

REVIEWS

Blitz, Michael, and C. Mark Hurlbert. *Letters for the Living: Teaching Writing in a Violent Age*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1999.

Sandi Albertson-Shea

This slim volume is not for the faint of heart. Some of the student narratives are so pain-full, I found myself gasping, hoping, even, that the next page would signal the chapter's end.

Concerned with the growth of violence in our culture and citing the influences of Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner's *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* and Mary Rose O'Reilly's *The Peaceable Classroom*, Michael Blitz and C. Mark Hurlbert conduct their classes on the premise that "[t]he teaching of writing is connected to living [. . .] and dying, that our students are not only among the living, but also among the dying and, like it or not, we (as faculty) are fully in the presence of both" (1). They argue that "our real lives" (those of instructors and students) are "integral to creative, collaborative pedagogy" (2).

Each of the five segments in *Letters for the Living* uses different typeface to interweave e-mail correspondence between the authors, extensive excerpts from their students' writings, and honest, thoughtful, shared philosophical/pedagogical commentary.

The role of violence in the lives of today's students is abundantly attested to by the mix of writings from Blitz's mostly urban, predominantly African-American, Latino/Latina, and Caribbean students at John Jay College in New York City and those of Hurlbert's rural, small town, working class, predominantly white sons and daughters of miners and steelworkers at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, as they "compose writing from the raw materials of their lives" (5).

One segment follows the dilemmas and rewards of an interstate collaborative project in which writing classes of the two authors, paired into letter-writing teams, research and describe for each other the often shocking realities of their diverse neighborhoods. Other sections wrestle with the specific "narratives of pain" brought to their classrooms through their students' written life experiences, as well as an accounting, for each other and the reader, of what it is they actually do in their writing courses.

Determined to "tell a fuller story [. . .] of what it means to live and teach composition in these times" (25), *Letters for the Living* includes, often with gut-wrenching detail, the compositions done when students are encouraged to write about something they are "burning to tell the world" (144):

What's wrong with this picture? An eighteen year old kid comes home to find his mother totally drunk, as usual. His little sister has most of her clothes off with her boyfriend who is older and bigger than the eighteen year old so what can he say? The father? Well

he's no place, nobody knows where he is or if he is dead. The eighteen year old finds a pile of dirty dishes and empty bottles and the baby brother is crawling around in garbage. So the eighteen year old picks up the baby and puts in his chair while he starts to clean up the kitchen and make dinner. Nobody's going to eat anyway. The eighteen year old will be too tired to study again and he won't have time to write his paper for the only class he thinks he can do good in. What's wrong with this picture? (6)

While students in many composition classes may view academic writing as occurring "in a vacuum" (61), Blitz's and Hurlbert's students clearly do not. The authors claim that "the vast majority [. . .] come away with a sense of competence and confidence that reading and writing are not simply the dreary business of school, but a potentially integral part of their lives" (139). The "books," which are the end products of both individual and team work throughout the semester, require the skills of research, documentation, editing, and revision. While Blitz and Hurlbert give little, if any, attention in this volume to their classroom skill-building practices, one is left to trust (and this reader does) that caring about the content will eventually lead to the requisite transition signals and semi-colons.

Addressing the anticipated criticisms that the focus of their classrooms is too much on the lives of their students rather than on skills, or that they "read pain into texts," or that they give assignments which elicit only narratives of pain, Blitz and Hurlbert respond that, prizing the lives of their students, what they are about is "teaching for the living," that they ask students "to write about what they need to write about because it does some kind of good to give testimony to the legitimacy of their lives" (47).

While some teachers of writing (indeed, one would hope, many) might claim no such degree of violence in the lives of their students, the violence in the cultural milieus of Blitz and Hurlbert's students is all too real. It would be wonderful if, asked to write about something important to them that they want others to know about, no students wrote of violence. Having provided a "safe" classroom environment for writers and having asked students to consider what in their lives is worth writing about, one is not likely to receive, or at least one should be prepared to receive something other than, a comparison/contrast essay on "Two Cars I Have Owned." "If we tell our students not to write these (painful, personal) stories for us to read, what will we have them write that will be worth reading?" (169). Indeed.

Blitz and Hurlbert ask, "What is the point of teaching people to read and write if we are not also trying to teach them to understand the world and to make it better?" (55) Some instructors may feel overwhelmed by the authors' call to deal with the "personal and cultural implications of what each student is telling us" (21), yet Blitz and Hurlbert argue that "to ignore violence as a reality in the lives of our students and ourselves [. . .] is to invite a living death into our classrooms, to encourage an insensitivity to living in the culture" (22). Their challenge to faculty to "help students better understand their experiences in relation to their cultures and to work toward solutions to the problems they face everyday" (143) and to "investigate with students the connection of that pain to the

social injustices that cause it” (43) is a pretty heavy assignment for faculty. Yet, one could ask, what else is more worth the doing?

Since both Blitz and Hurlbert argue for recognizing those “moments of peace when they happen” (56), I did wish for more examples, strategies, suggestions, of just such affirmation—to balance the narratives of pain in their text. In an open, honest exchange with students on subject matter, one should begin, they claim, “as in this book, by attending first to violence, to pain” (57). Yet a counterpoint is also needed and should be identified if our students are to be empowered and guided towards the hard work of “peace-making,” a catch-all phrase that the authors need to define more clearly in the context of the classroom.

South African playwright Athol Fugard, during the worst years of apartheid, forced himself to recall, before allowing sleep, ten images of beauty or goodness that the day had contained, even if only in his peripheral vision. My students, asked to do a similar journal exercise, often record stunningly affirming observations: “silent snowfall”; “a child throwing himself, arms outstretched, onto the grass”; “the smell of a good cigar”; “two young girls, heads bent over a book”; “birdsong.” I would have liked to see this kind of affirmation balance the sometimes overwhelming stories of violence and pain.

To be sure, composition cannot be a series of “pain clinics,” nor are English faculty therapeutic counselors, and Blitz/Hurlbert clearly acknowledge that change may only come incrementally, one person at a time. They give an example of the student who came to the insight that “I am not just average; I am loved” (79).

The narratives in *Letters for the Living* reveal that in our turn-of-the-century culture of violence, the “slaughter of the innocents” continues. The college classroom, for many, can offer an escape route, an alternative, as well as a forum for addressing the truth of the lives they bring to the classroom.

Blitz and Hurlbert have recognized the need in all of us to “testify,” to bear witness to the significance of our lives. The recounting of an important painful experience, if not obviously an act of peace-making, might be at least an exercise in “speaking truth to power,” perhaps a way of strengthening resiliency and a source of hope.

Tobias Wolff states that

[s]o many of the things in our world tend to lead us to despair [. . .]. The final symptom of despair is silence. Story-telling is one of the sustaining arts; it’s one of the affirming arts. A writer may have a certain pessimism in his outlook, but the very act of being a writer seems to me to be an optimistic act. (Qtd. in Charters 1384)

Challenged by *Letters for the Living*, at the risk of learning about more pain in my students’ lives than I would like to think is theirs and in the hope that affirming what is real for them will clarify some truths and perhaps lead to some new alternatives, I plan to change the way I teach my comp class next semester. ☺

Work Cited

Charters, Ann. *The Story and its Writer*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin, 1999.

Miller, John P. *Education and the Soul: Toward a Spiritual Curriculum*. Albany: SUNY, 2000.

Susan A. Schiller

John P. Miller writes for teachers who have not yet attempted to bring soul and the sacred into the classroom. In the introduction to the book, Thomas Moore (*Care of the Soul*) defines education within the context of soul and presents Miller as a leader in spiritual curriculum development. More compelling than this introduction, however, is Miller's extensive history of using spirituality in the classroom, as well as his twenty years of personal meditation practice.

Part One, "Exploring Soul," establishes a foundation and framework for understanding soul; Part Two, "Nurturing Soul," describes pedagogy, current schools using soul, meditation practices, and principles upon which to base a spiritual curriculum. Newcomers to this subject will most likely find part one useful, but a bit truncated. It only offers a bare bones view of the philosophical and theoretical foundations for a spiritual curriculum. While key concepts are introduced, they could be enhanced with additional specificity and depth. Part two, on the other hand, offers a wide range of wise and practical ideas. It should satisfy the teacher who is searching for new methods and appease those who are critical of nurturing soul through curricular choices.

Using a clear and accessible voice, Miller attempts to persuade his readers of the value of using soul in their professional and personal lives. Miller's motivation is similar to Parker Palmer's in *The Courage to Teach*. Both writers care deeply about teaching and students, and both assume that other teachers care as deeply as they.

Miller begins by centering his attention on "soul," which he defines as "a deep and vital energy that gives meaning and direction to our lives" (9). In his view "soul connects our ego and spirit. Ego is our socialized sense of self [...] spirit is the divine essence within. Through spirit, we experience unity with the divine" (24). This separation of soul from ego and spirit allows him to address the spiritual aspects of education from a certain distance, one that attempts to dissolve any resistance to spirituality in education.

In establishing the support for his ideas, Miller cites such philosophical sources as Plato and Plotinus, Emerson and James, Williamson and Sardello. However, his conceptualization of soul and spirit are more closely related to the work of Thomas Moore than of any of these others. His perspective, like Moore's, assigns great significance to love. Miller believes that the soul recognizes multiplicity and unity, seeks subjective time, and focuses on love.

Miller strongly supports multiple approaches to using soul in pedagogy. He expertly integrates soul into the curriculum through a multi-disciplinary approach and describes teaching activities that use art, music, movement, color, earth science, literature, history, and writing. He also draws our attention to creative alternative schools from around the world that have integrated soul into the whole curriculum. Waldorf schools, following the ideas of Rudolf Steiner, provide interesting examples, and the Ojiya School in Japan offers an exciting, in-

novative view of why nurturing the soul must include nurturing the earth.

The Oljija School owns a small forest with about 300 trees. Much of the curriculum includes this forest in some way or another. For instance, students write poetry about the trees and study the biology and environment that is natural to the forest. A similar school in Newburgh, New York, has access to 3,700 acres of ponds, streams and woods. Students in this district go into the woods to study in an integrated way. “Integrated learning activities,” (100) such as those designed around the environment, offer holistic experiences that nourish the soul, and the educators at these schools provide convincing and compelling proof that a soulful curriculum is beneficial for students and for teachers.

As one with a long-term meditation practice, Miller requires his students to meditate up to 30 minutes a day. He introduces a number of meditative techniques from which they might choose and integrates reflective writing into the assignments. These are explained and described fully enough to be helpful to those already using meditation in their classrooms as well as to those who wish to begin. However, the primary assumption of this chapter is that “some of the most important work we can do is on ourselves” (138). This work begins in contemplation and in living contemplatively so that “we can begin to create deep and powerful change in our world” (138). To understand how individuals can initiate significant change, Miller points us to Parker Palmer’s model of change as explicated in *The Courage To Teach*.

Overall, Miller’s goal is to restore a balance to our educational vision. He believes an awareness of soul can do this (140). As we all know, American education relies on reasoning and objectivity. Nearly anything subjective is denigrated as “touchy feely” or at best as an extreme form of expressivism that lowers the quality of academic activity. To help restore a holistic view, Miller offers eight “Principles of Soulful Learning” that oppose this false dichotomy:

1. The sacred and secular cannot be separated.
2. The dominance of the secular has led to a repression of our spiritual life.
3. An awareness of soul can restore a balance to our educational vision.
4. We can nourish the student’s soul through various curriculum approaches and teaching/learning strategies.
5. The authentic and caring presence of the teacher can nourish the student’s soul.
6. Soulful education must be accountable.
7. Teachers need to nourish their souls.
8. Parents can do much to nourish their children’s souls. (140-42)

Readers might see this list as a summary of the book, but in it one can also find an inspirational starting point upon which to base a balanced approach to teaching. By practicing and implementing these principles, teachers can create a balance in their lives as well as in the lives of their students.

Miller believes that teachers must develop this balance for themselves before they can model it or insert it into the curriculum. He suggests that teachers begin with contemplation. Like Palmer, he asserts that “the teacher sets the tone

and the atmosphere of the classroom. If the student's soul is to be nurtured and developed, it follows then that the process must begin with the teacher's soul" (121). With these words, Miller echoes and reaffirms what I so firmly believe about teaching from a spiritual or soulful position: It must start with the teacher, but the teacher must be aware of the possibilities and potentials in this way of teaching.

Spirituality in education is growing in America as it is across the globe. Miller calls it a global awakening (4); Marianne Williamson says there is a spiritual renaissance sweeping the world (3); and in *The Spiritual Side of Writing* I have used Jean Houston's term, "whole systems transition." These terms all lead us to the essential realization that spirituality joins the inner and outer life. Those of us drawn to teach this way are doing it because, like Miller, we believe that "our best teaching occurs when spirit and soul take over" (150). ☺

O'Reilly, Mary Rose. *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998.

Jeffrey D. Wilhelm

When I read the title *Radical Presence*, I expected to be shaken up. I thought the book would be juiced by blue bolts of righteous electrical energy. To the contrary, it was stimulating in the reassuring way of an evening of good conversation with a friend. It was comforting and kind, challenging and healing.

The book is about how good living and good teaching intertwine and are built around the same simple principles. Some of these principles include framing our central life and professional pursuits in spiritual terms, continually inquiring and seeking, working to develop nurturing relationships, welcoming true dialogue and challenge, immersing ourselves completely in the moment, listening intently to others, creating spaces and time for growth.

I'll admit it. I really liked this book. As with all my best and most memorable reading experiences, whether with fiction or non-fiction, I felt as if I had come to know the author's sensitivity. In this case, I liked the author and was glad I had conversed with her; she seems to be a great-hearted person, and she certainly espouses great-heartedness in the classroom.

Mary Rose O'Reilly rightly argues that to teach we must be fully present to our students and allow them to be fully present to us. Teaching is so often conceived and practiced as a purely cognitive pursuit, eliminating or slighting the emotional and spiritual elements of our learning and living. My friend Brian White reminded me once that those we revere as the greatest teachers are all spiritual teachers, yet we do not make spirituality our own practice or a topic of our professional conversations. This kind of book fills a niche, and I hope many others like it will follow.

One of the great strengths of the book is that it is stamped with the authority

of personal experience and practice. It does not shy away from joyful and painful self-revelation, from celebration and critique. In the third and what I would regard as the central chapter of the book, O'Reilly explores the importance of being listened to, and how a "soul friend" can be one's spiritual teacher. At the same time that she celebrates her close and necessary relationship with her friend Peter ("If someone truly listens to me, my spirit starts to expand"[19]), she also critiques herself ("Solitary. Short-tempered." "Always whining." [18]) and Peter ("He is always full of advice for others yet he does not attend to details of his own life—he eats standing up and sleeps in his clothes, for goodness sakes!" [18]) and studies both the costs and benefits of their relationship ("Peter has helped me to learn that intimacy entails pain." [18]). She shows here how common human bonds—even just being buddies with someone who grants respect to your being, as fraught as this relationship might be with noise and confusion—can be liberating, uplifting, and truly spiritual.

O'Reilly recognizes the difficulties of this kind of "radical presence" to oneself and others. When she really listens to students, she often finds herself in situations bigger, messier and more disconcerting than she would like. Yet she compels us to believe that spiritual relationships are necessary to teaching, to growth, and to healing. Of course, compassion and listening are tough. We have lots of reasons not to listen, attend, or act on behalf of others. O'Reilly challenges us to overcome the obstacles in our way: indifference, fear, and ignorance.

I am loath to critique this interesting and vital book. This book is what it is, and I can't say that I wish it were anything different. However, O'Reilly speaks from the perspective of a university academic, and as a long time middle school teacher, I found some of her suggestions inapplicable to my own teaching. Nonetheless, the main points that we must know our students to teach them, that we must engage in deep listening (what the author calls "listening like a cow"), and that we must not compartmentalize ourselves, our students or our work together (e.g. into subject areas with clear boundaries) are relevant to us all.

I also sometimes wished that the book would have pushed me harder. I wished it to be a little less comfortable and a little more contentious and full of challenging suggestions, like the author's friend Peter. Spiritual growth requires some agitation and challenge.

The book begins with a very moving foreword by Parker Palmer, a foreword worth reading in and of itself. It presents a ringing endorsement of O'Reilly's accomplishment:

The "secrets" of good teaching are the secrets of good living: seeing one's self without blinking, offering hospitality to the alien other, having compassion for suffering, speaking truth to power, being present and being real. These are secrets hidden in plain sight. But in an age that puts more faith in the powers of technique than in the powers of the human heart, it takes the clear sight and courage of someone like Mary Rose O'Reilly to call "secrets" of this sort to our attention. (ix)