

June 2013

In the Name of the Spirit

Lynn Briggs

Eastern Washington University, lbriggs@ewu.edu

Fred Schunter

Eastern Washington University, writersctr@ewu.edu

Ray Melvin

Eastern Washington University, writersctr@ewu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl>

 Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Liberal Studies Commons](#), and the [Other Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Briggs, Lynn; Schunter, Fred; and Melvin, Ray (2013) "In the Name of the Spirit," *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*: Vol. 6 , Article 4.

<https://doi.org/10.7290/jaepl6i70g>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl/vol6/iss1/4>

This article is brought to you freely and openly by Volunteer, Open-access, Library-hosted Journals (VOL Journals), published in partnership with The University of Tennessee (UT) University Libraries. This article has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning by an authorized editor. For more information, please visit <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl>.

In the Name of the Spirit

Cover Page Footnote

Lynn Briggs is an Associate Professor of English, director of the Writers' Center and graduate program in Rhetoric and Composition at Eastern Washington University. Fred Schunter is finishing his MA in TESOL at Eastern Washington University while racing motorcycles professionally. Ray Melvin is a Responder at the Writers' Center, a graduate of Eastern Washington University's MFA program, a poet and popular local musician.

In the Name of the Spirit

Lynn Briggs, Fred Schunter, and Ray Melvin

Listening is our work at the Writers' Center, and, though it may seem a passive sort of vocation, the act Mary Rose O'Reilley calls "listen[ing]someone into existence" (21) can be stressful and tiring. The heavy accents and tangled syntax of the many international students who use the center can make listening to their papers even more demanding. Incredible focus is required, total attention a must. Some Responders have chosen to make work in the center their primary employment, and they work many hours each week, so they see student after student for 50 minutes each. It is in this context that Fred met Yin at 6:00 on a winter evening.¹ Yin was fifth in a series of international students that day; she was a post-baccalaureate student getting some prerequisites finished so that she could enter the MBA program. She was the most advanced student of the day, but by that time it hardly mattered. Fred was so exhausted he couldn't muster the energy to go downstairs and get coffee. In this state of mind, wondering how he would ever get through the session, Fred began listening to Yin.

Expecting an essay, he was surprised when Yin pulled out what appeared to be a multi-page business document. In one of her business classes, Yin was assigned to a 3-student group charged with developing a marketing plan for a small business of their choice. The other two members of the group were young men who had grown up together in the apple orchards of southern Washington. Yin dutifully came to the Writers' Center to "clean up" the paper at the request of the other group members. As Yin read through the first page, she sighed and hesitated as if she lacked confidence in the quality of the concepts within the proposal. She noticeably checked her frustration as she started to make a statement critiquing the paper, then backing off. Fred, whose undergraduate degree was in business and who had spent a decade in the business world before returning to academe, began to concentrate on the proposal from a business standpoint and to question its viability. Yin replied to his questions and finally allowed some of her frustration to surface. Her dissatisfaction with the proposal was apparent. Yet, Yin confided, as a female international student in a group with American

Lynn Briggs is an Associate Professor of English, director of the Writers' Center and graduate program in Rhetoric and Composition at Eastern Washington University.

Fred Schunter is finishing his MA in TESOL at Eastern Washington University while racing motorcycles professionally.

Ray Melvin is a Responder at the Writers' Center, a graduate of Eastern Washington University's MFA program, a poet and popular local musician.

¹ All stories are true and are taken from Responder anecdotes shared at meetings. Whenever we have permission, we use real names of those involved; otherwise, we have provided pseudonyms.

men who were lifelong friends, it was her job to be subordinate and to help make their ideas successful.

As Yin continued to read, Fred began to direct the session toward an examination of her thoughts concerning the assignment. At his prodding, she confidently critiqued her partners' ideas and then shared her version of a successful marketing plan. Fred was impressed with her business knowledge and ability to take classroom learning and apply it to the consumer market of an economy with which she was not familiar. With encouragement, Yin continued to share the ideas that she had bottled up. She had mountains of notes spread all over the table, she was talking rapidly, and she sat straight in the chair. She looked and sounded like a different person from the one who sat hunched and mumbling at the beginning of the session. As Yin smiled and said "Thank you for understanding," Fred noticed that three hours had passed since the discussion began. It seems that Yin was not the only one energized by the session.

Yin's transformation could easily be cast as "political" by composition scholars. After all, she went from feeling oppressed by dominating systems which placed her, no matter her intellect and because of her gender, in a subordinate position, to feeling confident enough in her knowledge to engage a teacher-figure as an equal and to keep him working overtime. But taking a political view of this dynamic represents some as heroes and some as villains. Asian culture and the good old boys from the orchards become the oppressors, and Yin, through Fred's liberatory pedagogy, becomes a hero, an example to other women who have been deprived of their voices.

However, we have chosen to view Yin's transformation as "spiritual" rather than only "political" because we believe a broader analysis can be more generative. We see Yin's (and Fred's) experience as spiritual because she became able to reintegrate elements of her "self," because she was able to connect with another and receive "understanding," and because, after her session, we think her universe temporarily made more sense although it wasn't necessarily easier to live in. After this session in which Yin recognized that she had much to offer as a student, writer, and thinker, she had some difficult decisions to make with regard to her relationship with her group members, but she also recognized her ability to decide.

The spiritual pursuit has always responded to the question, "What is the meaning of life" (Frankl 153). Rarely, though, does the question come in such a large frame. Usually, people ask that question in smaller ways. Writers like Yin ask it in the center. They ask, "What is the meaning of this frustrating assignment" or "What is the meaning of this incomprehensible course" or "What is the meaning of this disappointing grade." By helping writers make sense of the particular pain their literacy practices evoke, we can help them momentarily make sense of life and help them temporarily hypothesize about its meaning.

Though we will assert in this essay that our goals in the center haven't always been this cosmic, even at its most microcosmic our center has focused on writers and their relationship to the various communities in which they live instead of on the writers' texts alone. These goals have been validated by department chairs, deans, and the vice-provost, to whom the tenured center director reports. The goals engage Writers' Center professional Responders (most of whom

have graduate coursework, if not degrees) in work designed to help writers understand their roles in various academic discourse communities, increase their participation in those communities, and develop self-assessment strategies regarding their participation. These reflective and community-based goals have broadened to include larger goals, such as helping writers to see in their writing processes a glimpse of a meaning of life. Working from the perspective that a Writers' Center session may help participants see a bright flash of life's meaning has led us to add spiritual elements to our center goals. Naming events "spiritual" is essential to seeing them as such, and seeing them as such offers advantages. It helps connect learning/education/pedagogy with the larger pursuit of "the meaning of life."

This integration of the pursuit of the meaning of life in education is a theme of Jane Tompkins's *A Life in School*. Tompkins writes of school's lack of integration with students' lives: "our educational system does not focus on the inner lives of students or help them to acquire the self-understanding that is the basis of a satisfying life" (xii). Rather, she hopes for a system that has "a commitment to the sacredness of life" (xiii) through methods that "would never fail to take into account that students and teachers have bodies that are mortal, hearts that can be broken, and spirits that need to be fed" (xiii). We do not claim that the only path to an epiphany like Yin's is by naming an experience "spiritual," but rather that naming Yin's experience as "spiritual" can serve as a reminder of how Fred and Yin connected in a way that transcended the usual academic interaction.

Our center sees many students whose hearts have been broken by academic life. We are located at a regional comprehensive university where most students are the first generation at college, where many are from rural areas or are place-bound, where over two-thirds qualify for and receive financial aid for the \$900.00 per quarter tuition fee. Our students are fighting a valiant fight, mostly, they say, for better economic conditions, but sometimes, they'll admit, for the ineffable piece that is missing from their lives. In the Writers' Center, they often wish that we would just edit or tell them what to do; they hope for directions like "make your thesis stronger like this" or "add more support to these two paragraphs." In the rare event that we do give such directive advice, we embed it in a discussion of audience and purpose, hoping, at least, to help writers become more independent by introducing them to heuristics they can use to make decisions on their own, hoping, at most, to help them make more sense of life. And, in about 10 to 20% of the sessions we have, we think we achieve the greater goal.

Usually, the achievement of the greater goal begins with an "aha" of rhetorical proportions. The epiphanies we see are of various kinds, sometimes resulting in the solution to a problem, but more often raising additional questions. For example, Terry's "aha" came when she realized that the rebuffs she had received on the drafts of her thesis were occurring not because she didn't have anything of use to say (a fate which she deeply feared and which kept her from writing for a long time), but because her narrative approach was challenging the values of the academy. Terry, a former center Responder, had a session with both Ray and Gail in which she bemoaned the fact that her adviser didn't think that she should use narrative as the dominant discourse form in her thesis. Gail's response was that though she understood the thesis expectations (Gail also works in the Graduate

Studies Office), the manner in which Terry had written “worked for [Gail].” After Terry had heard both Gail’s and Ray’s expressions of appreciation of the chapter draft, she was then able to hear Ray’s question “What do you risk when you write it like this?” As Terry started to answer, Ray saw disappointment cloud her face. His question made her realize that it was she who had to make a difficult choice about her thesis, and that the choice was not just between being a compliant or a resistant student, between using a traditional or a non-traditional style, but it was also tangled in decisions and understandings about her life in academe and in her field.

Terry’s “aha” was her realization that the dilemma wasn’t nearly as contained or containable as whether to use narrative. Instead, she became aware of the “hidden wholeness” of her plight (Palmer 27). She became aware of how her rhetorical decisions tied her to (or distanced her from) intellectual and ethical traditions. Though Terry did not particularly like what she learned, her epiphany was one in which she made more universal sense of her situation. After her epiphany, Terry realized that her battle wasn’t with her adviser, but within herself. She would have to decide whether to tow the line or make waves. Terry’s situation, like Yin’s, might normally be analyzed largely in political terms. Terry was resisting the hegemony of the patriarchy of the academy in her narrative format. However, we have come to believe that if we only look at such situations through the political lens we can miss the redemptive dimension of a troubling realization.

We see Yin’s and Terry’s “aha” and the “ahas” of many others as both political and spiritual events. “Simply, spiritual understandings [. . .] make life meaningful. Spiritual experiences are those experiences that connect [people] to themselves, to others, and to larger forces in the universe” (Briggs 88). Regina Foehr and Susan Schiller expand upon what it is like to discover spiritual meaning, saying “We find it [spiritual understanding] paradoxical – noncognitive but deeply known, inexplicable yet deeply felt, inexpressible in language yet familiar and trusted. It surprises us, it assures us, it transforms us; it makes us want to know more” (ix). Like Foehr and Schiller, who see spirituality as something not only available but also present in everyday life, Jay Conger describes “spirituality” as “very much of this world” (9). He goes on to say that “For many of us it is grounded in living feelings. Presumably, most of us have access to such feelings, though quite probably not on command” (9).

Those of us who have tried to use the term “spirit” to describe the goals or results of academic work hardly need reminding of resistance to the term and idea of spirituality in the university. Even our more open-minded colleagues can have trouble with the idea – one such colleague said to us “I just can’t get past the word – it’s contrary to the premise of the university – we’re about rationality here.” Joseph Holland agrees with this assessment, saying that “Perhaps we sometimes resist the Spirit precisely because we live so much in the ethos of professionalism, because we are so oriented to professionalized rational control – in other words, our control” (50). To O’Reilly, such resistance is not futile, but healthy:

We may, of course, resist the passions of spirit. Indeed, I think that

resistance is itself a spiritual process, a way of pacing ourselves so that growth and healing occur in all the structures of the human organism concurrently. It is natural to resist, and it is natural at a certain point to stop resisting [. . .]. (5)

And, certainly, two years ago we would have resisted the notion that any part of our work in the Writers' Center should involve spiritual connections/issues/growth for writers and staff. Like many people, we would have conflated notions of spirituality with those of religion – which is treacherous political territory. But Matthew Fox challenges the connection between spirituality and religion, saying “what does Spirit have to do with separation of church and state when it is seldom a part of either[. . .]. Those who imagine that Spirit is somehow owned by the churches have probably not been to church lately” (172).

Two years ago, we would have said that our Writers' Center work was about helping writers make as much written sense as possible within the confines of the discourse situation. We would have described the center as a place where students could explore, without risk, what they really wanted to say, and would be helped to see any differences between what they wanted to say and what they were allowed to say in a particular corner of the academic discourse community. We might have even described experiences like Yin's or Terry's in which writers had epiphanies about their ideas or about their position in the university discourse community, but we wouldn't have claimed their exclamations of “I get it!” as spiritual. But then Ray brought us a chapter from Viktor Frankl's final work, *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, and we read and discussed it in a center staff meeting. In this chapter, Frankl argues that his fellow psychiatrists should include spirituality in psychiatry. Frankl's definitions of how meaning is made in life, “creating a work; [. . .] encountering someone [. . .] changing ourselves”(142) paralleled our work in the center, in which writers bring works they have created to encounters with Responders in order to change themselves as writers.

After reading Frankl's chapter we began to tell each other stories about response sessions in which writers exuded palpable energy about a piece of writing they had completed, about moments when the writer-Responder relationship “clicked” deeply and unexpectedly, or about sessions in which they or a writer experienced an “aha” moment and knew that they were changed. After reading Frankl's text, we started to think of our work in his spiritual terms. His words helped us synthesize and articulate a core of our work that we had known but until then been unable to utter.

Now, having been initiated into a conversation about professional practice in which the spiritual is named without reservation, we are able to see our work as such. We can now see the revelation that Yin had as spiritual, for, as she allowed herself to be “listen[ed] into existence” by Fred, she had a surprising revelation about her place in her group, academic culture, the university, and maybe, for just a moment, the universe.

Students have such realizations frequently in our classes or writing centers when they come to understand something like the concept of a discourse community. As this concept becomes clear, writers like Terry understand that, perhaps,

what they want to say can't be said in a particular forum not because it is not worth uttering, but because an audience isn't ready to receive it. The "aha" perspective gained – the shift from "what I have to say isn't valued or valuable" to "this is the wrong venue for that kind of utterance" – is empowering. The realization that there are different discourse communities can help writers seek out others with whom they can connect; it can help them sort out where they want to be in the university and the universe. When the idea of a discourse community "clicks" with a student, it can do what Foehr and Schiller describe:

It teaches people to trust their own abilities and creative processes – to move beyond their apprehension and self-doubts. The processes that access this inner/transcendent power build self-confidence, create hope, and make one feel more connected to others and the world by engaging the mind and the spirit. (ix)

Accessing that inner/transcendent power is becoming less and less a task of churches or temples, and more in the realm of everyday life, according to Conger, who argues that the contemporary movement towards a separation of religion and spirituality emphasizes the importance of fulfilling spiritual needs outside of religious institutions. He states, "As the direct impact of religion in our lives lessens, many of us are turning to other arenas or means by which we can nourish our spirituality" (14). The center has become a realm in which we try to nourish our spirituality on a daily basis.

As a result of this realization and commitment, we have developed a series of strategies that we use to operationalize our spiritual goals:

- Presence: We realize that in order to work with a whole writer (including her spirit) we must be entirely present, and we must be "centered" in the session. We need to turn away from worry, let the periphery become silent, and allow the lyrical in the moment to surface.

Joy works with Michelle regularly, and before every session she has to remind herself to focus. Michelle is an ESL student who is also deaf and so brings her translator with her. Language, then, moves from Korean, to Korean sign language, to ASL, to spoken English in their sessions. There is much static, much that could interfere with presence, much that could distract. Joy is a warm and caring person, and she works hard to make sure that everyone feels included, so it takes a great commitment to being present to Michelle, for Joy consciously to ignore Michelle's sign-language interpreter during the sessions. Joy realized that she could not be totally present with Michelle if she was negotiating a three-way conversation and looking – even occasionally – at her interpreter. So, she made a conscious decision to ignore the interpreter as a person (a very difficult task for Joy, who characterizes herself as the center's "Mom"). Against her own nature, she came up with the metaphor of "headphones" to illustrate the way she needed to think of her in-session relationship with Michelle's interpreter. Joy made an ironic commitment, which was painful, because it meant temporarily ignoring a person's humanity, so that she could be totally present for Michelle and Michelle alone. Michelle has since requested this type of interaction (through her interpreter) with other Responders.

- **Mystery:** We have carefully resisted developing files with usual course writing assignments or talking to instructors to get information about assignments. We want to ponder the meaning of the writing tasks and the goals that can be achieved at the same time the writer ponders them. We want to be able to explore the possibilities honestly.

Celia is an intern in the center who also teaches ENGL 201. She had a session with a student from another instructor's section of 201. Instead of assuming that she knew the goals and approach that the other instructor wanted, she wallowed around in the assignment with the writer, living with uncertainty, biting her tongue when she was tempted to describe to the student how she would want it done. In the end, she was pleased that she had let mystery prevail, for it turned out that the other instructor took a significantly different approach – an insight she would not have gained had she jumped into the session as the one who solves the mystery. Not only did Celia's willingness to live with mystery result in the writer having authority in the session, and needing to explore his understandings of the assignment and its purposes, but Celia discovered another approach to an assignment, and, more importantly, that other approaches were quite possible.

- **Story:** We share narratives of our own writing experiences, and of our quests and questions as students, writers, and people. We let writers in on the tales of our making sense of tough assignments, troubling feedback, or gratifying results.

Ray has worked with Jody in the center for three years. Early in their relationship, Jody confided that she'd been diagnosed as having bipolar disorder. She related tales about the difficulty of pursuing an education with this type of mental illness. Rather than take on a therapeutic role and sit across from her listening to her stories as if they were alien, Ray took a position beside her, and shared his experiences as a depression-prone poet. Instead of just swapping labels, the stories they shared were about the lived experience of psychological disorientation in the academy. The stories built trust, but have, through the years, served to weave Ray and Jodi together. Jody came to the center to share her written stories, but ended up writing one, with Ray, about how people can find compatible souls at the university.

- **Celebration:** We acknowledge the "aha" moments and clearly note the significance of any epiphanies. We share stories of our own and other writers' epiphanies and welcome writers' new understandings.

Ray had a session with Dennis, who had returned a day after his first session with Gail. Dennis came in to talk about his revision, but spent much of the session describing what happened when he worked with Gail. Dennis began by saying "that session yesterday was really a learning experience." Ray heard Dennis describe how, because Gail had asked him questions about what he meant to say and how that fit with what he was asked to say, he realized that he hadn't done the assignment at all. Ray praised Dennis's willingness to see how he had missed the assignment and to turn what must have been a disappointing moment, realizing that he had not done an adequate job on the assignment, to a victory. Ray was glowing about the session a day later and told Gail Dennis's story to further the celebration of Dennis's courage and insight.

- Pointing Outward: We help writers generalize the “aha” experience, and illustrate how the same process can be used to make sense in other situations.

The patience and direction we need to do these things (which are much harder than simply telling writers to clarify their theses or add more support) come, in part, from naming our work “spiritual.” As we have named our work “spiritual” we have accumulated anecdotes that illustrate our strategies.

Patrick’s story of the “three Lings” illustrates how he helped a writer generalize an epiphany. Patrick worked hard to get Li to understand the influence of audience. For some time, Li didn’t understand why and how a different audience would affect what could be said and how it could be expressed. One day, however, after several weeks of work, Li had a breakthrough. Li described how he could not expect his grandfather to speak to him the way that he spoke to his grandfather, that different levels of respect would be necessary. He indicated that his grandfather, the first Ling, needed to be approached with respect by him, the third Ling, and that it would never occur to either Li or his grandfather to diverge from expected conventions of discourse. Not only did Li’s revelation about the three Lings serve to help him understand audience and to articulate the discursive relationships between himself, his father, and his grandfather, but it served as a metaphor that both Patrick and Li used for the rest of the year. From that day forward, when Li learned something about perspectives, he and Patrick would exclaim, “it’s like the three Lings!”

Naming experiences in which writers make sense of their writing and how it fits into their world “spiritual” makes a difference in how the experiences are conceptualized. Words matter. Words matter so much in the field of C/composition that there are fights not simply about semantics, but the “apparent squabble over words is a key part of our disciplines’ struggle for voice and search for self” (Zebroski 251). And the “self” that is found in this type of search is communicated to others by language. As Hannah Arendt says:

[. . .] whatever men [sic] do or experience can make sense only to the extent that it is spoken about [. . .] men [sic] as they live and act and move in this world, can experience meaningfulness only because they can talk with and make sense to each other and to themselves. (4)

Vincent Ostrom indicates that individual’s search for self is guided by words:

Human cognition is, however, profoundly affected by the way that languages give expression to ways of conceptualizing what human beings experience in the course of living their lives. Wilhelm von Humboldt observed “by the same process whereby he spins language out of his own being, he ensnares himself in it; and each language draws a magic circle round the people to which it belongs.” (162)

James Hillman reflects on the magic of language as well, but in more spiritual words: “We need to recall the angel aspect of the word, recognizing words as

independent carriers of soul between people. [. . .] Words, like angels, are powers which have invisible power over us” (28-29).

Naming an experience as “spiritual” is important because it makes a space for the ineffable, the mysterious, in pedagogy – the notion that we don’t know everything that influences student learning. And naming spirit does what Parker Palmer calls “create a space” (qtd. in O’Reilly 1). While we don’t think that the spirit is absent without the word to mark its presence, we do think that using the word can help us recognize the possibility of a spiritual reading of a situation. Naming an experience “spiritual” creates a space that can make it real, that can invite it to appear. Such an invitation can lead to an acceptance that, as Foehr and Schiller say, “even in the academy, intellectual activity, like language itself, is spiritual. Spiritually open pedagogy, as the ancient Greeks suggested, can reintroduce balance while at the same time fostering lifelong learning” (ix).

Thomas Moore articulates how he sees learning related to spiritual growth. He describes the purpose of “study” as “[t]he manifestations of one’s essence, the unfolding of one’s capabilities, the revelation of one’s heretofore hidden possibilities” (59). The notion that we could reconceptualize the academic to include the “spiritual,” that we can name learning as a spiritual experience, that study is about the sacredness of life, and that school should be about connecting the heart and soul to each other and the universe is a huge challenge for us. So much in our lives in school has taught us to resist it. But we are going to encourage others to use the word “spirit,” and to use it ourselves, in hopes that its echoes will break down some of the resistance. ☹

Works Cited

- Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1958.
- Briggs, Lynn. “Understanding Spirit in the Writing Center.” *Writing Center Journal* 19, (1999): 87-98.
- Conger, Jay. *Spirit at Work*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1994.
- Foehr, Regina Paxton, and Susan A. Schiller. “Introduction.” *The Spiritual Side of Writing: Releasing the Learner’s Whole Potential*. Ed. Regina Paxton Foehr and Susan A. Schiller. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997. ix-x.
- Fox, Matthew. *The Reinvention of Work: A New Vision of Livelihood for Our Time*. San Francisco: Harper, 1994.
- Frankl, Viktor E. *Man’s Search for Ultimate Meaning*. New York: Penguin, 1997.
- Hillman, James. *A Blue Fire*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1989.
- Holland, Joseph. “A Postmodern Vision of Spirituality and Society.” *Spirituality and Society*. Ed. David Ray Griffin. Albany: SUNY, 1988. 41-61.
- Moore, Thomas. *Meditations: On the Monk Who Dwells in Everyday Life*. New York: HarperCollins, 1994.
- O’Reilly, Mary Rose. *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998.
- Ostrom, Vincent. *The Meaning of Democracy and the Vulnerability of Democracies: A Response to de Tocqueville’s Challenge*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1997.
- Palmer, Parker. “The Grace of Great Things.” *The Sun*. Sept. 1998: 24-28.
- Zebroski, James. *Thinking Through Theory*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994.