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## Genre Across The Curriculum

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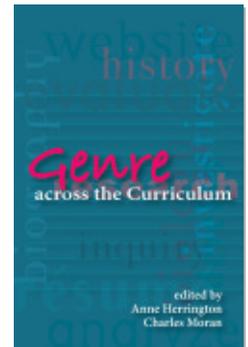
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# READING AND WRITING, TEACHING AND LEARNING SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Elizabeth A. Petroff

I teach a general-education course at the University of Massachusetts entitled Spiritual Autobiography in which students read and write autobiography. The course is centered around the interrelationships between the act of reading autobiography and that of writing it: through reading autobiography students can discover how different writers express their own experiences, and as a result write in new ways, and through the act of writing their own life experiences students gain a new understanding of their own lives as well as coming to be better readers of autobiography. We focus on the experience of the artist reading her own autobiography as she writes it, along with the experience of the reader who composes his own autobiography as he reads another's autobiography. It is now a commonplace in studies of autobiography to assert that the self comes into existence only through writing or narrating; my task is to show what that means in practice.

I've been teaching in universities for over thirty years, and I've taught Spiritual Autobiography for twenty years, usually in the format of a large lecture for about 150 students and weekly discussion sections of 30 students. The course is usually elected by first- and second-year students, many of whom have not yet chosen a major and for whom this will be the only literature course in their college careers. It satisfies the general-education requirement of a Global Diversity arts and literature class, and most students say they chose the course to satisfy this requirement, not because they had a prior interest in autobiography.

The reading list varies from year to year, but for the sake of brevity I will be writing primarily about the course in fall 2002. We read seven books in a fourteen-week semester, which allowed us on the average two weeks of lectures and two discussion sections for each book. The syllabus includes *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, by Harriet Jacobs (2000); *A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, the earliest of Douglass's three autobiographies

(2000); *Black Elk Speaks*, as told to John Neihardt (1932); *Obasan*, by Joy Kogawa (1994); *Dreams of My Russian Summers*, by Andrei Makine (1997); *Of Water and the Spirit*, by Malidoma Patrice Some (1995); and *The Far East Comes Near*, edited by Lucy Nguyen and Joel Halpern (1960). These texts come from many different parts of the globe and several historical periods, as is required for a course meeting the guidelines for Global Diversity. As autobiographies they share two important qualities: they are “spiritual” autobiographies in which the protagonist, even when denied agency and subjectivity, is engaged in a deep inward search for meaning, often in response to trauma; and they are autobiographies of young people the same age as the students.

While students are reading these books, hearing about them in lectures, and talking about them in discussion sections, they are also writing out their own experiences in the form of three short autobiographical papers on aspects or events of their lives suggested by a list of possible topics. In addition to writing autobiographical essays, students are asked to demonstrate their understanding of autobiography in take-home midterm and final exams. Since one of the goals of the class is understanding the connections between the reading and writing of creative texts, the midterm and final offer students several different ways to demonstrate their experience of these books. Some questions ask them to respond discursively by comparing and contrasting different authors and books; other questions ask them to engage with autobiographers and their autobiographies in more personal ways, such as interviewing Harriet Jacobs, or writing a letter to Andrei Makine. Several questions encourage students to compare the themes and styles of their own essays with some of the autobiographies we read. Another tool for self-reflection was provided in a survey I created to learn more about how students perceived their own learning experiences in the course and the connections they perceived between reading and writing autobiography.

My intention in offering this class to fulfill a general-education requirement is to give students an opportunity to enrich their knowledge of other times and other cultures; the readings are designed to give them a more personalized understanding of history and of the twentieth-century world by reading American slave narratives, Native American autobiographies, and accounts of wartime internment in North America, student life in the Soviet Union during the cold war, and the legacy of colonial occupation in traditional societies in Africa and Southeast Asia. Almost all the texts speak of the authors’ experience of biculturalism in these coming-of-age stories,

and in my lectures I explore the different modes of biculturalism all of us experience as the descendants of aboriginal peoples, immigrants, refugees, and colonists. I also try to give students access to the historical and cultural background they need to better participate in their reading, and to catalyze students' personal insights in the course of reading the life stories of writers the same age as they are. In my lectures, I try to weave together the themes of commonality and of difference, in our lives and in these books, while providing background material that helps place each book.

## **WHAT IS AUTOBIOGRAPHY?**

### **Reading Autobiography**

We read and write autobiography for similar reasons: a search for self-knowledge and a desire to place ourselves in the world. In reading, we communicate with a transpersonal world, learning what it feels like to live in other times or in other cultures. In another's autobiography an alienated young reader may discover a kindred soul or identify a role model to be followed. Reading autobiography allows us to find ourselves in others and to see our own experiences from a new perspective. It also teaches us how to shape our own experience in writing from the inside out. What I term "spiritual autobiography" is autobiography that explores the deepest parts of the self, the inner force that can keep us alive in the direst and most traumatic of circumstances, and at the same time reveals our place in the universe, our connections with other beings and other forms of consciousness.

All of these dimensions of reading center on the reader and his or her response to the autobiographical text, yet the life must be lived before the text is narrated or written. The autobiographical text is the mediator between the lived experience of the author and the reflective experience of the reader. The languages and styles of autobiography show us readers how our deepest experiences may be put into words. Reading autobiography is itself an autobiographical act, for there is a continual process of association, memory, and insight that takes place as we read, which leads to the construction of a reading self. You cannot read the autobiography of another person without remembering and understanding more of your own life.

### **Writing Autobiography**

The self that comes into existence through reading is similar to the self that comes into existence through writing, through the process of

reading one's own autobiography while writing it. We embark on the process of autobiography in order to remember and account for our experiences. Even though one might think that the narrative of an autobiography is already known, since it has been lived by the narrator, in actuality autobiography is the inscription of an inner life far deeper than a mere listing of events. We write autobiography, then, to discover our selves, often by tracing continuity and loss in our lives, or by examining where we've been and where we want to be. We also write to understand the others in our lives, to recapture certain moments that will not return, and to analyze our own motives. Sometimes we need autobiography to find healing, to confess, or to seek forgiveness, although this may not be the conscious justification for beginning to write. We may write autobiography when we feel we have reached the end of one phase of our lives and are embarking upon another phase. We may write in order to let go of the things that haunt us; it is a hedge against death, as well as a way to integrate our different selves and the memories they carry for us.

### **The Genre of Autobiography**

We know that an autobiography (etymologically "self-life-writing") is the story of a lived life, containing narratives of moments the author finds meaningful for the purposes of self-representation and reflection. We can never write the whole truth of our whole lives (although some diarists may aim for such inclusiveness). An autobiography is always selective, always retrospective, and often unfinished; it calls into question the writer's identity, sincerity, honesty. In writing an autobiography, the writer uses the resources of prose and poetry and blurs the line between truth and fiction.

Autobiography, as a genre, is characterized by questioning one's experience. And as an object of critical study, autobiography raises questions about chronology and causality; how can someone tell his or her life story when the ending is not yet known? What aspects of a person's experience can an autobiography represent? Since the medium of autobiography is language, can language represent visual or nonverbal consciousness? To what extent does autobiography represent culture in revealing contemporary assumptions about race, class, and gender, and to what extent does it represent individual consciousness? What constraints are externally imposed on autobiography? How much of a life can be spoken publicly? And what about a dictated autobiography? Can a second person, no matter how sympathetic, represent to us the world of a person who does not

write? How is it that the exploration of interiority may come to represent a universe, a cosmos that is home to the individual?

Fortunately for the many readers of autobiography, the complex issues involved in defining autobiography have little to do with the popularity of the form. Today, publishers, booksellers, and teachers know that autobiography has wide appeal to readers of all classes and backgrounds, that Western and non-Western readers enjoy reading autobiographies, that historically autobiography has been popular in the East as well as the West. Women writers and readers exhibit a preference for autobiography, and have done so for a millennium. Although popular autobiography in the West is thought to have arisen at the same time as the novel, in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century in Europe, deriving from current notions of the individual, of religious or moral introspection, and social mobility, women were writing their spiritual or visionary autobiographies much earlier (see Petroff 1986). Consequently, the bibliography positioning the history and practice of autobiography is very large. Contemporary autobiography exhibits many different models of subjectivity, identity, and individuality, and at the same time, definitions of what constitutes an autobiographical text have become wider and more flexible; we now include diaries, memoirs, letters, and as-told-to narratives under the heading of autobiography. Many contemporary novels are autobiographical fiction, as are travel records, family chronicles, communal storytelling. Studies of autobiography have moved away from focusing on the individual narrative of a personality (which limited autobiography to those texts by Western, literate, and mostly male writers), and many scholars in the field now speak of autobiography as composed of collective voices, or position collaborative autobiographies, tribal and community representations, alongside autobiographies of individual identities.

Writing in 1971, one scholar defined autobiography as “the retrospective prose narrative that someone writes concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality” (Lejeune 1989, viii), a statement that applies to eighteenth-century as well as twentieth-century autobiography, but, as Lejeune himself notes, fails to distinguish between “autobiography and the autobiographical novel” (ix). Rather, a writer establishes a boundary between fact and fiction by the “autobiographical pact,” the signs within a text of authorial intention (ix). Reading *On Autobiography*, which includes English translations of chapters from Lejeune’s best-known studies of autobiography, one sees the evolution of notions of autobiography from individual and

confessional to collective and historical. Recent studies by James Olney (*Memory and Narrative* [1998]) and John Eakins (*How Our Lives Become Stories* [1999]) are useful for their careful explication of this more inclusive view of the genre.

Those new to designing courses on autobiography in the West might begin with Jill Ker Conway's recent study, *When Memory Speaks* (1998); having written her own autobiography, Conway reports on the "history of self-narrative in modern and postmodern times" (4), observing that "virtually the only prose narratives which are accorded the suspension of disbelief today are the autobiographers' attempts to narrate the history of a real life" (5). Autobiography attracts us because it gives us the sensation of that rare experience of being allowed inside another person's experience and provides us with an alternative to our own perspective. An autobiography is also a window into a culture: "Whether we are aware of it or not," Conway says, "our culture gives us an inner script by which we live our lives . . . and the dynamics of that script come from what our world defines as success or achievement" (6).

Conway speculates on the difference gender makes in autobiography. She finds the shaping male narrative to come from the classical epic, and that sense of agency carries over into Christian autobiography, right up to frontier narratives and the quest for meaning in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. For women, she says, the shaping narratives are different (they weren't citizens and were supposed to keep silent in church): "[I]t was within the special enclave of religious life that the tradition of Western European women's autobiography was first established, in narratives about the autobiographer's relationship with God. Such a tradition, involving a relationship with a first cause, did not permit the development of a sense of agency and acting on one's own behalf with which the Greek idea of the hero is fused. Instead, it promoted meditation about the nature of God and the recording of direct experience of divine revelation" (12). In my own work, I argue that there is a strong sense of agency to be found in religious women's autobiographies, an agency that results from a dialogue with God (Petroff 1986). Carolly Erickson (1998) also posits a different approach to narratives about one's relationship with a higher power, also crediting such narratives with an awareness of agency, in *Arc of the Arrow: Writing Your Spiritual Autobiography*. She further provides a number of models for creating writing assignments that will assist readers in writing their own spiritual autobiographies.

A text my teaching assistants and I have found useful in course design, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2001), sets out to “explore the building blocks and components of autobiographical acts, review the histories of autobiographies and autobiographical criticism, and offer a ‘tool kit’ of pertinent questions for twenty key concepts” (xi). In their chapter on autobiographical subjects they identify five elements that make up an author’s representation of subjectivity: memory, experience, identity, embodiment, and agency (15–16), which constitute commonalities among all the books we read in my class. In preparing lectures for each book, we may address the meaning of these elements for each writer, and how they are contingent upon the culture and historical moment in which the author is presenting his or her life narrative. I’ll give a few examples of how I utilize Smith and Watson’s ideas.

For instance, memory for Black Elk is closely tied to his experience as he narrates his personal memories of his visions and of the major events of his search for healing for his people, contextualized by his understanding of the collective history of the Plains Indians up to the slaughter at Wounded Knee in 1887. His identity as a visionary is embedded in his awareness of race and gender as well as defined by the responsibility he feels for all Native Americans in his role as shaman and spiritual guide; his sense of agency is represented by his desire to learn how Wasichus think about their world, his attempts to find a common ground for cross-cultural communication, and his feelings of failure in his later life on the reservation. His sense of embodiment includes his out-of-body experiences.

Linda Brent (the pseudonym of Harriet Jacobs, the author of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*) begins with her memories of her early childhood, before she knew she was a slave. Her memories then become intertwined with her experiences in slavery, and are conditioned by her gender as well as her status as a house slave. Her sense of embodiment is represented by her awareness of her vulnerability to the sexual advances of her white master and white lover. The language she chooses to tell her life story is colored by her knowledge that as a woman in the domestic culture of the nineteenth century she ought not to speak of her sexual experiences, as well as by her conviction that she must communicate her sexual experience if she is to demonstrate the terrible fate of female slaves: deprived of any rights over their own bodies, helpless to protect the children they bear, and forbidden to marry and live faithfully with a black man they choose. “Linda Brent” vividly portrays the contradictions in asserting her

own agency—she can be free only by surviving seven years hidden in a crawl space in her grandmother’s house (located just around the corner from the home of her master) and by using her intelligence to defeat her master psychologically as she convinces him (by means of letters purportedly written by her safe in the north) that she has already escaped his grasp.

Smith and Watson demonstrate other ways of reading the affinities in autobiographies by asking their readers to look at the occasions that solicit a life narrative (John Neihardt interviewing Black Elk in old age, the women abolitionists in Massachusetts who encourage Linda Brent to write and publish her story, the abolitionists’ meeting in Nantucket that provides the stage for Frederick Douglass to tell his story to a white male audience). Sites of narration are equally important and condition the audience in how to read a story: a southern plantation, the city of Baltimore, the Great Plains and the reservation, an internment camp for Japanese Americans, an African village and a French Catholic school. In “spiritual” autobiography, we find other sites of narration, ones not found in the physical world; one of Linda Brent’s sites is the experience of expansion and freedom while cooped up in her hiding space. One of Black Elk’s sites is the world of the Grandfathers in the sky, the true reality behind what we take as reality in the physical world. There are “characters” in our autobiographies: the autobiographical “I” testifies to the veracity of the story, and the “Others” reveal the narrator in relationship and dialogue with other people. The addressees, the audience selected by the narrator, affect the way a story is told and contribute to the readers’ and auditors’ complicity in the telling.

#### **WHAT IS SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY?**

This brings us to the nature of spiritual autobiography. We have noted in passing a number of identifying traits of spiritual autobiography: (1) it is the inscription of an inner life far deeper than a mere listing of events (2) in which the protagonist, denied agency and subjectivity, is engaged in a deep inward search for meaning, and (3) in which the exploration of interiority may come to represent a universe, a cosmos that is home to the individual. As in autobiography in general, spiritual autobiography is a retrospective, interrupted narrative, often written early in life. All autobiography is a search for truth, but the writers of spiritual autobiography seem to look for a demonstrable truth, repeatable truth, that they can carry with them into the future. They see their lives from the fulcrum of

a radical change, a before and after, a deep rupture separating very different experiences, an epiphany that suddenly makes sense of previous experience. Seventeenth-century spiritual autobiography found this fulcrum in the search for inner proof of being saved or damned, as in John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1662). Experiences such as emigration, catastrophic events, natural disasters, loss of family—all precipitators of spiritual autobiography—bring along with them a sense of isolation and abandonment and create a search for community. It is paradoxical that spiritual autobiography, perhaps the most inward turning of autobiographical forms, is at the same time the most community oriented of all, for in autobiography as well as real life, the individual experience of trauma may be healed in the return to community.

Such autobiographies reveal a process of healing to the writer and the reader. In writing spiritual autobiography, contemporary writers can reveal the deepest parts of themselves, their buried experience of trauma, of illness or abuse, of crimes of war. In the process of finding words for the buried fragments of experience, whether the autobiographers are survivors of childhood sexual abuse or life in a concentration camp, the language they discover on their written pages gives an objective, externalized shape to their experience, now an experience for readers as well, demonstrating to themselves and to their readers that the act of writing transforms their isolating experiences of pain into a bond with others.

Contemporary readers and writers believe that autobiographers are not limited by formal considerations: autobiographies may easily take the form of diaries narrating events day by day (like Carolina Maria de Jesus's *Child of the Dark* [1962] or Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl* [1952]) or of life writing focusing on the experience of exile, or escape from slavery, or capture by the Indians. The memoir form, which develops a narrative on a significant part of a life rather than on a total life review, seems most appropriate to many spiritual autobiographers, where the central focus may be on the portrayal of a person important to the autobiographer's self-understanding (such as Andrei Makine's French grandmother in *Dreams of My Russian Summers*) or a moment in which the meaning of life for the autobiographer changed utterly. Resistance to war, or ideology, may be the cause of the rupture that initiates spiritual autobiography, as it is in Carlo Levi's narrative of his exile in *Christ Stopped at Eboli* (1970), in Primo Levi's recollections of his concentration camp experiences in *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity* (1993), and in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, detailing her search for understanding in the Canadian

relocation camps for those of Japanese descent . Similarly, a memoir may single out for examination the rupture in a life caused by becoming a refugee, or emigrating to another country, by experiencing threatening or terminal illness, as in Marie Cardinal's *The Words to Say It* (1983), or undergoing great personal loss, as in Isabel Allende's *Paula* (1994), written on the illness and death of her daughter.

What *does* matter, what is essential if spiritual autobiography is to effect a change in the writer, is the actual writing (or speaking aloud) of the words, for the words that an autobiographer finds perform a kind of alchemy on hidden suffering, in which the leaden experiences of personal or collective pain are refined, transformed into gold, as it were, liberating the autobiographer from isolation and loneliness, able at last to forge links to other human beings. The density of inner pain becomes expansive, stony hearts melt, and the experience provides metaphors and structures for the perceived new life.

My hypothesis about how spiritual autobiography effects transformations in writers and their readers also derives from understanding the impact of trauma on the lives around me. Thanks to modern psychology, we all know something about how great pain (especially but not exclusively in childhood) creates fractures in the self, severing the person who undergoes pain from the person who remembers, often burying the pain in another self, leaving the dominant personality with a kind of amnesia in the deepest levels of the psyche. In writing an anatomy of the moments of suffering in his or her life, the autobiographer performs a kind of *anamnesis*, a recollection that reconstitutes the inner pain by standing outside it in order to record it. This remembering forges a dialogue in which the broken pieces of the self may communicate with the social or public self-representation. It is this dialogue that not only brings forth healing, but speaks to the audience to engage us, the readers, and to bring us to a higher understanding of what it means to be a human being. The act of writing the autobiography of the soul not only unifies the divided self, it creates a luminous space in which readers begin to re-create and understand the creative uses of their own suffering and its relation to their own survival.

And since pain often brings guilt with it, as one tries to justify one's suffering to oneself, the autobiographer must forgive him- or herself *and* forgive those that caused the suffering. This circle of forgiveness also embraces the reader, as the reader's own suffering comes to light. As Nakamura Sensei says to the family gathered for Uncle's funeral in Joy

Kogawa's *Obasan*, "We are powerless to forgive unless we first are forgiven" (1994, 287).

It seems that the art of experiencing spiritual autobiography, as writer or reader, is a delicate one to learn. Often we do not willingly explore our own pain or that of others. Something in our daily experience, some mystery in our sense of self, some glimpse of a new life, must compel us to go into those depths. If we are to gain from our reading, and share in an author's progression from dark to light, we need to write our own experiences as we read. We need to practice our own alchemy of suffering.

### HELPING STUDENTS WRITE SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

If one believes that the best way to learn to read spiritual autobiography is to try writing it, one needs to create assignments that will prompt students to examine their own lives. Such assignments will of course highlight many of the essentials of good expository writing: immediacy, vivid descriptions of remembered details, sense impressions and emotions, clarity of thought and sentence structure. Over years of teaching spiritual autobiography, I have learned some rules for creating effective assignments that students are ready to write. My first rule is to avoid large, generalized topics: no assignments on "My High School Years" or "My Parents' Divorce": no topics that ask for the meaning of life. I do not ask my students to begin their autobiographical writing by searching into the deepest parts of themselves. I learned, when I first began teaching this class, that nothing paralyzes a group of students faster than asking them to write about meaning in their own lives. My second rule is to create assignments that allow for individual experience to come forward: "My Earliest Memory," "A Recurring Dream or Nightmare," "My First Day of School." My third rule is to create a progression of assignments that will build confidence in one's ability to reflect on one's own life, beginning with short narratives in which the writer presents his or her perceived reality, moving on to more complex events involving others, often accompanied by ambivalent feelings.

So when I distribute assignments for the first paper (see appendix 1, "Paper Topics"), I simply encourage students to *remember*—to remember an early memory, a recurring dream or nightmare, a moment in their family history, the mood when a certain snapshot was taken. I ask them to make this memory as vivid as possible for the reader. Show, not tell, is the guideline here. Create the presentness of the remembered moment by physically inhabiting it with all your senses. To write out your physical

sensations, you may need to describe colors, the scent in the air, the room in which something happened, the clothes you were wearing, the weather that day. Also observe your feelings, the movement of your emotions, the sensation of time slowing down or speeding up. If you wish, you may end your paper by speculating on why you think you remember this experience, how it speaks to the person you are today. Some students will think they don't have anything to remember that's big enough for a whole paper, and I encourage them by saying they will be surprised at what they remember once they get started. They may modify the suggestions any way they wish, or try a topic of their own choosing.

The first assignments don't ask students to identify "spiritual" experiences. I ask them to write out "personal" experience, the memories that are exclusively their own, so they can begin to see a self take form on paper. The paper is due within the first month of classes, when the lectures and discussions are exploring what "spiritual" means in broad terms, separate from religious worship or the expression of piety. I hope students will come to see "spirituality" as experience shared by all of us, contacting our deepest sources of strength and starting to reveal our place in the universe.

I give students ten to fourteen days to write this first paper; I point out similar passages in the book we're reading in class at the time; I encourage them to take risks and experiment with writing style. I ask them to give the paper a title that will direct the reader's attention, and bring the paper with them to their discussion section to turn in. If the discussion leader senses trust in the room, he or she can ask the students to form small groups and help each other proofread and edit their papers. The emphasis is on learning to be helpful in reading someone's writing, never to be judgmental.

A couple of weeks before the second or third paper is due, I remind students that they can choose another topic from the first list or select a new topic from a new list I pass out. Many of these topics are more complex: I may ask for a portrait of a person about whom you have strong feelings or a description of a relationship you have with such a person. I encourage them to create portraits of boyfriends or girlfriends, but the portraits should reveal the idiosyncrasies, the little revealing gestures, the personal differences that have to be bridged, rather than employing the language of Hallmark cards. Writing about a pet or the loss of a pet, about the first friend you made, or the first book you remember—all such topics will lead the writer to represent himself or herself in dialogue with

something or someone, in relationship with something that matters. For the third paper, when we have explored the role of trauma in spirituality and analyzed ways in which writers deal with the ruptures in their lives, some of the suggested topics may seem quite abstract: write about an experience of loss, about a challenge you successfully met, about a “failure” that brought something good with it. Yet the process of writing on one of these topics is not abstract at all; the “experience of loss” must be remembered, relived, objectified so that a reader can experience it too, and these are the papers that at the end of the semester students find to be most revealing of themselves and most comforting to recall.

Sometimes students choose to link all three papers thematically or chronologically; more often they use the papers to explore very different aspects of their lives. Since this course, as I teach it, is directed primarily to first-year students, writing assignments don’t ask students specifically to employ a particular kind of rhetoric, although we discuss rhetorical strategies used by our different writers. I don’t ask students to write autobiography in the form of a diary, or a memoir, or in the second or third person, although we discuss how an author uses these modes. Many upperclassmen do choose to experiment with form and style; if a student chooses to write about a traumatic event, especially physical or sexual abuse, he or she will often choose to write in the third person.

#### **STUDENTS’ WRITING: HOW STUDENTS PERCEIVE AND DESCRIBE THEIR EXPERIENCE**

Students enrolled in *Spiritual Autobiography* in fall 2002 were invited to complete a survey on their experience of the reading and writing dimensions of the course. This was the first time I had used such a survey to gather student assessments of how the class worked for them; in the past I had used the standard teaching evaluation forms supplied by the Department of Comparative Literature, but I felt that writing this essay necessitated a closer knowledge of students’ perceptions of the course. In all, 86 of the 140 registered students completed the survey, and it is their responses to the survey questions from which I quote below. I asked them to share with me several kinds of information: (1) the topics they chose to write on; (2) how they now assess their writings, including whether they had a particular favorite; (3) what they learned about themselves through the process of writing; (4) what they learned from reading autobiographies that they could apply to writing their own stories; and (5) what they valued in the books they had read. The following themes were evident in their responses.

### **The Importance of Memory**

In response to questions on their own writing experience, many students said that the assignments allowed them to remember more details of their lives and to treasure their memories. The act of writing allowed them to see into themselves and their families in greater depth. There was surprising breadth to their responses concerning their pleasure in writing and reading their memories. Some of their responses: “I liked reflecting on what I’ve done/accomplished. I liked writing about the Super Bowl because I spent it with my best friends, and now that we’re all away at different schools, it brought back good memories”; “I learned that I could actually go back in time and remember what happened and write from my experiences”; “It’s fun to remember your past, but also sometimes emotional and sad. Either way it is important to remember where you’re from and remember memory, because I wrote about my mother and how my memories of her will never be forgotten”; “It was fun to reflect on my experiences. My writing showed me that I’ve overcome several obstacles.”

### **Benefits of Choice of Topics**

Students liked the variety of suggested topics and the freedom to write on a topic of their choice. “I enjoyed the freedom that was given to me regarding my papers”; “I liked the fact that we had a choice of topics, which made it easier to get into writing the paper.”

### **The Importance of Feeling**

There was a wide range of responses to questions about what they learned about themselves while writing and reading. Some focused on what they learned about expressing emotions and feelings: “I liked writing and exploring myself. I learned how to look at the inner part of me, underneath the surface”; “I learned that putting emotion in your writing can make a great deal of difference to holding a reader’s attention”; “I learned that the feelings the writer uses can/does have a great effect on the reader understanding the intensity”; “I truly learned that I like reading autobiographies and until now, I did not know of any book type that I would enjoy reading.”

Other students stressed what they learned about the complexity of emotion. “I learned that sometimes an experience can be more than happy or sad, there are many layers to the memory”; “I liked reading about details

and emotions rather than just facts”; “I enjoyed the first autobiography the most because it was the one that I was the most emotionally vested in. It made me sad because I miss my relative a lot, but I was also happy while writing them because it brought back some fond memories.”

Many students spoke of the difficulty they have had in the past with identifying and expressing their emotions. “I learned that I’m a person who doesn’t easily decide what my emotions are, or maybe I try not to know what they are. Writing really helped me to evaluate certain situations and helped to figure out how I was really feeling”; “[I learned] that I don’t really like to discuss my feelings, but with the encouragement of my TA, I went into deeper depths about how I felt and wrote more about myself as opposed to just telling a story”; “It gave me a chance to actually reflect deeply on topics I often don’t get an opportunity to. I have a deeper sense of feelings on topics such as these that I didn’t know I was aware of.”

Many responses hinted at self-knowledge, and new writing strategies, that came from the experiences of both reading and writing: “From reading autobiographies I applied my feelings much more intensely, and I was able to clearly express myself from understanding the books”; “I learned about myself and realized what an amazing story I have. I learned about style—and intimacy. My writing became open, personal, and *very* intimate”; “While I was writing, I realized that I don’t work well with change. Most of my papers were sad and discussed topics varying from a tragic breakup to a friend committing suicide”; “The styles of some of the autobiographies I took to write my own. It made me learn how to open up and not hold anything back”; “I’ve found that incorporating lots of emotion is more effective in telling your story.”

### **The Importance of Description and Detail**

Students seem to have discovered for themselves how important full description, with many sensory details, can be in expressing experience. “I . . . learned to show not tell and be more descriptive”; “I learned that each autobiography needs a lot of detail and description to be able to understand what someone is going through.” Their insights about the importance of description were often connected to honesty about emotions. “I learned that telling the whole story, not holding back, would make my writing a lot more powerful”; “Be open, honest, and sincere. Also explain your surroundings and show your story to others”; “When reading autobiographies, I was able to picture the experiences in my

mind. Therefore, when writing I learned that I had to be more descriptive so the reader can mentally envision my story.”

### **Writing as Therapy**

In class lectures and discussions, we rarely spoke directly about the idea of writing as therapy, yet the theme came up often in student responses about their own writing. “It gave me the opportunity to write about Sept. 11 which I witnessed—it was painful but I feel as though it helped”; “Writing about these instances was painful at times but therapeutic. I vented my anger through the language in the paper and tried to write (the first two especially) in the first person so I could put myself back in time”; “[T]he three exercises were therapeutic. It was admitting to past stupidities and looking them right in the eye. Why the hell did I do that? What was I thinking?”; “I got so much from simply writing about myself. From this class, the three autobiographies, I feel like I have transformed into a stronger, more enlightened person. Through writing, I have been able to see the beauty and the meaning in my life”; “I learned that writing down what I felt helped ease my soul. I felt so much better after I got it down on paper. To open up and leave nothing behind. Just let it all down on paper. Let your emotions run free.” Many students would agree with the young person who said: “When I write an autobiography, I feel strong and proud. It gives me power to know that my life is on paper.”

### **Wider Experience through Reading**

Students often related that the deeper self-knowledge acquired from writing was connected to the wide range of life experiences they were reading about. “All of the autobiographies showed me a different world”; “This course . . . made me explore other cultures and it made me think. It made me think about myself as a person, and it made me think about others as individuals, all with a different story to tell”; “I liked the autobiographies because . . . I could feel their anxiety, pain, fear, or frustration. That they all continued on in times of despair”; “I learned that my life is more eventful than I realized and my experiences have affected me greatly”; “I liked reading these stories because I was able to look into their life and see their spiritual side. They were valuable because they offered knowledge.” Students also noted that they absorbed different styles of autobiography and learned to improve their own writing by reflecting on their reading. Students observed: “I learned that even though not anything that drastic has happened, everyone has a story to tell”; “By reading these

autobiographies I realized that an important key in writing my own was to try and make the memories as real as possible.”

Students felt encouraged to be more direct and honest in their writing by their reading experiences: “Mainly, the honesty that I read has helped me be more honest with myself and look deeper into my real self.” One of the most succinct statements noted: “Some of the best books are about extremely trying/difficult experiences. Don’t block out the bad stuff, *use it.*”

### **Summary of Student Responses on Learning**

In the process of writing autobiographical papers, students found they could remember more events and more details of their own lives than they expected; thanks to the fullness of their memories, they used the paper topics as opportunities for self-analysis and discovered themes in their own lives they’d never noticed before. They felt their writing was empowering for themselves and their families, that it allowed them to see their own lives as interesting and important and to recognize strengths they had not acknowledged earlier. Many students commented on their improved writing skills and appreciated the opportunity to experiment with different styles of narrative. Almost all students ended the course feeling they understood themselves more deeply and had found therapy or healing in both reading and writing.

After teaching Spiritual Autobiography each fall semester, I often questioned whether students had actually internalized the ideas and values that structure the course and had profited from the relationships between reading and writing autobiography. After reading dozens of student autobiographical essays for my discussion sections each semester, I had a pretty good idea of the issues students wrestle with and explore through writing, but I was less sure of what students gained from the books read, and how they related their reading to their writing. The answers to my student survey have reassured me that coordinating writing assignments with autobiographical reading has resulted in a deeper understanding of the books read, more ability to participate in reading as a creative experience, greater self-knowledge, and improved self-expression. The responses I have found particularly moving are those that comment on the pleasure and value of memory and the consolation found in writing through their own suffering. I feel that my hypothesis about the Alchemy of Suffering has been validated and merits further study.

## APPENDIX 1

### PAPER TOPICS: SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

#### TOPICS FOR FIRST AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PAPER

Choose one of the following topics, modifying it to suit your own particular circumstances. The idea is to write a part or scene from your own autobiography. Since you will write three autobiographical papers in this course, you might like to link them as you go along. You will have an opportunity to peer edit this paper and to rewrite it, so please be willing to take risks. Writing your own autobiography is not always easy or comfortable, and there is no one correct way to do it. Papers should be three to five pages in length, typed, double-spaced, and proofread. Make your writing as vivid as possible—don't talk *about* your experience. *Show* your experience to your reader.

1. An early memory. What is the first thing you remember? Describe it as fully as you can, keeping in mind that your consciousness was more limited then, and that you remember things differently now. Why do you think this memory stayed with you? What does it mean to you now?
2. A recurring dream or nightmare. What did you dream? Be as specific as you can. Why was it frightening or memorable? What does it reveal about you?
3. A challenge successfully met, a victory over difficult circumstances.
4. A portrait of a person important in your life, including positive and negative qualities. What does this person mean in your life?
5. Imagine that you are an old person, perhaps retired now, and looking back on your life. Write a letter to the person you are right now, sharing your knowledge of what is important in life. Give enough details of your life story for the reader to understand why your advice is important.

#### TOPICS FOR SECOND AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PAPER

For your next paper, you may choose from one of these topics or use a topic from the previous handout, modifying it to suit your own particular circumstances. You will have an opportunity to peer edit this paper and to rewrite it, so please be willing to take risks. Writing your own

autobiography is not always easy or comfortable, and there is no one correct way to do it. Remember to make your writing as vivid as possible—don't talk *about* your experience. *Show* your experience to your reader.

1. An experience with death or loss. (This could be the death of a pet, or a friend or relative, or the loss of an ideal or a hope.) Who or what did you lose? How did you learn about this loss? What feelings and sensations did you have? How did you deal with those feelings? What have you gained from the experience?
2. A fight and its outcome. Describe a fight you had with someone (it could be on the playground in first grade, or a struggle with a family member, or a breakup of an important relationship). What triggered the fight? How did you handle it? Why was this issue so important to you? What was the outcome? How do you feel about this event now?
3. Traveling to someone of spiritual authority in your life. Spiritual teachers often say that consulting your guru begins with the first step you take. Describe the steps of a journey to someone of authority in your own life; this could be a musical group or an audience with the pope or a visit to a college. What did you learn about yourself in each step of the journey? What happened when you finally arrived?
4. Describe an encounter or a relationship with someone who seemed totally unlike you. How did this encounter or relationship begin? In what ways were you and this person like? unlike? Did you or your ideas change because of this encounter? What was important in the experience?
5. An act of forgiveness. Describe the greatest act of forgiveness you have seen in your life. What needed to be forgiven? How did the forgiver find the strength to forgive? How did you know it was real forgiveness?
6. A relationship with an animal. This could be something like Black Elk's relationship with horses in his vision, or your personal bond with a pet, or rescuing an animal that needed help. Don't just describe the animal—describe the relationship, show what it meant to you at the time and what meaning it has for you now. How do you see human/animal relationships at this point in your life?

### TOPICS FOR THIRD AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PAPER

For your final paper, you may choose from one of these topics or use a topic from the previous handout, modifying it to suit your own particular circumstances. The idea behind these topics is to represent some of the complexity of your inner life: your relationships with others, dealing with painful events in your past, finding your place in the world, learning to

trust. The topics are intended to get you to start thinking about the shape of your own life, and to assist you in reflecting about where you want to go. Remember to make your writing as vivid as possible—don't talk *about* your experience. *Show* your experience to your reader.

1. A new or unfamiliar culture. Describe how the new culture appeared to you, what was confusing about it, how you tried to adapt to it. This might be an experience of traveling, of changing schools or neighborhoods, or it could be more radical, such as the experiences of the Vietnamese refugees we read. Really examine the disorientation, the homesickness, the excitement of newness, the new language.
2. Misunderstanding difference. Tell about a time in which you did not understand a difference you were facing: a miscommunication between friends or family members, or a serious confrontation you got yourself into by not being able to read the (danger) signals, or even discomfort you felt because of different food you were served. What happened? What did you feel? What can you learn from this experience?
3. A paranormal experience such as precognition (knowing the phone will ring just before it does ring), or an out-of-the-body experience (such as floating on the ceiling looking down at your own body, known as "astral projection"), or a dream that foretold a future event. Describe what you felt, saw, or heard as carefully as possible. How did you interpret your experience at the time? How would you interpret it now? What importance does it have in your life?
4. Describe the most important event in your life so far. What was it, when did it happen, what was the context, what were the consequences? Analyze why you believe it is your most important event.
5. A powerful sense experience. Describe a moment in which you were overwhelmed by your sensations. The event might be felt by several senses at once or a single sense experience: a powerful visual image, a breathtaking melody, the scent of night-blooming jasmine, the song of a nightingale, a storm. Describe your sensations in this experience as fully as you can, both the physical sensations and emotional feelings.
6. An event in family history that has had an impact on your life. This could be something momentous that happened to your grandmother or grandfather, or the unexpected death of a relative, or the fact of immigration. Show how this family event was presented or revealed to you, and the difference it has meant in your life.

## APPENDIX 2

### MIDTERM AND FINAL TAKE-HOME EXAMS: SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

#### TAKE-HOME MIDTERM EXAM

This is an open-book exam in which you may use your books and class notes (but no other aids, online or in book form). The exam should take about three hours, if you budget your time carefully. Your answers must be typed, double-spaced, and proofread. Please follow instructions carefully. Write the name of your TA and the number of your discussion section on your exam.

#### Part One: Thematic Questions

Answer two questions from this section. Each answer should be at least two double-spaced pages (five hundred words). Be as thorough as you can in comparing and contrasting the texts, and use specific quotations in referring to particular incidents. No vague comparisons, please. Back up your assertions.

1. Human beings cannot grow unless they find others whom they can trust. Not very many opportunities for trust present themselves to our three protagonists, but there are a few instances, and they have a profound effect on their lives. Choose one example of experiencing trust from each book, and show the difference it makes in that person's life.
2. Compare and contrast all three books as collections of memories for posterity. What kinds of events and experiences do they contain? Is there anything they choose to leave out? What kind of posterity are they thinking of? Whom do they imagine as present and future readers? What does memory mean for them?
3. Compare and contrast the role spirituality plays in each life story we have read. Begin with showing how each author might define spirituality. Do you think the concept of spirituality changes or evolves for each writer? How so? Do you see any aspects of spirituality that all three writers share? To what extent does spirituality seem to be culturally defined?
4. Looking at the childhood of each of these figures, discuss *what* values each is taught, and *how* these values are communicated to each (e.g., ritual,

mentoring, parental instruction, divine guidance). Then assess the impact these early teachings have on their adult life.

### Part Two: Specific Questions on Individual Works

Choose two questions to answer in this part. Each answer should be at least one page. You must write about two different books. Again, be specific and use quotations.

1. Discuss the importance of the Rough Lock Bill episode in Naomi's life and in the book *Obasan*. What does she learn from his behavior toward her? How does he help her? How is her life different after her encounter with him?
2. What is the meaning of the death of Crazy Horse to Black Elk and to his people? Look at the reputation he has, how he dies, and the community's response to his death, immediately and later. Why is he considered a martyr by his people?
3. Why is Linda Brent so resentful when her friend says she will buy her freedom? In accepting this offer so that she may be legally free, what conclusions does she come to?
4. Choosing one of Naomi's dreams, show how it helps her to uncover the secret of her mother and her relationship to her. Describe the dream, show how it is related to the events in that part of the book, and what Naomi learns from it. Think about what we as readers also learn.
5. Why is it so difficult for Black Elk to reveal his vision to the elders in his tribe? How does he finally choose to do it? Why is the whole story only told late in his life, to John Neihardt?
6. If Dr. Flint is so determined to possess Linda, what do you think prevents him from raping her? Look at what characterizes their relationship, how each person expresses his or her feelings toward the other, and where the power lies in the relationship.

### FINAL EXAM QUESTIONS FALL 2002

The purpose of this final is to demonstrate your understanding of the books we've read by exploring your learning experiences with one or two books that we've read since the midterm and with writing your three autobiographical papers. *Choose only one of the following questions*, and answer it in a well-organized essay of approximately four double-spaced pages (one thousand words). The books are *Obasan*, Joy Kogawa; *Dreams of My Russian Summers*, Andrei Makine; *The Far East Comes Near*, ed. Nguyen and Halpern; *Of Water and the Spirit*, Malidoma Patrice Some.

1. What was the book or books from which you learned the most, or which made you reflect upon your own life to the greatest extent? (These may not be the books you liked the most.) Discuss what you got out of that book or those books, your process of reading it. You might want to write a brief summary, then show what the contents meant to you. Then try to look at your autobiographical papers objectively, and show what you experienced and learned in the process of writing them. Then explore what your papers and your chosen book(s) have in common—fears, obsessions, grief, joy, hopes for the future.
2. Choose a book where you identify to some extent with the protagonist, and imagine what the story would be like if it were based on your experience, from your point of view, as if you were the protagonist. (You'll only be able to pick a few telling episodes.) What would you have done if faced with the challenges the protagonist met? What would your weak point be? What can you learn about yourself by inserting yourself into someone else's autobiography? What about your own autobiographies? What have you learned about yourself in writing them?
3. Write a dialogue between yourself and a protagonist of one of our books. (You can make it like a TV interview, or a two-character play, or a movie script.) The important thing is to have you and the author both speak and compare opinions. You do not have to agree on everything. You can take your author to task for his or her attitudes and behaviors: "Why on earth did you do that?" and then allow him or her to offer a defense. You will want to find out what your author wants to communicate to us. Then imagine this person reading your writing, your autobiographies, and questioning you about them. This exercise should show you what you have learned from reading and writing in this class, and it should give you a sense of your own progress.