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At our conferences and in our journals when we have discussed writing and power, we have meant intellectual, economic, social, or political power. Perhaps it is time for us to include the spiritual. Perhaps it is time for us to see all the multifaceted ways actual human beings use literacy to compose power in their daily lives.

### **Writing to Heal: Using Meditation in the Writing Process**

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Unifying the many definitions and practices of meditation is the notion of training the mind, which suggests that the technique of meditation could usefully supplement courses designed to train people to think and write critically, analytically, or academically. In *Riding the Ox Home: A History of Meditation from Shamanism to Science*, Willard Johnson argues that "meditation has no intrinsic goal or meaning; it is rather a technique, a way of developing consciousness" (3). Coming from a Hindu tradition, Ekneth Easwaran similarly defines meditation as "a systematic technique for taking hold of and concentrating to the utmost degree our latent mental power" (9). Most frequently meditation is discussed within a spiritual context, yet for beginning college students, who often report difficulty keeping their minds on what they read, practice in meditation could be as useful as other study techniques frequently taught, such as focused free writing, mapping, and dialogic reading logs.

Yet work linking writing and meditation remains on the fringes of our discipline. In this essay I want to review the scholarship on the connections between meditation and writing, analyze objections to the use of meditation in a writing classroom, and suggest that writing teachers consider using meditation with apprehensive or blocked writers, a population I have studied and seen it serve. Most of my experience with meditation and writing has occurred outside the academy; I've led workshops at a bookstore, in a therapist's office, and most frequently through Unity, a center for spiritual growth. Teaching at a spiritual site helped me shift my focus from helping writers produce good prose to helping them enjoy the process of meditating and writing regardless of the outcome. I have also guest taught in elementary and high school classes and typically offer an optional day of meditating and writing in my university writing courses. Despite enthusiastic student response, the marginality of meditative practice within the academy has discouraged me, as an untenured faculty member, from regularly offering meditation to writing classes. Peter Elbow relates a similar reluctance to bring new practices into his university classes: "The

question in teaching is always where to find an occasion to try something out, because it always feels you can't try it out in your regular teaching. We need arenas to do these things" ("Interview" 19).

Although the workshops I've led were not associated with a university, many participants were undergraduate and graduate students hoping to re-discover some joy in writing or seeking help with writing blocks. Their stories, as well as hundreds of other literacy histories I've read, reveal the wounds too frequently inflicted by English teachers. I've used the word "heal" in the title of this essay (despite being warned that I could be sued for claiming something I cannot deliver) because, if given a choice between wounding or healing, I want to move toward the latter. "Healing" is rarely heard in academic discussions of writing and teaching, perhaps because it has become the province of those credentialized to heal: physicians, psychologists, perhaps ministers—but surely not writing teachers. Don't we already have enough to do? In a context of traditional western medicine the word *healing* may connote a passivity of the healed and a power of the healer that I do not intend. Rather I invoke the etymological sense of healing as being from the holy, the spiritual, an interplay of forces with which I am a participant rather than creator.

James Pennebaker, a psychologist who has studied the physiological effects of writing, reports on experiments where "those subjects who had written about their thoughts and feelings about traumatic experiences evidenced significant improvement in immune function compared with controls" (162). These beneficial physical and psychological effects of writing have been used outside the academy, for example, in the Twelve-Step programs that Beth Daniell examines. Writing exercises are frequently included in self-help books, such as *Courage to Heal* by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, which instructs survivors of sexual abuse to narrate their experiences. In other popular texts, meditation is added to writing exercises to enrich the writer's experience. Christina Baldwin's *Life's Companion: Journal Writing as a Spiritual Quest* includes a guided meditation at the end of each section to expand and complicate the reader's awareness of issues she has explored through journaling. In her popular book, *Writing from the Inner Self*, Elaine Farris Hughes, a college writing teacher, has collected a number of guided visualization exercises designed to help writers tap into topics they might not otherwise explore. And Gabriele Rico's *Pain and Possibility* includes reports from workshop participants testifying to the power of meditation and writing combined.

Very successful outside the academy but cited infrequently in composition studies is Ira Progoff, whose books and journal workshops are based on a systematic study of depth psychology and incorporate "process meditation" with writing prompts. Progoff defines meditation broadly as "all the

forms and methods by which we reach toward meaning in our lives and by which we seek the depth beyond the doctrines of religion and philosophy" (226). While any journal prompt might be said to reach toward meaning, Progoff includes meditation to "access the power of the unconscious."

In the early history of composition, meditation was sometimes included as a part of writing instruction. D. Gordon Rohman's 1965 article "Pre-Writing: The Stage of Discovery in the Writing Process" suggested imitation, analogies, and meditation as techniques to help students "imitate the creative principle itself which produces finished works" (107). Meditation allowed students to experience their subjects "concretely" and "personally" because it was "a heuristic model, something which served to unlock discovery" (110). Rohman maintained that once students had experienced their subject "the urge to 'get it down' usually increases to the point that the will directs the actual writing of words to begin" (110).

But it has been the work of James Moffett that has so far brought the use of meditation in a writing classroom closest to legitimacy. Coming from a prominent composition theorist, Moffett's 1982 article "Writing, Inner Speech, and Meditation" provides an overview of meditation practices (including his own) from many cultures and locates the common trait in "some notion of transcending intellectual knowledge" (235). He proposes inner speech as the "bridge" between meditation and writing and writes that meditation helps one gain "some control of inner speech ranging from merely watching it to focusing it to suspending it altogether" (236). This allows a writer to engage in "authentic authoring" by helping the writer perceive "the deeper self that abides at least somewhat independently of the outside," a trait he believes necessary for effective writing (236). The article concludes with an exhortation to teachers who meditate to "come out of the closet" as well as a proposal to include meditation training in regular staff development programs (246).

*College English* published three responses to Moffett's article: a wholehearted acceptance of the article with minor adjustments, a sarcastic dismissal of Moffett and his sources, and a detailed response from James Crosswhite, in which he objects to the idea that we can transcend our circumstances to perceive a "higher" knowledge, arguing that all abilities are rooted in language and history. He calls Moffett's proposal "illiberal," because "being critical of language in a historic and political and cultural way" is the root of a liberal education (402). Crosswhite's objection sounds like one that might come from many social constructionists, anti-foundationalists, and postmodernists today, namely, that there is nowhere to transcend *to* and no absolute to found our notions *on*, so we must be aware that when we privilege a discourse or idea that we are also privileging and

serving a particular group of people. Moffett anticipated objections that his approach was too personal by acknowledging the social and historical forces in language, observing that “one’s revised inner speech may reflect convention so much as hardly to bear a personal mark” (“Writing” 233). But rather than fight for the supremacy of his theory he seems to want schools to include any technique that helps a student understand: “Human beings rely on several authorities for their knowledge. The only problem comes from excluding some. If it is a mode of knowing, it belongs” (“Comment” 404).

Perhaps the continued exclusion of meditation as a classroom practice is based in part on a distrust of the idea of a “deep” self so often sought by the meditating spiritual seeker. Swami Muktananda, for example writes, “We do not attain the Self through spiritual practices, because the Self is already attained. The Self is always with us. Just as the sun cannot be separated from its light, the Self cannot be separated from us” (12). The capitalized “Self” seems to indicate a singular essence at the core of each individual, similar to that valorized by many advocates of expressive writing. For example, Ira Progoff uses as a basic metaphor for the individual a water well which in turn is “connected to an underground stream . . . that is the source of all wells” (33). For Progoff, unity is possible amidst individual differences, for once “we have gone deeply enough we find that we have gone through our personal life beyond our personal life” (34). Or in Moffett’s words “spirituality depends on widening the identity” of the person and institution (“Censorship” 117).

In postmodern theory, this idea of transpersonal unity is not possible or desirable, and instead difference is foregrounded. Lester Faigley defines the postmodern subject “as a play of differences that cannot be reduced to a whole” (232), and he cites the damage done to marginalized people when a single, unified voice is demanded in a writing classroom. Faigley’s word *reduced* reflects past religious or liberal treatments of difference where unity is evoked without acknowledging difference—you can be one with us if you leave your race, class, gender, or sexual orientation at the door. Drawing on the work of political theorist Iris Young, Faigley writes that, “In order to practice a politics of differences, there must be discourses and spaces where differences are preserved and appreciated” (232).

Because religious groups have historically suppressed differences, with tragic consequences, in the name of a single path to God, any technique used by religion seems suspect to some. This conflation of religion and spirituality leads both postmodernists and fundamentalists to distrust meditation as a practice of peace. Postmodernists essentialize difference and religious fundamentalists fear it. But in the spirituality that stems from mediation, the perception of oneness does not erase difference but

creates an arena where that difference is not only named and celebrated but ultimately loved. Faigley's aim is to bring ethics back into rhetoric, not in order to study absolute right and wrong but to accept "the responsibility for judgment," "reflect on the limits of understanding," and "to respect . . . diversity and unassimilated otherness" (239). Meditation can facilitate all three ends, whether a person seeks a unified self in the process or uses meditation as a technique to create one of a number of selves.

Even those who acknowledge the value of meditation may have reservations about writing teachers employing it in a classroom, objecting that we aren't trained as therapists and should not pretend to be. While I understand the concern for students in these objections, it is important (and potentially radical) to acknowledge that students are not only intellectual but also physical, emotional, and spiritual beings—and that these elements are as present in a classroom as the politics and power we now address. Further, I would contend that a teacher is actually less intrusive during meditation than during most other pedagogical acts, as she can only offer suggestions for physical relaxation without monitoring its results.

For blocked or anxious writers, meditation offers a practical technique to move through that pain. Moffett writes that "the key to meditation is a relaxed body and an alert awareness" ("Writing" 244), and that combination can help apprehensive writers discover the physical location of their fear of writing and begin releasing it. For instance, several women I have worked with in getting past writing block have had histories of headaches, even migraines, before or during a project. As they meditated in and on places of perceived safety, the headaches disappeared, and they could express their ideas in writing. As Rohman has argued, meditation can also facilitate invention, which can ease anxiety of composing. Meditating before writing helps writing run through a whole series of images or phrases before committing any of them to writing. When I led an exercise at a high school, the students seemed most impressed with how easy it was to write once they had visualized a subject. Many of the fifth and sixth graders I worked with doubled the amount of writing they usually produced in one sitting and were astonished at the power of their imaginations the meditation had tapped. One boy wrote "That was incredible! I have never experienced anything like that in my life! It was so realistic! I could hear birds twerping, feel the mist through my body, see the cabin, and then slowly come back to the room."

Meditation and writing often work well in conferences with individual blocked or apprehensive writers. For instance, over the course of four meetings, Marianne, a graduate student I worked with, began to get past her writing block only after she saw her dissertation director in a meditation and continued writing the dialogue with him she started there. Our

conversations and further meditations helped her change her working habits so that she was able to write daily, to use a different voice in her writing, to include personal information for an academic audience, and to finish her project in time to submit it for publication. The article was accepted.

It's perhaps a particularly capitalist perspective to think of meditation as a means to an end. In Buddhism the *practice* of meditation is all, and meditators are cautioned against becoming attached to outcomes or insights. Yet in a discipline which talks of process but where teachers often must still evaluate products, and in universities where students want class activities to feed directly into the papers they write, it's difficult to avoid arguing for the practical benefits of offering meditation—at the very least, to students with writing block. Just as Elbow argues for the inclusion of personal writing in the curriculum because, as he puts it, "Life is long and college is short" ("Reflections" 136), I urge meditating writing teachers to combine meditation with writing to provide an anodyne for the wounds of schooling and to offer a model for healthy living.

### **Women's Ways of Writing, or, Images, Self-Images, and Graven Images**

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In his most recent—and he claims last—study of childhood, *The Spiritual Life of Children*, Harvard psychologist Robert Coles brings his work on children full circle by recounting one of its starting points. Working in the Deep South during the early 1950s with grade school children who were among the first to integrate the public schools, he experienced a conversion of sorts. He came face to face with the power of religious conviction as something far more than psychiatric neurosis as he listened to an eight year old patient, Laurie:

I was all alone, and those people were screaming, and suddenly I saw God smiling, and I smiled. . . . A woman was standing there [near the school door], and she shouted at me, "Hey, you little nigger, what you smiling at?" I looked right at her face, and I said, "At God." Then she looked up at the sky, and she looked at me, and she didn't call me any more names. (19–20)

Steeped in Freudian psychology, Coles had been trained to regard religion at its worst, as hate-filled, mean-spirited, ignorantly superstitious—as a social lie based on the need people have for self-deception. Yet, he asks, what would Freud have made of Laurie, from Greenville, North Carolina, "or, for that matter, of the heckler who was stopped in her tracks