

Writing as Spiritual Practice
Application for the Newell Innovative Teaching Award
Spring 2022



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Project Description

In the spring of 2022, I created a new course called ENG 395: Writing as Spiritual Practice. The aim of the course is to help students write about their spiritual lives, to put words to the ways God is working in each of them. The course falls under the disciplinary umbrella of creative nonfiction (e.g., memoir, personal essay, literary journalism, etc.) and incorporates a holistic approach to the writing process. At the end of the semester, students will submit a book proposal for their own spiritual memoir, including a cover letter to an editor and a sample chapter. The class has been transformational to my own pedagogy and I can sense that students are finding the experience both challenging and life-giving. The following will describe the course structure and major assignments. Due to the nature of this application being submitted for a class in process, the verb tenses I use in this document frequently shift to accurately represent what has already happened, what is currently taking place, and what will take place by the end of the semester.

Structure

The course is divided into two sections. The **first section** took on an intentionally slower pace, asking students to develop a practice of noticing and awareness, both in their inner and outer lives. I wanted to create a spacious atmosphere for students, where they felt free to explore new practices and have ample time to practice reflective writing in their journals. This happened in two ways. First, we begin each class with a period of silence. Through contemplative prayer practices, guided meditation, or deep breathing techniques, I want us to approach class unhurried, giving students the chance to be fully present and engaged. Second, students (and the professor) spent time in class writing in their journals, reflecting on prompts that explore their

past or present spiritual lives. During this section of the course, we also read Barbara Brown Taylor's *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* as an example of the type of memoir writing the students would produce later in the semester.

The **second section** of the course, which we're currently in, takes the experiences and bulk of writing that students have done thus far and asks them to narrow their focus. It makes a shift from exploratory reflection, to the nuts and bolts of effective writing. This section will guide students in how to take personal, reflective writing and revise it for a broader audience. The rhetorical vehicle for this revision work will be a book proposal of the students' own spiritual memoir, including a letter to the editor and a sample chapter. To aid us in this endeavor, we will be reading Vinita Hampton Wright's *The Art of Spiritual Writing: How to Craft Prose That Engages and Inspires Your Reader*, a straightforward writing manual for spiritual writers. In it, Wright gives practical writing advice from her decades-long career as a book editor for Loyola Press. Additionally, to help students understand the genre of a book proposal, we will Zoom with Devin Maddox, Union University alum and current Trade Book Publisher for B&H Publishing Group in Nashville, TN.

Assignments

While the final book proposal for the course has already been mentioned, several other assignments help students with the tasks of creating a practice of awareness and revising their personal, reflective writing for a broader audience. Specifically, the ritual assignment, edited journal, and weekly self-care helped students with the task.

The ritual assignment asked students to choose an activity to practice intentionally at least three times per week, then reflect on each experience in their journals. The guidelines I gave for choosing rituals were that they should be relatively short and simple, primarily silent,

done alone, and were something that the student wanted to do (as opposed to what students think they *should* do.) Seeing the rituals students chose shows the diversity and creativity of how students approached the assignment. Some committed to daily walks (on campus or in the UU woods), going outside upon first waking, taking cold showers, listening to bluegrass, and meditating, among others. It's been exciting to see how the rituals have been transformative to some, bringing awareness to areas of growth, as well as highlighting where students need to change. Throughout the semester, we have short check-ins to see how their rituals are going.

Throughout the course, students keep a journal. Entries include in-class writing, reflections on their rituals, and any other reflections they want to include. **The edited journal** assignment asks students to revise sections/entries of their journal for a more public audience. This assignment is the first to help students see the tension between personal and public writing. It gives students agency in what they wish to include and what they'd rather keep private. It also follows a tradition of theologians, missionaries, and monastics who have published journals.

Finally, the course requires a great deal of both vulnerability and empathy from students. The level of intellectual hospitality necessary for full engagement with the readings, activities, discussions, etc. is a precious commodity in our world. Therefore, students were invited to practice **weekly self-care** this semester. Each week, students devoted 45-60 minutes of their own time to reset and refresh their mental, emotional, and spiritual faculties. This assignment is self-reported and only accounts for 5% of their final grade, but students continue to speak of the benefits of the "assigned" self-care as having an excuse to take time for themselves.

In addition to these assignments, students also wrote a **book review** of a spiritual memoir of their choice. By reading and reviewing another memoir, students were given more exposure to

the genre, which would hopefully help them in writing their own spiritual memoir chapter at the end of the semester.

How the Project is Innovative

I believe the most innovative aspect of this course is its holistic approach to how we teach students to write about their faith. Too often, discussions of faith and writing in the classroom are purely cognitive exercises. This course, however, sought to add flesh and bone to the conversation, to engage the students' fully embodied selves as they tried to "provide vocabulary by which the rest of us can name what God is doing to us, for us, around, and right inside us" (Wright, 2013, p. 4). The somewhat surprising realization for me, however, was that this approach could take place alongside the current best practices in writing studies, thereby demonstrating the integration of faith and learning that Union so highly values and promotes.

The integration I'm describing happened in several ways.

- **First**, by beginning each class in silence, I gave students a chance to bring themselves fully to the present moment. This, in turn, led to more productive engagement in the work of the day.
- **Second**, by prioritizing student well-being through the weekly self-care assignment, I could approach class reassured that students were taking time to be refreshed from their coursework.
- **Third**, the course had students engage in the writing process holistically, not just cognitively. Through the ritual assignment, students were asked to participate in a non-writing, physical activity, then write about their experience. Additionally, the class engaged both physical and spiritual faculties by taking a walk in the Union woods together, pausing to read written prayers.

- **Fourth**, students were exposed to several standard genres of academic writing, such as book reviews, book proposals, memoirs, and reflective writing. What this course uncovered was that these academic genres could be taught by also engaging the spiritual lives of students.

Successes, Challenges, and Future Considerations

I continue to be impressed and grateful at how students are responding to the course. Of the aspects of the course I'm finding most successful, the first would be the slower pace. I don't feel as if time was ever lost by slowing down. Second, the more non-conventional aspects of this English class, especially beginning in silence and the ritual assignment were well received by Union students. And finally, the edited journal assignment is going well. I gave in-person feedback during the drafting stage of their edited journals and was utterly impressed by the vulnerability and honesty students brought to the assignment. Typically, a week of conferences with students is taxing, but that week with ENG 395 was life-giving to me.

One aspect of the course that hasn't worked as well as I'd like is the class discussion. Students will offer wonderful insights from the readings, often sharing personal experiences, but the class is slow to take up the conversation. In the future, perhaps it would help to model what this sort of discussion looks like.

Another aspect that needs to be refined is the assignment scheduling. Although I like the slower pacing at the front end, it pushes the major assignments to the latter half of the course. This makes it harder to identify students who may be struggling early on. Future iterations of the course need to have an earlier graded assignment to make the midterm grade more accurate.