EGL 64 W: Writing About Spirituality

Winter 2016
Instructor: Rachel Howard

Our Course

Our spiritual experiences stir our most urgent desire to communicate. We burn to share the questions and convictions that draw us to a reality beyond our limited selves. But how do we work with language to contain the ineffable? How do we write about spirituality without oversimplifying infinite complexities? How can our writing reach those who already share our beliefs, and those who don’t?

We will alternate between reading weeks, during which we’ll share craft notes and study published work closely, and writing weeks, during which you’ll draft new work to post for small group respond. In the final month, each writer will expand a longer work (maximum 5,000 words; no minimum) for full class workshop. You may expand/revise any of the shorter pieces you wrote during weeks one through six for your workshop submission, or draft new work.

The design of this course is inspired by two “Imitation Workshops” produced by the literary magazine ZYZZYVA that I attended early in my writing life. The benefits to this approach, and the outcomes to our course, are that you will:

• Learn to read closely as a writer (rather than as a reviewer or a book club member)
• Think about craft aspects such as image, rhythm, tone, structure, point-of-view, and connotative language, so that you can make active decisions in your work
• Consider challenges unique to writing about spirituality, and try new strategies for communicating
• Discover material you might never have put on the page otherwise, and see what resonates for you and your readers
• Experience the way working with constraints, such as a pre-determined form, can give you freedom to investigate your material more deeply
• Begin to recognize your unique sense of truth and your voice as a truth-seeker

Our Readings

All of our readings will be provided as URLs for work available on the Internet. You will need to print the online readings to read and make notes in hard copy (essential in our course). A few of our readings will be provided as PDFs.

Our Weekly Rhythm

I am present online everyday Monday through Friday, responding to your posts.
The material for the coming week is released every Friday, so you can get started on reading over the weekend.

During Reading Weeks, you will read each short selection twice by Tuesday, choose one selection to study closely, and post your Craft Notes on it by Thursday at very latest. You are encouraged to post your Craft Notes and Discussion responses early.

During Writing Weeks, you will be assigned to a small group for feedback. You will post your creative draft by Tuesday, and respond to your fellow writers’ work by Friday. I will provide workshop response prompts asking you particular questions about your fellow writers’ work. Your answers may be short and concise.

During Workshop Weeks, you will read the submissions by the students up for workshop (three or four per week) and post your response to each by Friday. These are more in-depth responses than during Writing Weeks. I will provide complete guidelines. We will also have one optional reading of a master’s essay and optional discussion thread during Workshop Weeks.

We will hold live class video chats every Monday afternoon. These are optional but highly encouraged. Live video conversations will be recorded for those unable to attend. During Workshop Weeks, each of the writers just workshopped will have 20 minutes in live chat to follow up with questions about our responses to their workshopped essays.

I will also hold a weekly office hour on Friday at noon PST.

**Important note:** Although many students take online courses with the absolute best intentions of doing every single assignment, real life—family, illness, work—have their ways of intervening. **Rather than adopting an "all-or-nothing" approach to your participation in this course, I recommend simply doing what you can, when you can.** Remember, if you have to take a couple of weeks away from the class, you can always come back! "The door is always open," as they say.

**Your Grade**

Students have three grading options for Continuing Studies course:

1. **Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)** – written work is required
   In this class, letter grades will be determined as follows:
   - Participation in Reading Week Craft Notes: 20%
   - Writing Week Submissions: 20%
   - Response to fellow writers’ essays during Writing Weeks: 25%
   - Longer workshop submission: 10%
   - Response to fellow writers’ workshop essays: 25%

2. **Credit/No Credit (CR/NC)** - attendance and participation is required. You must receive at least 70 percent according to the letter grade formula to receive credit.

3. **No Grade Requested (NGR)** - no work is required; No credit shall be received; No proof
of attendance can be provided. (Not suitable for those requiring proof of
attendance/completion.)

Please note that you can change your grading status at any point before the final class
meeting, by contacting the Stanford Continuing Studies department.

Whichever option you choose, the most important things are for you to enjoy yourself, try
new things, give back to your fellow writers, and be part of the writing community.

Our Quarter at a Glance: Week-by-Week Outline

Week One: Reading Week
Introductions; What are the unique challenges of spiritual writing?; Your favorite writers.
Read Grace Paley’s “Mother” and Christopher Castellani’s craft notes on “Mother;” add
your observations to Castellani’s.
Read Yehuda Amichai’s “The Place Where We Are Right” and “Not Like a Cypress,” Joy
Harjo’s “A Map to the Next World,” Rumi’s “I Died from Minerality” and “The Progress of
Man,” Philip Larkin’s “Church Going” and “High Windows.” Choose one to annotate in
the same way that Castellani annotated “Mother.”
Optional discussion reading: Introduction to Best Spiritual Writing 2012, by Philip Yancey.

Week Two: Writing Week (Poetry)
Choose one poem from among last week’s selections; choose two structural elements to
imitate. Alternatively, you may post up to 1,500 words of any kind of spiritual writing you’re
working on. Post for response and respond to your small group members.

Week Three: Reading Week
Read excerpt from Surprised by Joy, by C.S. Lewis, excerpt from Fasting for Ramadan, by Kazim
Ali, and “Six Kinds of Loneliness” by Pema Chodron. Choose a paragraph or page from
one to thoroughly annotate in the style of Castellani. (You may also comment more
generally on the ones you did not choose.)

Week Four: Writing Week (Personal Essay/Homily/Dharma Talk)
Choose between Surprised by Joy, Fasting for Ramadan, and “Six Kinds of Loneliness.”
Brainstorm your own equivalent to the model essay/chapter/talk: a diary-style account, a
spiritual autobiography, a five- or six-point spiritual discussion. Alternatively, you may post
up to 1,500 words of any kind of spiritual writing you’re working on. Post for response and
respond to your small group members.

Week Five: Reading Week
Read Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” and George Saunders’ “Tenth
of December.” Choose one to annotate. (Again, you may also comment on the essays you
didn’t choose, if you wish.) Supplemental reading: Excerpts from Flannery O’Connor,
“The Church and the Fiction Writer,” and George Saunders, “Congratulations, by the Way:
Some Thoughts on Kindness.”

Week Six: Writing Week (Short Story)
Choose between “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” and “Tenth of December.” Adapt the storyline with your own characters and context. Alternatively, you may post up to 1,500 words of any kind of spiritual writing you’re working on. Post your draft for response and respond to your small group members.

**Week Seven: Workshop Week**
Three or four writers will post work for in-depth workshop response. You may expand/revise any of the shorter pieces you wrote during weeks one through six, or draft new work.
You may optionally also read Mary Karr, “Facing Altars: Poetry and Prayer,” and contribute annotations on the discussion thread.

**Week Eight: Workshop Week**
Three or four writers will post work for in-depth workshop response. You may expand/revise any of the shorter pieces you wrote during weeks one through six, or draft a new work.
You may optionally also read an excerpt from Pico Iyer’s *The Global Soul* and contribute annotations and comments on the discussion thread.

**Week Nine: Workshop Week**
Three or four writers will post work for in-depth workshop response. You may expand/revise any of the shorter pieces you wrote during weeks one through six, or draft a new work.
You may optionally also read TBD and contribute annotations on the discussion thread.

**Week Ten: Workshop Week**
Three or four writers will post work for in-depth workshop response. You may expand/revise any of the shorter pieces you wrote during weeks one through six, or draft a new work.

We’ll also discuss how your approach to writing has shifted and what your next steps will be, and discuss literary publications that specialize in writing about spirituality, including how to submit to them.