

GUIDELINES AND EXPECTATIONS: EN 489-01 A Contemplative Spirituality of Environmental Writing

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Office: 305 Albertus Magnus
Hours MWF 9:30-10:30 and by appointment

TEXTS:

Environmental Writing:

Abbey, Edward, *Desert Solitaire*
Abrams, David, *The Spell of the Sensuous*
Anderson, Slovic, O'Grady, *Literature and the Environment*
Dillard, Annie, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*
Hogan, Linda, *Dwellings*
Krakauer, John, *Into the Wild*
Williams, Terry Tempest, *Refuge*

Spiritual Practice:

Goldberg, Natalie, *Writing Down the Bones*
Hanh, Thich Nhat, *Peace is Every Step, The Long Road Leads to Joy*
Keating, Thomas, *Open Mind, Open Heart*

Additional Materials:

Cassettes: Kornfield, Salzberg, Young, *Beginner's Mind*

COURSE DESCRIPTION

It's well known that Henry David Thoreau invented the discipline of ecological writing, less well understood that the speculative equipment he took to the woods included a vision formed by Eastern and Western contemplative spiritualities. When the poet Denise Levertov asks us to enter a world where "those who are sacred have remained so," how do we make this passage, turning our backs on the Mall? With what intellectual and spiritual equipment can we confront, in Edward Abbey's desert landscape, "the bare bones of existence, the elemental and fundamental, a bedrock which sustains us"? Thoreau would have us read the *Bhagavad Gita*; Mary Oliver speaks of "the chance to love everything;" Annie Dillard characterizes herself as a nature writer with theological preoccupations.

As Quakers put it, "What canst *thou* say?"

This class will emphasize—besides an immersion in contemporary environmental writing—slow and reflective reading (which Benedictine spirituality calls *Lectio Divina*); contemplative practice according to Christian and Buddhist methodologies; focused observation in the field; and journal writing.

EXPECTATIONS

Attend class and contribute to discussion.

Commit to spiritual practice for the length of the semester.

Read and reread the assigned texts.

Keep a journal, writing, on the average, twice daily. Come to class with journal entries on each assigned text or subject; write on your own as well, especially about nature.

Make a 24-hour silent retreat.

Adopt a natural phenomenon; observe and write about it several times a week: this may be a particular tree, one of our distinctive albino squirrels, the moon—it probably should not be your mother.

Complete and hand in a final edited journal, 10-15 pages.

Note on the Edited Journal

“Writing Practice,” as Natalie Goldberg defines it, will be the foundation of a strong final journal, but I expect your final effort to be much more than a collage of daily writing. You’ll need to edit and revise: add, subtract, rethink and *write a preface which describes your experience of the course*. The best responses to this assignment will contain a judicious mix of writing about nature, reflection on the assigned texts, response to spiritual practice, response to class activities, and reflection on what other people say. I expect to see complexity of thought (which usually involves several ideas in tension) as well as evidence of evolution and change over the course of the semester.

COURSE CALENDAR: Spring, 2001

Monday, Jan. 29 Introductions. Thich Nhat Hanh, "Inviting the Bell." Brief readings from Henry David Thoreau, Thomas Merton and Jane Tompkins

Wednesday, Jan. 31 Introduction to sitting meditation. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step*, 1-18. Introduction to writing practice. Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones*, 1-13. James Wright, "A Blessing," *Literature and the Environment*, 65

Friday Feb. 2 Introduction to walking meditation. *Peace*, 27-28. Denise Levertov, "Come Into Animal Presence," Walt Whitman, "I Think I Could Turn and Live With the Animals," *L&E*, 64 and 67. Introduction to *lectio*.

Week 2: Going deeper into sitting meditation. Read "Be Still and Know: Meditations for Peacemakers" (handout)

Monday, Feb. 5 Tom Wolfe, "O Rotten Gotham," *L&E*, 53.

Wednesday, Feb. 7 Carol Polsgrove, "On a Scrap of Land in Henry County," *L&E*, 233. Wendell Berry, "A Good Scythe," *L&E*, 389.

Friday, Feb. 9 David Abrams, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 225-230. Read/reread "Conscious Breathing," and "Breathing Room," in *Peace*, 8 & 45. Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 1-42. Discussion of meditation practice: how's it going? Distinctions and commonalities among such concepts as *meditation*, *contemplation*, *spirituality*, *religion*.

Week 3: Going deeper into Lectio Divina.

Monday, Feb. 12 Henry David Thoreau, "Solitude," *L&E*, 47

Wednesday, Feb. 14 Continued

Friday, Feb. 16

Week 4: Going deeper into writing practice. Read two chapters in Goldberg and do two timed practice sessions each day, besides your class preparation.

Monday, Feb. 19 Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 3-15

Wednesday, Feb. 21 Continued, 16-36

Friday, Feb. 23

Week 5: *Going deeper into walking meditation. Carry Thich Nhat Hanh's The Long Road Turns to Joy with you this week. Read short chapters and do several daily practice sessions, and/or/alternately, practice walking "The Way of the Pilgrim."*

Monday, Feb. 26 Dillard, continued, 55-63

Wednesday, Feb. 28 Continued, 78-83

Friday, March 2 No class. **Thich Nhat Hanh: *If you are going to write me a letter, write me a letter about your practice.***

Week 5: *Review of the basics: listen to Jack Kornfield, "Beginner's Mind."*

Monday, March 5 Conversation about practice

Wednesday, March 7 Abrams, "The Ecology of Magic," 3-29

Friday, March 9 Continued

Week 6: *Contemplation and action: listen to Shinzen Young, "Meditation in the Zone." Rinzai Zen: Hurry up and stop.*

Monday, March 12

Wednesday, March 14 Abrams, "Animism and the Alphabet," 93-135. Read as fast as you can, anti-*lectio*. Mark passages you want to come back and think about.

Friday, March 16 Be ready to report today on the contemplative practice you have found most congenial, how it's going for you, how you intend to carry it forward. Keating, 109-132.

Monday, March 19—Friday, March 23 Midterm Break

Week 7: *Contemplation and political action.*

Monday, March 26 Terry Tempest Williams, "The Clan of One-Breasted Women," *L&E*, 347

Wednesday, March 28 Terry Tempest Williams, *Refuge*

Friday, March 30 Continued

Week 8: *The Unconscious and contemplation, Keating, 93-107. Transcending the drama*

Monday, April 2 Williams, continued

Wednesday, April 4

Friday, April 6 Aldo Leopold, "Thinking Like a Mountain," *L&E* 148

Week 9: *Exploring contemplation and community. Listen to Sharon Salzberg, "Lovingkindness Meditation"*

Monday, April 9 Edward Abbey, "Eco Defense," *L&E*, 354. *Desert Solitaire*, ix-7

Wednesday, April 11

Friday, April 13- Monday, April 16 Easter Break

Week 10: *Continue working with metta meditation (Salzberg)*

Wednesday, April 18 John Krakauer, *Into the Wild*

Friday, April 20 Continued

Week 11: *Hospitality*

Monday, April 23 Continued

Wednesday, April 25

Friday, April 27 Joan Chittister, "The Unbounded Heart," from *Wisdom Distilled From the Daily*

Week 12: *"Love calls us to the things of this world."*

Monday, April 30 Linda Hogan, "Feathers," "Bats" from *Dwellings*

Wednesday, May 2 Hogan, continued

Friday, May 4 Rick Bass, "The Heart of a Forest," from *Audubon Magazine*

Week 13: *Vocation, community and social change*

Monday, May 7 Wendell Berry, "Solving for Pattern," from *The Gift of Good Land*

Wednesday, May 9 Berry, "Solving for Pattern," continued. "The GE-ification of Minnesota" from the *Star Tribune*.

Friday, May 11

-1-

“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear...”

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* (Norton, 1966), 61

-2-

“...both monastery and university came into being in a civilization open to the sacred, that is to say, in a civilization which paid a great deal of attention to what it considered to be its own primordial roots in a mythical and archetypal holy ground, a spiritual creation...they teach not so much by imparting information as by bringing the clerk (in the university) or the monk (in the monastery) to direct contact with ‘the beginning,’ the archetypal paradise world.”

Thomas Merton, “Learning to Live,” in *Thomas Merton, Spiritual Master*, ed. with intro. by Lawrence Cunningham (New York: Paulist, 1992), 361.

-3-

“This was a use for the cloister: to screen out the world and enable the gaze to turn inward to contemplation...But the cloister needs to be used for the purposes for which it was originally intended: quiet reflection, self-observation, meditative awareness. These are the gifts of the cloister that allow the hear to open without fear...As far as the university is concerned, the core of the human being, his or her emotional and spiritual life, is dealt with as a necessary evil, on the sidelines, and the less heard about it the better.”

Jane Tompkins, *A Life in School: What the Teacher Learned* (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley, 1996), 220.

METHOD FOR *LECTIO*: reflective reading/rereading of a short text

1. Center yourself in your mind and body, place and purpose.
2. Read the passage reflectively several times.
3. Consider the question: what speaks most profoundly to me here? What does my inner teacher want me to hear?
4. Write for 5-10 minutes.

Shared *Lectio*: reading/rereading together

1. Keep a few minutes' silence together.
2. One person reads the text aloud. All listen.
3. Each one speaks to something the reading sparks in him or her.
4. If appropriate, general discussion.

- 4 -

My chief concern is that our educational system does not focus on the inner lives of students or help them to acquire the self-understanding that is the basis for a satisfying life. Nor, by and large, does it provide the safe and nurturing environment that people need in order to grow. My teachers have not been of the usual kind—a dog...Alzheimer's patients, homeless people, Buddhist meditation, a nondenominational, charismatic African-American church. The experiences that have meant the most to me have taken forms that are antithetical to what we mean when we refer to learning in an academic sense. Overcoming resistance to these nonintellectual modes of knowing has been the work of my life in recent years. What was lacking in me—respect for the whole human organism, emotions, body and spirit, as well as mind—is what is lacking in American educations as well.

Jane Tompkins, *Life in School*. Reading, Mass.: Perseus ,1996. xii

Moment after moment we have to find our own way. Some idea of perfection, or some perfect way which is set up by someone else, is not the true way for us.

Shunryo Suzuki, quoted Tompkins, xix