

Writing as a Spiritual Practice

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Starr is a second-year student preparing for parish ministry. She wrote this paper (excerpted, below) for a special reading course. She has worked as a poet, writer, arts administrator, community organizer and restaurant cook.

My plan through this reading course was to support and explore my spiritual practice of daily writing. In April 2003 I began a 15-minute daily writing practice that continued for five months. I deepened my understanding of what it means to me that I consider poetry my chosen form of prayer. I also gained familiarity with other writers for whom daily writing has a spiritual, meditative, “practice”-like quality. One important part of this practice for me was to support the nascent poem-thoughts as much as the fleshed-out pieces.

APRIL 27: Cradle

To cradle my body as I am moving, care-
fully around the dirt track, sunlit-morning—

To cradle as in moving without
concern for destination, back and forth without goal...

You cradle me in your loving
and I learn what it's like to *bask*

to not hurry, to not at all need
to not be trying to achieve anything at all

The way that the cedar canoe is a cradle
elegant in countless rivers—

a cradle that held and nourished
a blossoming-you

the way that my crescent-curved hand
gets to (so briefly) cradle and frame your gentle face

and yes, the chalice: a continental cradle
for our hopeful and also resolute flame.

This morning, slowly circling the track, softly running,
my hips cradled my whole aging, learning body

my body every day meeting itself
greeting skin, muscle, joint, bone, greeting

the whole of the energy that becomes me.
This morning, for just a few moments, I felt my delicacy and my strength.

Silent, arching beams, my hips cradled my back, my knees, and my heels,
cradled and carried me, calmly, confidently, forward.

Writing as a Prayer Statement

Writing as prayer is a challenge to probe myself. It is a challenge to let myself be open and accepting, ways of being that I often cultivate towards others but sometimes neglect to cultivate towards myself. The daily practice of writing-as-prayer creates a moment of intentionality. It also cultivates an awareness of my self in each day, often at around the same time: where am I internally? To what are my thoughts directed? What tone am I taking?

Some of the “traditional” understandings of prayer don’t apply for me when I engage in this practice, at least, not yet. I don’t expect an answer, other than the evolving words on the page. I have appreciated the wide-open guidance of Marcus Braybrooke when he writes, “The first step in learning to pray is to free ourselves from preconceptions of what prayer is... The only prerequisite for prayer is that we be ourselves.”

It was in Rosemary Chinnici’s class on The Psychology and Theology of Religious Leadership, in between our reading of Thomas Merton and our discussion with visiting minister Richard Gilbert, that I realized the degree to which poetry has already functioned as prayer in my life for as long as I can remember. Throughout

my life it is open-ended writing, and the freedom of free verse in particular, that I have turned to to explore and probe a thought, idea or struggle that I couldn't easily talk about with a friend, and yet couldn't let go of either. I have turned to poetry to explore what could only just barely be put into words.

Sometimes I sit and hum a tune. Sometimes I type in one word that I didn't expect and stare at it with some puzzlement for several minutes. Sometimes a poem flows out of me with such urgency that I lean back after typing in the last word, spent for a moment and astonished again with the realization of how much this poem needed to be written, this practice needs to be done: it both empties and replenishes me.

I have a lot further to go in terms of understanding how this daily writing practice and the many different traditional and contemporary notions of prayer overlap and stretch one another. My daily writing practice is only the beginning of trust, the beginning of believing that sitting each day for 15 minutes and allowing something I did not orchestrate, anticipate, organize or plan to come forth is *worth doing*. I also believe that through this practice I am developing an embodied relationship with words that I will carry into my ministry. I believe that when we make a practice of being intentional and deliberate with our words, we come through habit to use and incorporate these sacred words into our daily lives.