in *The Peaceable Classroom* that "...finding voice—let's be clear—is a political act. It defines a moment of presence, of being awake; and it involves not only self-understanding, but the ability to transmit that self-understanding to others. Learning to write so that you will be read, therefore, vitalizes both the self and the community" (58).

Just a couple of pages later comes this parallel claim which gives the argument an explicitly spiritual twist: "Finding voice is a spiritual event. In many religious traditions, it is the reward of a vision quest. Think of Isaiah . . . *given words*. And spiritual events change the face of community. A prophet, or prophetic writer, calls us to a higher standard of what we could be. That's simply a prophet's job description (62).⁶

Clearly, O'Reilley is concerned with the relationship between the individual and society. Harris acknowledges the same about Elbow, yet remains unconvinced that Elbow's approach ultimately has enough political potential, or perhaps even enough of a genuine base level of political concern. But O'Reilley's words come in the context of an explicitly political program: *The Peaceable Classroom* is about O'Reilley's attempts to foster nonviolence, "to teach English so that people stop killing each other," as she quotes the challenge (from one of her graduate professors during the Vietnam era) that inspired her career-long quest as a teacher. Contrasting her own approach with "[f]ormal peace [studies] curricula," O'Reilley suggests that "Perhaps what I am encouraging instead is Inner Peace Studies, which asks Who am I? Am I at peace with who I am? Who are these other people? What is the nature of community? What do they believe, and why? Is it possible for us to work together" (37)?

O'Reilley, then, makes a direct link between expressivism, spirituality, and the social/political. From this spiritual viewpoint, time spent in the wilderness of personally-focused writing has the potential to pay dividends to the whole community in the form of voice-full, lively, and even prophetic language.

5. I don't agree with these complaints, but they are important to recognize insofar as they are held by colleagues I respect and as they are concerned with fundamental questions of how we might best teach our students.

6. A tall order, *prophet*, but don't even the most social-epistemic of radical pedagogues hope their students will learn to make strong arguments for needed change in their communities?

Continuation

O'Reilley and Harris differ on another important part of composition's history. Harris follows his examinations of growth and voice with a critique of the idea of *process*, an idea which in his view gained legitimacy for "composition as a research field" in the 1970s, especially via cognitive-studies approaches (55). But for Harris, "the proposition that writing is a process" is "a claim that is true, banal, and of a real if limited use" since in his view the process approach can and should be taught rather quickly, leaving more room for content-based, dialogical revision (57). However, O'Reilley, for her part, conflates the process approach with the search for voice, which in her view also crucially includes freewriting and small-group work (*Peaceable* 38-39). For O'Reilley, "what we now think of as a process model for teaching writing" begins with Elbow and Macrorie rather than Janet Emig or Linda Flower (38-39). So O'Reilley distinguishes between the process *model* and the process *theory* that's largely the focus of Harris's process chapter, and her preferred version of process is far from "banal" and "of limited use" but instead underlies much of her attempt at a peaceable classroom. For example, she claims that the writing group "forces us to stake out the terrain between our own and other people's view of reality; hence, it reinforces both personal identity and the sense of relationship to a community" (33). In freewriting, meanwhile, "we begin to listen to voices inside. They may surprise us. They may surprise the world, which badly needs new ideas" (44). Again here is the idea that writers' attention, first turned inward, must always be brought outward. So for Harris "process" may indeed be banal, but insofar as a vision of process like O'Reilley's *can* point toward specific classroom practices connecting the inner and outer, process is another foundation of composition with spiritual overtones.

Yet there is an additional way in which "process" takes on a spiritual bent. In Nhat Hanh's spirituality, *continuation* is a key concept. For instance, he suggests that instead of saying "Happy Birthday," we instead wish each other "Happy Continuation Day." This passage from *Good Citizens* gives some idea of his reasoning:

Your birth is not your beginning. It's only your continuation, because you were there before your birth, in other forms. For example, this [paper] page that you are reading existed first in many other forms. It didn't come from nothing, because from nothing you can't become something. Looking into the sheet of paper, we see the forest, the trees, the cloud, the rain, and the soil that nourishes the trees. We can see the saw that cut the tree down, the lumberjack, and the paper mill. The sheet of paper has not come from nothing. Its manifestation as a sheet of paper is only a new manifestation, not a birth. (27)

Nhat Hanh suggests that this view has a number of implications, among them (merely!) the possibility of lessening one's own dissatisfaction and suffering at the vicissitudes of life and death, as well as ethical implications that stem from the ultimate interconnection—or *interbeing*, as Nhat Hanh dubs it—of seemingly disparate elements of reality. As I'll argue, *interbeing* is an idea with close parallels to notions we already hold dear in postmodern academia. But for the moment I want to dwell on the notion of continuation as it relates to process. Despite the seeming banality of process for Harris, his choice to build one of his five main chapters around the concept testifies to its pervasiveness in the field. From a spiritual perspective, it's significant that compositionists are steeped in the idea of writing as process—as (in the 1982 words of Maxine Hair-

ston) “messy, recursive, convoluted, and uneven” (448). To that list we might now add “chronotopically laminated,” a descriptor for the complex mixture of elements—including time—that influence writing (Prior and Shipka, 2003, n. pag.). Compositionists see writing as potentially ever-unfinished, always revisable, revisitable, remixable; the field continually finds new ways to talk about its mutability. In some sense, then, one of our key concerns as compositionists is flux. It’s therefore possible to see composition studies as aligned with a spiritual view of reality that insists on the importance of change, flow, continuation, and renewal.

Community and Radical Inclusivity

I’ve shown that, contrary to Harris’s view, the early concerns of composition—authenticity, voice, cognitive theories of writing process—in fact have significant social aspects. But Harris himself begins to make such connections when he turns to examine Mina Shaughnessy’s 1977 *Errors and Expectations*, a text seen by Harris as a kind of fulcrum point in a move toward social concerns in composition studies. Taking Shaughnessy’s book to task for what he believes is its overwhelming focus on teaching grammar, Harris nevertheless titles one of his chapters “Error” because he finds real importance in the way Shaughnessy “argued for a new kind of student” (79), the basic writer, whose problems were seen by Shaughnessy as ones of inexperience rather than inadequacy. As Harris observes when discussing what he perceives as her strengths, “[Shaughnessy’s] message was consistently one of *inclusion*” (80, italics in original). Debates over linguistic correctness, Harris concludes, are intimately tied to hopes and fears related to language and social mobility; underlying these debates are arguments about who is to be included and who—if anyone—is to be left out. After looking at Shaughnessy, Harris’s history takes up the era of composition that John Trimbur called the “social turn,” examining the idea of *community* (as seen through the emergence in the 1980s of concepts such as the discourse community) and then concluding with a chapter on *contact and negotiation*, focusing less on intra-community writing and more on the sometimes messy ways in which different discourses, cultures, and identities intersect in the writing classroom (Trimbur 109).

The trends toward social awareness that Harris highlights are indicative of a move in composition toward what I call *radical inclusivity*, a move that continues to this day. Shaughnessy’s open-admissions students, “for the most part blacks and Hispanics” (Harris 78), may have been among the first groups to which composition extended its efforts and sympathies, but they were hardly the last. Clearly, as Harris notes, “gender, race, and class” have now long since become familiar identity markers discussed in composition, with members of marginalized groups welcomed and even championed (124). To these markers can be added sexual orientation, disability, nationality, and others. And of course there is the work calling for attention to two-year colleges, to the status and working conditions of contingent faculty, to extra-curricular writing, to the “world Englishes” movement, to the call for greater attention to affect and emotion. Further, as I noted earlier when discussing DePalma’s work on religion, the move toward inclusion isn’t simply toward obviously-marginalized or minority students or groups. For instance, Christian students in our classrooms may be members of a socially-dominant religious group, but compositionists have

begun to realize that these students too can be marginalized to the extent that religion is treated as incompatible with academic skepticism and inquiry.

Some might, quite reasonably, see these moves toward inclusion through *democratic* or *dialogic* frameworks. Andrea Lunsford, for one, has suggested—writing in 1990, in the middle of the “social turn” era—that two defining characteristics of composition are “We are dialogic, multi-voiced, heteroglossic...” and “We are radically democratic...” (76). She also noted that composition had “resist[ed] the temptation” to be, like other humanistic disciplines, “defined by what we exclude” (76). But I suggest a spiritual framework for viewing our inclusiveness, what we are “at our best,” to quote Lunsford’s introduction to her list of disciplinary characteristics. For one reason, I believe that a spiritual viewpoint attends explicitly to compassion in a way I’m not sure is inherent in democratic or dialogic perspectives. To be sure, those perspectives aren’t *uncompassionate* by any means. They involve bringing in as many voices as possible and putting those voices in dynamic play; they imply respect, tolerance, and the positive value of a good rhetorical wrangle. But they aren’t explicitly motivated by compassion; they lack a certain emotional element; they welcome the other’s voice but perhaps remain silent on the inherent value of the other’s being. And I think part of what we do in composition is not just extending inclusivity and promoting dialogue, but in fact openly extending compassion.⁷ We know the second and third secrets for good teaching and good living from Parker J. Palmer’s list in my epigraph above: “offering hospitality to the alien other” and “having compassion for suffering” (O’Reilly 13)

Another reason I’m partial to “spiritual” as a descriptor for composition’s work is that the field appears to be moving beyond a strict focus on the human. Scot Barnett, in a 2010 review article, suggests that our field is perhaps in the midst of a “material” or “posthuman” turn focusing on “[a]mong a host of others . . . technology, the body, space and place, and the natural world” (“Toward,” n. pag.).⁸ As Barnett puts it, “Not separate or merely additional constituents in rhetorical situations, these materialities and their intertwinings constitute our reality—are part of the very is-ness of that reality—in ways that fundamentally shape our very senses of what writing means and how we practice and teach writing in the world today.”

In other words, our inclusiveness is becoming so radical as to include *everything*, the whole of reality itself.⁹ A spiritual perspective like Nhat Hanh’s interbeing, in which all things ultimately bear some relationship to each other, can be one framework for

7. To be clear, I am not arguing that composition has *achieved* full inclusion by any means, but rather I am noting an undeniable *impulse* marking the discipline.

8. Among the “host of others” are non-human animals (e.g., Hawhee, “Toward,” 2011; Kennedy, *Comparative Rhetoric*, 1997), a group of beings to which, in my view, we certainly owe more ethical consideration; adopting an explicitly spiritual viewpoint, in which we inter-are with the non-human world as surely as with the human, might help move us toward such consideration. Certainly, if we are going to extend our rhetorical viewpoint to inanimate objects, we ought to also consider animate, sentient beings that we ask to suffer and die for our pleasure.

9. Object-oriented ontology (or OOO), with which Barnett suggests an affinity, is especially interested in the *-thing* aspect of this concept. See, for example, Ian Bogost’s *Alien Phenomenonology, or What It’s Like to Be a Thing* (2011). Since Bogost invokes the term “alien,” I should probably be clear that I’m not necessarily suggesting a correspondence between OOO and Palmer’s

understanding what's happening as we extend our interest and our welcome more and more widely.

Reflection and the Postmodern

In addition to reaching further and further outward, composition has also been inclined to intense self-scrutiny, to looking inward, as it were. Harris's text is just one example of many attempts to reexamine, redefine, and rearticulate the field itself—we can also think of Berlin's *Rhetoric and Reality*, Susan Miller's *Textual Carnivals*, Hawk's *A Counter-History of Composition*, Palmer's *Remixing Composition*, and Faigley's *Fragments of Rationality*, to name just a few of the book-length treatments of the subject. So, too, do we teach the importance of reflection to students, regularly asking them to compose "writer's memos" on their own work—not to mention assignments that are heavily reflective from the outset, e.g., the literacy narrative, or the analysis of a rhetorical moment in one's own life. Composition, in its literature and its practice, is certainly inclined toward the "meta." Here then is another way that composition can be considered spiritual since spirituality, according to Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama, must include a practice of intensive inner focus and contemplation, of observing one's own patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving—and as Palmer puts it, of "seeing one's self without blinking." As a field, we are consistently engaged in asking who we are and how we might be better.

There has also been an "institutional turn" in composition, a call for reflective and often critical attention to the particular, local contexts that shape writing instruction.¹⁰ Harris too contributes to this turn in a new postscript to the "Community" chapter in the 2011 version of *A Teaching Subject*, suggesting a "programmatic" approach to dealing with the messy business of improving teaching and learning conditions within individual writing programs; he believes that such an approach means "asking how, at a particular school and a particular time, you can best support the work of writing students and their teachers" (*New Edition* 160). The institutional turn, I think, is simultaneously part of our move toward inclusivity (i.e., still another set of answers to the question, "Which rhetors, contexts, eras, and aspects of writing/writing instruction have we not yet properly examined?") and a self-reminder of one of our own mantras, "Context matters."

The parallel with spirituality here is that spirituality is at once oriented toward ultimate connection (interbeing) and experienced by particular individuals, each one an "institution" unto herself. What I mean is that individuals are, like institutions, composites; each of us has characteristics and patterns of functioning, but our "selves" are ultimately relational as well as unstable, built of constantly shifting non-self elements. This statement will probably be uncontroversial to most compositionists, steeped as we are in postmodern visions of relativity, wrangle, performance, and constructedness. For

spiritually-inclined nod toward the "alien other" – though OOO theorists might find it interesting to consider where OOO and spirituality do or do not intersect.

10. See, for example, Porter et al., "Institutional Critique," 2000; Tassoni and Lewiecki-Wilson, "Not Just Anywhere, Anywhen," 2005; Grego and Thompson, *Teaching/Writing in Thirdspaces*, 2008; Selber, "Institutional Dimensions of Academic Computing," 2009; LaFrance and Nicolas, "Institutional Ethnography," 2012.

instance, Harris, citing a seemingly-before-its-time (1952) writing assignment by Theodore Baird, approvingly notes that “[t]he self is here imagined not as an essence but as a set of perspectives, as something that can only be seen in relation to something else” (Harris, 1997, 36). But Nhat Hanh’s interbeing gives us another way to understand this relationality. The passage I cited earlier about the “continuation” of a sheet of paper is also illustrative of interbeing, a concept highlighting a kind of ultimate interwovenness, in which any given “thing”—say, a cell phone—is revealed, upon reflection, to be linked to myriad “non-thing” elements. The phone would not exist without the various rare-earth minerals that make its functioning possible; or without the rain that helped grow the food that nourished the miners of those minerals; or without the designers of the phone’s operating system. And that system could not exist without the computer language created and refined by many previous programmers. This list of interwoven elements could go on and on.

For Nhat Hanh, interbeing is thoroughgoing, extending to physical as well as mental and social phenomena; things, people, and ideas inter-are. As I’ve noted, academic postmodernity has made it easy for us to believe along the same lines about the intellectual self and about ostensibly autonomous texts. We can point to a particular “book” and discuss it for practical purposes as an isolated object, but the book is, from a certain perspective, composed entirely of “non-book” elements. So, too, for larger units of discourse—“composition and rhetoric,” for instance—and rhetorical entities such as “America.” Nhat Hanh believes that to fully apprehend the concept of interbeing requires a process of “looking deeply” (*Be Free* 36); in a kind of paradox, it is incumbent upon individuals to engage in intensive reflection which can reveal the truth of interbeing, of how individuality is in some sense an illusion. Thus, Nhat Hanh’s interbeing is resonant not only with the radical inclusivity I’ve mentioned earlier, but with composition’s valuing of both self-scrutiny and constructedness.

A final resonance is appropriate to mention at this point—between spirituality and rhetoric itself. Rhetoric has probably regained prominence in our pedagogies because it is so-well suited to a postmodern sensibility, in which “truths,” such as they are, are local and always shored up by discourse. Paradoxically, though, as Barry Brummett suggests in “Rhetorical Epistemology and Spirituality,” rhetoric can be seen not just as local and contextual but as a kind of epistemological common ground: we all “know because we have been persuaded to know, and whatever ideas we validate as knowledge we validate (in this view) because we have been persuaded to do so” (132). Even if different belief systems seem to conflict, “[r]hetoric is the flux that merges epistemologies. Argument is the secret passage connecting ways of knowing” (132). Rhetoric is seen as a kind of always-in-motion but nevertheless fundamental grounding of how any of us know anything. Rhetoric, Brummett suggests, provides a kind of commensurability underlying seemingly disparate arguments.

In this light, insofar as rhetoric is a practice we all share, it accords well with a spirituality of interbeing.¹¹ Brummett nods in this direction in the concluding section of his

11. Communication scholar H.L. Goodall, in a 1993 essay, suggests provocatively that communication itself might be defined as an expression of spirituality, and especially of a spirituality of interbeing (44). Though Goodall’s discussion is situated within a different disciplinary context and takes a rather different tack than my approach here, I want to acknowledge his work and note a

essay when noting that he has mostly ignored the aspect of spirituality that focuses on “connection and connectedness” (134). “But surely,” he writes, “I have ended up with that dimension of spirituality by dissolving epistemology in rhetoric. For when we live rhetorically, we live in connection with others” (134). Brummett further claims that a good teacher models rhetorical connectedness in the classroom, displaying “both a commitment to what he or she ‘knows’ and an awareness that he or she can ‘know’ differently, should he or she be persuaded to do so” (134). As teachers, we should be simultaneously confident about our knowledge and open to the possibility that some new instance of rhetoric might change that knowledge. We should acknowledge through our practices that we aren’t isolated containers of absolute truth but instead are connected, porous containers of what we have been persuaded—for now, at least—to understand as truth.

Conclusion

Every retelling of composition’s story is, of course, a reframing, a re-seeing. My goal here has been to offer a way to re-see composition through spiritual eyes: to note resonances, parallels, connections, and kinships between composition studies and spirituality. But why? What does an understanding of these connections contribute?

One answer is that connecting composition with spirituality helps place the discipline in further conversation with a thriving social phenomenon. In conjunction with the rise of “spiritual but not religious,” “spiritual *and* religious,” “spiritual atheist,” and other identities, “spirituality” has become for many a preferred term indicating a striving for deep meaning and interconnection. Certainly, as scholar Lucy Bregman points out, some have raised conceptual, ethical, and practical issues with “spirituality” as a blanket term. But I believe, with Bregman, that spirituality as a term and concept *works* for many people in the current historical moment, and I think its familiarity can render it useful for thinking about composition as an evolving field.

So, too, am I happy to admit a degree of (gentle) provocation in this article. Brummett suggests that “spirituality” is a term with “rhetorical wallop,” and I agree (123). I enjoy the thought that my work here might stimulate interest, pondering, agreement, or disagreement, as long as those reactions engage with the content of my claims.

Further, though, and I think quite importantly, spirituality as I’ve outlined it provides another way to view—and to bridge—the supposed expressivist/social-constructionist “divide” in composition studies. A spirituality of interbeing insists that the social and the personal are necessarily (dare I use “always already”?) interwoven, and it is no surprise that Mary Rose O’Reilly, who has written extensively about the influence of Thich Nhat Hanh’s work in her teaching, should be one of the most insightful articulators of how this dynamic plays out in writing. Seeing the supposed dichotomy of the social and personal not as a divide but as a dynamic can help us ask more interesting

couple of similarities. Goodall too compares spirituality with postmodern thought, but he is most interested in proposing spirituality as a “successor” to a fragmented postmodernity, rather than positing some complementarity as I do here (41). He also invokes Thich Nhat Hanh, though only briefly in order to introduce the concept of interbeing. I would like to note, however, Goodall’s intriguing suggestion that we think of ourselves as *interbeings* (44).

questions and find more interesting answers about how this interplay functions in the writing of our students.¹² Indeed, I think writing's ability to mediate between the personal and the social suggests a question (let me be provocative again here, following Goodall's lead as noted above): could not just the field of composition studies but *writing itself* be seen as spiritual? I will leave that larger question to readers, at least for now.

In the end, I emphasize a spiritual view of composition because my preferred understanding of spirituality indicates a worldview inclined toward extending compassion and seeking connection. Composition has already evolved to become, I believe—to borrow a phrase from the popular Buddhist author Jack Kornfield—“a path with heart,” and a spiritual framework could encourage compositionists to continue on that path even as we expand, age, change, and remix ourselves. Seeing composition as spiritual does not, in my view, conflict with the intellectual and democratizing goals of the field but rather provides an ethically-oriented way to undergird and support them. We study writing and the teaching of writing with an underlying sense of deep compassion for and interdependence with our students, their lives, and the work they do.

And ultimately our underlying conception of our motivations matters very much. I use terms like “undergird” and “support” because I believe our frameworks—one might also call them lenses, paradigms, guiding metaphors—help orient and sustain us. We are constrained by many of the externalities—the institutional, economic, and social contexts—of our work as teachers, but we have some freedom in choosing how we will *conceive* of what we do. And perhaps altering our underlying paradigms can better position us to effect positive change on some of those externalities, many of which would be improved by a greater commitment to connection and compassion. Because spirituality, for me, *means* cultivating connection and compassion, I choose a spiritual paradigm for my work.

Such a perspective can be applied to the field as a whole as well as to the small moments of our individual teaching lives. Perhaps some readers will resonate with my titular notion that our work is a “spiritual discipline.” Others, however, may agree with me that compassion and connectedness are important aspects of our field but still reject, for any number of reasons, the language of “spirituality.” More than anything, I hope that my discussion here provides an opportunity for readers to spend some time defining for themselves—whatever the terminology—the underlying belief systems and ethical frameworks that drive their work as teachers and as people. I believe that such reflection, in challenging us to articulate our commitments, may open up new conversations about the motivations for our work in the study and teaching of writing.



12. See also Tara Roeder and Roseanne Gatto's 2015 edited collection *Critical Expressivism: Theory and Practice in the Composition Classroom* for a contemporary re-examining of this issue. My essay in that volume addresses some similar themes to ones I explore here, but in the context of a look at composition and nonviolence.

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