

“SPIRITUAL WRITING”

FIVE-WEEK ONLINE CLASS

Monday, Jan. 11-Sunday, Feb. 14, 2021

Instructor: Jonathan Callard

Class Description

This class will ask what, if anything, can make nonfiction writing “spiritual.” You will read selections from essays and memoirs in the spiritual writing genre and try composing your own versions of this material. How can we write about something so personal and powerful and share it with an audience of differing beliefs or traditions? How do writers move beyond saccharine sentimentality to illuminate a truth? You will choose a spiritual question or subject to explore in depth by writing two optional 500-word pieces and one article/essay between 1,000 and 3,000 words. The course will provide tips and inspiration for getting started, gathering material, and revising your work for publication. Writers from all backgrounds and faiths are welcome.

Class Outcomes

- Form regular writing community and deadlines
- Explore and identify examples of essays/memoir in spiritual writing to jumpstart process
- Develop writing approach through exercises, lectures, and discussions
- Learn constructive peer review practices
- Gain feedback on primary assignments
- Gain strategies in revising for publication

How It Works

Each week provides:

- discussions of assigned readings and other writing topics with peers and the instructor
- written lectures and a selection of readings

Some weeks also include:

- writing exercises and/or assignments
- opportunities to submit a full-length essay for instructor and/or peer review (1,000 to 3,000 words)

To create a better classroom experience for all, and to allow the instructor to meet each writer where they are, ***students are required to participate weekly to receive instructor feedback on their work.***

Early in the course, the instructor will offer a one-time optional office hour where students can ask questions and discuss the class in real time online. This conversation will be recorded and available for viewing after its conclusion.

(see next page)

Class Plan

Week 1: Shaping the Spiritual (Jan. 11-17)

This week will cover how writers working in the genre might begin to define or describe “spiritual writing.” You’ll take a look at how the body, culture, or identity might shape its parameters and your approach. Writing itself can serve as spiritual practice, both playful and prayerful. To get the juices flowing, you will have the option to write a short piece (up to 500 words) to share with the class, and you will choose a subject for your primary assignment.

Week 2: Framing the “I” in Faith (Jan. 18-24)

You’ll confront challenges of placing individual perspectives of faith—so close to the heart—on the page as art. Often, we do not speak of spiritual or religious subjects because they can be just as divisive as inclusive, as sappy as salient. How can you mine your relationship to belief without alienating readers or losing the complexity that marks lived experience, particularly in the realm of emotion? You’ll consider how form, voice, or narrative distance can frame such issues in creative ways. In preparation for the primary assignment, you will have the option to write another short piece (up to 500 words) to share with the class.

Week 3: Engaging the Other (Jan. 25-31)

Spiritual writing often engages people, places, or things that perplex, disturb, or mystify, and that draw us out of ourselves. Whether you face a religious institution’s complicated history, a family tradition, a desert, or a baffling stranger, you encounter uncertainty in stuff seen and unseen. You’ll imagine how to embrace such tensions with the “Other” in your work, and the ways in which you might incorporate disparate backdrops or backgrounds without losing the personal element or forward flow. You will also submit your primary assignment (an essay/article between 1,000 and 3,000 words).

Week 4: Speaking to You (Feb. 1-7)

Martin Buber writes that you “not only speak *of* God but also speak *to* him,” and Madeleine L’Engle adds that you don’t love in general, you love in particular—to live a spiritual life means risking closer communion with each other, with the earth, with the divine. You’ll study how writers might embody such desire—and its difficulties—through character or charisma, prophecy or plea. You will also have the option of sharing your primary assignment with a small group of classmates for peer review.

Week 5: Re-Seeing and Representing Your Work (Feb. 8-14)

This week will cover techniques to revise and sharpen a spiritual writing piece to make it ready for publication. We’ll discuss submitting work to journals but also consider the bigger picture: allowing for risk and even failure, loving the roadblocks, and sustaining a practice.