

Spiritual Writing: An Online Class with Jonathan Callard / Jan. 6-Feb. 9, 2020

Class Plan

Week 1: Shaping the Spiritual (Jan. 6-12)

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. 13-19)

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. 20-26)

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 (Jan. 27-Feb. 2)

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. 3-9)

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.