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Activist WPA, The

Linda Adler-Kassner

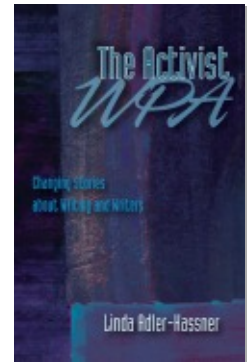
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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In the yoga class that I took each week while I was writing this book, our teacher, Michael, reminded us to practice *pranayama*, breath that vibrates in the back of the throat. (Michael described it as the breath you make if you're trying to fog up a mirror.) "Hearing everyone else's breath," he said, "reminds us that we practice in a community—we don't practice alone." Instead, we're a group. If we need help with poses we can look around us at fellow practitioners to see what they're doing. It also reminds us to focus on the here and now—to be in *this* moment, in this time and space. Not two minutes ago, not in the future—now, now, and now. Together, here, now.

Together, here, and now are three ideas that run throughout this book. When I described this project to people who asked about it (and even those who didn't), I would tell them that I was working on a book about strategies for writing program administrators (WPAs) and writing instructors to employ to affect policy. But this shorthand summary doesn't really do justice to the work involved in "developing strategies," or to the ways of thinking and working that emerged during the process of research, thinking, and writing this book. Instead this is really about understanding ourselves as WPAs and teachers and working from this understanding to enter into relationships that invariably continually change that understanding in sometimes unexpected and surprising ways. Our breath is our own, yes. But when we hear the breath of others and develop our practice in concert with others, that practice changes in ways we don't always anticipate. The work that has gone into this book has changed my own practice as a teacher and administrator—even a person outside of the world of work—in ways I never

could have anticipated. It's given me invaluable gifts—time, ideas, insight, humor, wisdom, reflection—and I have greedily accepted them, turning them over and around to think about how I can incorporate them into my own practices.



Whenever I pick up a new (academic) book, I look at the acknowledgement page to see who shared in the experience of the authors in the creation of the work. I'm painfully aware of the conventions of acknowledgment-as-genre; in this instance, as in those others, the thanks I convey here go far beyond the words that appear on this page. I literally couldn't have written this book without the groups and individuals I list here (and a lot of others I don't because of space constraints).

When I started to think about how to undertake the research for this book, I realized quickly that I wanted to learn from others who had experience learning about organizational cultures and developing strategies within those cultures. I of course looked to academic sources; however, I also wanted to spend time with others who were engaged in this kind of work with real people. For this, I turned first to my friend Gary Magenta, vice president of sales and marketing at Root Learning, a strategic engagement company. Gary made it possible for me to attend presentations, talk with Root staff, and get a broad sense of Root's methodology for learning about client cultures. Katie Outcault, Root's director of strategic innovation and client services, was also incredibly generous with her time, allowing me to participate in team meetings and to talk with her team about how Root gathers and uses information.

This book would not have been possible without the community organizers and media activists who generously shared their ideas, their time, and their incredible wisdom with me: Eleanor Milroy of the Industrial Areas Foundation; Erik Peterson from Wellstone Action; Bruce Budner from the Rockridge Institute; Anat Shenker-Osorio from Real Reason; Normon Solomon; Laura Sapanora from the SPIN Project; Michel Gelobter from Redefining Progress; and Joan Blades from MoveOn.org and

Moms Rising. Additionally, during the time I spent with Anat, she brought me to a presentation by Alan Jenkins of the Opportunity Agenda (OA). While I did not spend the same kind of one-on-one time with him that I did with others listed here, I have benefited from him and OA's work as well. Each of these organizations is working to change stories about *their* issues in innovative, challenging, and *successful* ways—and we can continue to learn from them all (I've included contact information for each organization in the appendix). I am also grateful to the NCTE staff who took time to talk with me about their work to change stories about writers and writing: Kent Williamson, Ann Ruggles Gere, Paul Bodmer, Barbara Cambridge, and Millie Davis.

Second are the people who helped me think about and work through the connection between spirituality, especially Jewish spirituality, and the ideas here. I benefited enormously from an early and formative conversation with Rabbi Robert Levy of Ann Arbor's Temple Beth Emeth (TBE), who generously shared his time to listen to the ideas of a neophyte Jewish philosopher. Jan Price of the Ann Arbor Jewish Cultural Society, my own community of practice, both listened to my ideas and shared her amazing talent, knowledge, and wealth of resources with me as I worked through early ideas about Judaism included here. Aimee Rozum provided both insight and support as I worked through the process of writing this book. I also am grateful to TBE's Cantor Annie Rose and participants in the Jewish spirituality seminar that Annie led in late 2006. The members of this group formed a community where I, a non-TBE member, felt safe and comfortable raising hard questions about the ways that I (and others) enact our beliefs and principles. I am also grateful to my colleague Jeff Bernstein, a colleague from Eastern Michigan University's political science department for his input on chapter 6.

My friends in our fantastic profession of composition and rhetoric, as always, provided enormous support during the process of writing and revising this book. Dawn Skorczewski read most of this book and provided both helpful comments and great cheerleading along the way. My friend and EMU colleague

Cathy Fleischer also read much of this work in progress, providing incredibly amazing and speedy feedback in the clutch. Heidi Estrem, Susanmarie Harrington, and Sherry Linkon have read many pieces of this manuscript in various forms, also sharing advice, reassurance, and chocolate along the way. I met Shawn Hellman at the 2007 WPA conference; she volunteered to read a revision of chapters 1 and 6 and also provided remarkably thorough and insightful comments. Eli Goldblatt is a great model of what it looks like to be an “academic” who is involved in the community. My colleagues in the Council of Writing Program Administrators Network for Media Action (WPA-NMA)—especially Dominic Delli Carpini, Darsie Bowden, and Pete Vandenberg—have made thinking about all of these ideas fun, interesting, and as collaborative as can be. I’m also grateful to WPA-NMA members for sharing vignettes about their WPA experiences with me for chapters 4 and 5 of this book. As successive presidents of the Council of Writing Program Administrators, Chris Anson and Shirley Rose have both supported and encouraged the WPA-NMA’s work. This book has its origins in a conversation that Chris, Shirley, and I had one night during the 2004 National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) conference about the challenges that writing instructors and WPAs faced; the next morning, running through the dark streets of Indianapolis, I sketched the outline for it in my head. At the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) the next year, when I had a firmer sense of the project, I sought out Michael Spooner to see if Utah State University Press might be interested in the manuscript. Michael’s encouragement has been unwavering from that time on. Michael and Utah State have been a joy to work with from start to finish.

I am also thankful for the incredible group of colleagues I now have at Eastern Michigan University. I’ve already mentioned Cathy Fleischer; Heidi Estrem (now at Boise State, but always with us in spirit) and Carol Schlagheck read and provided great advice on portions of this book. As department head, Russ Larson provided enormous support for EMU’s First Year Writing

Program. Ann Blakeslee, Steve Krause, Cheryl Cassidy, Doug Baker, and Steve Benninghoff all listened to and supported me through the process of writing this book, as did two remarkable former EMU graduate students/instructors, Jennifer Castillo and Liane Robertson. My thanks also to Alicia Vonderharr, who indexed it for me. These colleagues make it challenging (in the good sense) and fun to come to work every day. EMU also supported this work with a research leave for the 2006–07 school year, and I am thankful to the Josephine Nevins Keal Fund for a grant to support the travel required for this book.

Acknowledgments sections always mention the author's family, but in this case this book was a real family affair. My husband Scott Kassner provided incredible moral support, reminding me that I *could* write this book and (as is typically the case) being far more patient with me than I am with myself. A Renaissance kind of guy, Scott read and provided incredibly helpful feedback on the sections of this book that deal with historical narrative *and* provided flexibility with family time, especially during the time I spent on the road for research. Our daughter, Nora Kassner, knows more about most things than we do; she also indulged me in conversations about teaching, learning, administration, and organizing work as I've put this book together. My brother, Bill Meyer, put me up (and put up with me) for eight days of research work in San Francisco and put me in contact with Norman Solomon while busily teaching his own history classes at Marin Academy and preparing for the academy's annual Conference on Democracy. Finally, I would be remiss if I didn't thank my original organizing teacher, my mother Connie Adler. Now retired from her career as a professional activist, editor, and all-around hell-raiser, she is busily taking photographs, acting as the secretary of the bio-diesel co-op, hiking around with the dogs, traveling, fulfilling responsibilities in the native plant co-op, sitting on the board of a new charter school, and joining "the progressive community" (her words) for coffee every Saturday morning at ten o'clock in Silver City, New Mexico. She provides an incredible model for activists everywhere.

THE ACTIVIST WPA

