

Writing With the Dark

By Susan Walsh

Abstract

What are some possible intersections between (feminist) spirituality and the process of writing with fear and pain? How might the process of writing with the dark be connected to the process of reconceptualizing a different way of knowing and being in the world? Such questions are raised in this exploratory paper.

Inanna¹ haunts me
going to the depths and
being stripped of her clothes
crossing the river and what else?
leaving behind the earth
moving in darkness
crucifixion terror
something about seven
I don't trust my memory
want to go look up some facts
Descent to the Goddess by Sylvia Brinton
Perera (1981) Inner City Books: Toronto Canada
or maybe *The Inanna Poems* by Karen Lawrence
Longspoon Press (1980)
find a book safety or maybe call Leslie because she has
researched Inanna's myth thoroughly used it in
her doctoral dissertation and I don't *know*

Inanna speaks to
me in my dreams which aren't even in
images anymore her voice
listen to me you are just
protecting yourself let
go she says and I am fighting
eyes closed fingers stuck in ears and
I don't want to go let go
stand naked looking into the eyes of
my sister my self

I begin with fear. A story.

I am at a writing retreat in the Rockies with Emily,² a poet whose work I have long admired. On the first night, Emily asks us, "What is essential writing?" We discuss this for hours. She ends by telling us to take away the ten pages we have submitted and to find one phrase of essential writing. A night long task for most of us.

Our meeting the next day is brief. She tells us to take away the bit we have excavated from our words, to write another ten pages from it. To come back in the afternoon. I am already weary.

It continues in this way. I begin to hate it. I'm lonely. There is no one to talk to. And I don't like the food. The rooms are like hospital rooms. I phone my husband and cry. "I can't do this," I say. "It's too hard."

"Come home if you want," he says. "Why torture yourself?"

I stay.

We are shaping pieces now. All I can feel is the inadequacy of what I am doing. Maybe I am just not a good writer. I think to myself that it is good to find this out now before I waste any more time fancying myself a poet. I reconsider going home.

But I don't. I keep writing. Trying to get past something. Or to something that I can't quite articulate. It pulls me. Compels me. Everything I write is met with polite comments from the members of the group whom I now respect as excellent and critical readers.

It is the night before the last day. The middle of the night, and I can't stop writing. I can't believe what I am writing about. High school. My struggles with food, with dieting. Inner voices I haven't heard before. Different fonts. A play with space. I finish a draft and walk the halls. Tanya is up, typing and drinking wine. She reads what I have written and offers suggestions. I rewrite.

In the morning, we drive to a campground to read something we have written as a celebration and good bye. I feel sick. I don't know if I can read this piece. I'm afraid of it. Can't believe my words, how they came out. Maybe I'll stay silent.

But I do read it. Can feel the power of my words. How the group is silent, listening. At the end, no one says anything. I feel shaky. Emily looks at me and says, "Wow."

The piece is later published in a literary magazine.

My writing has never been the same again.

Neither have I.

As a little girl, I kept a notebook beside my bed so I could write down my thoughts and ideas when I woke up in the middle of the night. I did not even turn on the light because I was afraid I would forget what I was thinking if I didn't get it down right away. *Writing in the dark*, also the title of my master's thesis, has long been a practice for me. The story of the experience in the Rockies, however, is more about writing *to* the dark, or perhaps *through* or *with* the dark. It was the first time that I had really written *with* fear and avoidance instead of all around it. I could not believe the intensity of my words.

I am convinced that in some way, this experience of writing with&through fear is connected to what I will, for the time being, refer to as a spiritual journey. The workshop in the Rockies occurred around the middle of what has been my two-decade exploration of meditation groups, healing circles, a

twelve step program, Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian texts, bodywork and creative movement, art, color and energy, T'ai Chi, reiki, dreams, runes, tarot cards, and more. What has struck me most powerfully through these various spiritual forays is that a common theme arises--in this wide array of contexts, people are working with their experiences of fear and pain; they are willing to share their stories. My search of the literature related to spirituality and, specifically, to feminist spirituality³ reveals a similar thread (see, for example Christ, 1986; Chung, 1992; Elder, 1997; King, 1993; Tamm, 1995). Noted creation spirituality theorist, Matthew Fox, comments:

There is no moving from superficiality to depth—and every spiritual path is about moving from the surface to the depths—without entering the dark. . . . Daring the dark means entering nothingness and letting it be nothingness while it works its mystery on us. Daring the dark also means allowing pain to be pain and learning from it. (1991, pp. 19-20)

In my doctoral work thus far, I am exploring the ways that (feminist) spirituality might be connected to questions left over from my master's study. The latter involved an investigation of the work of Cixous, Kristeva, and Irigaray among others--a profound attempt to understand language from feminist poststructuralist and psychoanalytic perspectives as well as an examination of exploratory creative writing by Canadian women. I experimented with my own writing, personally as well as in the academic arena. Fear and pain emerged as important themes in my poetry and cross-genre work as well in the writing I studied. Throughout the research, though I was intellectually "taken" with the ideas I encountered, I felt a nagging sense of something missing. I kept asking my advisor where the spirituality was in all of this theory--and he just kept looking at me quizzically. I was not sure what I meant by *spirituality* at the time, and I was unable to reconcile whatever notion I had of it with my understanding of feminist poststructuralism. The project of the latter was, for me, to become increasingly aware of the ways we are shaped through discourses, many of which are competing and contradictory; it was to peel back the layers of the taken-for-granted and to become more critical. As subjects, we had to move outside humanism. Language was crucial. The practice of poststructuralism, then, opened the possibility of different ways of knowing and being. My investigation of the literature about feminist spirituality and my personal experiences in writing and spiritually-based groups show me that these too are concerned with opening different ways of knowing and being--often through the process of reconceptualizing experiences of fear and pain. Descent into darkness emerges as a theme, a recurring phase in the process.

I descend into *miktlan*, the underworld. In the "place of the dead" I wallow, sinking deeper and deeper.
When I reach bottom, something forces me
to push up, walk toward the mirror, confront the face
in the mirror. But I dig in my heels and resist. I
don't want to see what's behind *Coatlilcue's* eyes,
her hollow sockets. I can't confront her face to face; I
must take small sips of her face through
the corners of my eyes, chip away at the ice a sliver at a time.

Behind the ice mask I see my own eyes.
 They will not look at me.
Miro que estoy encabronada, miro la resistencia--
 resistance to knowing, to letting go,
 to that deep ocean where I once dived into death.
 I am afraid of drowning.
 Resistance to sex, intimate touching, opening myself
 to that alien other where I am out of control
 not on patrol. The outcome on the other side
 unknown, the reins falling
 and the horses plunging blindly over the
 crumbling path rimming the edge of the cliff,
 plunging to its thousand foot drop. (Anzaldúa, 1999, p. 70, my line breaks)

Two feminist theologians that I have encountered, Christ (1986) and Chung (1992), recognize the power of *language-as-process* in awakening to the ways in which women have been positioned and also as a way of moving *with* experiences of fear. Both emphasize the importance of storytelling in community--the interwoven movements of naming experience, of listening, of being listened to--and how such an interweaving effects transformation. Both speak of 'moments' in women's spiritual journeys, moments which can be discerned as integral to the rhythm of women's emergence into their own powers, moments which can occur through the process of naming experience through story. Both reiterate the point made by Irigaray (1996) and Ruether (1983) that women's spiritual quests are rooted in the body as material being (Christ, 1986, p. 21; Chung, 1992, pp. 38-39). Both speak of the need to acknowledge pain and to question conventional values and social beliefs. For both, profound feelings of shame and inadequacy must be endured in the midst of deep reflection on one's culture and its unjust and unethical treatment of marginalized groups. Storytelling in community, whether in oral or written form, is seen as central to the process of naming past and emerging experiences as well as articulating visions of hope.

For Chung, storytelling in oral form is the foundation for a new Asian women's theology of liberation; writing as a means to communicate experience is only beginning to emerge through education and through connection with the West (1992, pp. 102-103).

Asian women's approach to theology . . . starts with women's *storytelling*. Women from various backgrounds gather together and listen to one another's stories of victimization and liberation. Educated middle-class women theologians are committed to inviting or visiting poor farmers, slum-dwellers, dowry victims, and prostitutes and listening to their life stories. Storytelling has been women's way of inheriting truth in many Asian countries because the written, literary world has belonged to privileged males. Until the turn of the century many Asian families did not teach girls how to read or write. (p. 104)

Christ is interested in two aspects of language: as a symbol system in need of examination and also as a process of naming experience through writing in community. Her work highlights the struggle to find ways of expressing women's spiritual experiences in a language not their own. In *Diving Deep and*

Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest (1986), she goes to women of letters to find support, writers such as Kate Chopin, Margaret Atwood, Doris Lessing, Adrienne Rich and Ntozake Shange. Christ notes that traditional language must be used in non-traditional ways; she uses terms such as *nothingness*, *awakening*, and *insight* from mystical discourses to help in her discussions--but finds that these words do not yet accurately portray the experiences described by women writers and lived by their characters (1986, p. xii). Christ finds the search for ways of expressing women's spiritual growth in a language of their own a serious project, and one that also pertains to women writing in the academy about such experiences. She refers to a *deformation* where traditional language is used in unusual contexts to help open meaning (p. xiii).

Christ's work with women in community includes as a central aspect the *process* of writing in response to shared readings (1986, pp. ix-xxxii). This process of writing--personal reflections on readings and the integration of personal experiences and insights--is a *means* of journeying spiritually and moving into power, effecting transformation.

The experience of writing in class in the presence of others seems to evoke deeper reflection and sharing than either writing at home and sharing in class or simply sharing in class. It is easier for those of us who are insecure about our writing to write in the presence of other women who are also writing. The limited time for our writing seems to encourage us to dive immediately into our depths. (1986, p. xvi)

Inanna descends leaves
word with Ninshubur her servant,
to send help after three
days farther and farther
down meeting gate after gate
seven times she disrobes more
until she reaches bottom naked
face to face with Ereshkigal dark queen
of the underworld death transformation rage
greed fear destruction suffering loss she
naked suffering too unleashes fury sentences
Inanna to death hangs
her corpse on a peg flesh
rots turns green

surrounded by friends
in the labyrinth of dreams
I am aware that I
must do something
(I can't remember what)
no one is surprised

Deborah takes me to the bathroom
makes me look in the mirror
face burned beyond recognition
skin stretched nose smeared into lips

flesh covering parts of eyes
I am terrified but can't stop
looking at my self in the mirror
why didn't you tell me I ask
it happens to all of us she replies
I splash with cool clear water

and surface, sobbing from someplace
deep within tears dissolve the glue that
holds me together

As I learn more about (feminist) spirituality, I have to reconsider the work of Irigaray and Cixous, two of the philosophers I explored in my master's study and whom I had considered separate from any association with spirituality. Neither neglects this important discussion. Both speak of death and transformation. Both seem to connect spirituality with the important work of coming to know and be differently in the world. And, neither separates this work from examination of and experimentation with language. Irigaray (1993, 1994a/b, 1996) speaks about how women in the West have been excluded from the symbolic in at least two significant arenas--that of identification with the divine and that of representation in language. Women's increased awareness of their exclusion and their struggles to find different ways of being in the world often involve dark and painful moments. She insists that female subjectivity has been shaped through a patriarchal language and a social order that permits only one relationship with the divine. Her project is to work toward recognition of *two* instead of one, the acknowledgement of sexual difference as a metaphorical basis for ethical relations, the acceptance of difference, of *otherness*. She revises thought and being on the basis of sexual difference, moves beyond dualistic thinking, and also through and beyond an *essential* feminine.⁴

She is not replying to the question "Who art thou?" from within, in the context of the discourse of man, of humanity. She replies elsewhere. With or on the basis of another language, another world, a different relation to being. Often situated on the side of the abyss, perhaps, that other slope of the transcendence of the God? Where being in the feminine is to become, to grow unchecked. Without ecstasy or standing outside the self, if she is faithful to herself. (Irigaray, 1993, p. 139)

Irigaray relates immanence, a respect for the spirit, the divine in all things, to a respect for life, its transformative potential. Death is, at least partly, a spiritual death that originates in the belief in a universal *one*--the denial of woman; death must be reconstituted within her own horizons, not his (1996, pp. 23-26). A relationship with death on her own terms is linked to a need for her own connection to the divine (1994b, pp. 158-159, also 1996). For Irigaray, woman's connection to the universal, the possibility of her being *able* to open to spiritual energy is contingent on her ability to be separate from man. Within her own bodied subjectivity, and while developing a language of her own, she can work toward redefining the space between them.

Cixous (1993) says that the writers she loves best are those who have the courage to go to the

depths in their writing. She quotes from Kafka in saying that “a book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us” and extols the work of those who write in such a way (pp. 17, 63). She too reconceptualizes death in her work, describes it as the first in three schools of writing, and espouses the belief that death is a passageway to openness, abundance, transformation, a space between.⁵

To begin (writing, living) we must have death. I like the dead, they are the doorkeepers who while closing one side “give” way to the other. We must have death, but young, ferocious, fresh death, the death of the day, today’s death. The one that comes right up to us so suddenly we don’t have time to avoid it, I mean feeling its breath touching us. Ha! . . .

It’s true that neither death nor the doorkeepers are enough to open the door. We must also have the courage, the desire, to approach, to go the door. (Cixous, 1993, p. 7)

Death, the dead as doorkeepers, closing one side and opening another . . . For Cixous, going to the depths, having the courage to do so, looking deep inside the self in a truthful way is linked with seeing the god inside. “What we hope for . . . is the strength both to deal and to receive the axe’s blow, to look straight at the face of God, *which is none other than my own face*, but seen naked, the face of my soul” (1993, p. 63).

when I started writing . . . it was like stepping off the edge of the world into the void I didn’t know who I was I didn’t know where all these voices were coming from. . . I didn’t know why I had such a desperate need to break the centuries-old public silence of the women in the Mennonite community where I grew up . . . I just knew that if I didn’t do it I would surely die. . . . the pain of undoing a dozen generations of repression and silence . . . the utter pain of risking my cultural and personal identity was so deep and intense . . . I simply fell apart. . . . I found a wise woman, a spiritual healer . . . I didn’t know there was such a thing as healing before that real healing where you release the body/mind’s incredible capacity to regenerate itself through therapeutic touch and meditation and talking and writing. . . .
(Brandt, 1996, pp. 156-157, my line breaks and omissions)

I want to read and outside the lines already constructed. Pre-formed. Limiting. Boundaried. I want to be freer, let go, be less afraid of the blank page than I have been conditioned to be. I want to find ways to let the body speak, to disrupt, to let prayer and dreams and spiritual guidance come through.

Process of writing as process of being-becoming. Something more startling, more radical, more poetic. Disrupting the body of the text to allow the surfacing, the investigation of other ways of being. The syntax of “ordinary” discourse as a limiting factor in the same way that being an abused child or an adult child of an alcoholic is limiting. How do we break free of our language, our discourse?

Ereshkigal I wish
I had a picture of
you dark queen of
the nether space under
world sister I have felt

in blackness fury anger
hatred have recognized
you want to keep your
picture where I can
see it hold you in
reverence up here
above but you are
not to be seen only
felt in the gut in the
shivers of the scalp are
you the blackness around
her around Inanna?

Breaking free, letting go of the discourses I have learned as a Western woman/academic/writer has been much more difficult than I ever believed. A strong part of me desires change, transformation while another part resists such a death--such an emergence into ways of knowing and being in the world that are other than the way(s) I have found to be successful--new ways of knowing and being which are still unclear to me, still very much in the dark. . . . *Inanna speaks to me in my dreams which aren't even in images anymore her voice, listen to me.* . . . Writing *with* the dark at the retreat in the Rockies was the first crack in my resistance, my fear of the death of habitual and unexamined ways of knowing and being in the world: writing *with* the sickness and death of my father cracked things open even further. . . . *You are just protecting yourself let go she says.* . . . Still, often as I sit down to write, I am reminded that this learning is not linear. . . . *And I am fighting eyes closed fingers stuck in ears and I don't want to go let go stand naked looking into the eyes of my sister my self.* . . .

reaching into the
bag I draw a
rune rough between
my fingers blank
it says leap*
into the void
empty handed

(trembling at the edge
passport driver's
license falling through
fingers)

* between resist and let go hold and surrender before and beyond staying home changing home

Notes

1. Inanna was a much revered deity in ancient Sumer--the Queen of Heaven and Earth. She represents femaleness in its many aspects; texts about her from this early civilization reveal various different phases of her life cycle. Crucial to Inanna's story is her descent to the underworld where she is put to death by Ereshkigal, Dark Queen of the Great Below. Inanna later returns to Heaven and Earth as a transformed and empowered entity. (see Perera, 1981; Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983).
2. Pseudonyms are used in this section.

3. Though I am uneasy with dualism as I explore knowing and being differently in the world, for now, I frame the term *spirituality* as King (1993) and Tomm (1995) have—as a process, movement between inside and outside, from inner to outer work and from outer to inner work, an *energy*, an *integral*, *holistic and dynamic force* that shows *reverence for life . . . from a wide range of experiences* (King, 1993 pp. 5-6) and *awareness of immanent, creative powers that serve to integrate the life system* (Tomm, 1995, p. 2-3).
4. There is no doubt that Irigaray bases her work on the importance of sexual difference and that she uses the physical body as a metaphor for her discussion (see Weedon, 1987). She has been critiqued at length because of her “essentialism.” Tina Chanter (1995) notes that charges of biological essentialism are especially serious in feminist theory because such reductionism leads to preservation of the status quo whereas social change is the most important aspect of feminism as a project. Chanter argues, however, that while Irigaray does base her discussion in sexual difference, she attempts to go beyond this and to rethink the (historical/philosophical) structures on which such debates center (pp. 6-7). Irigaray sees sexual difference as the basis on which to accept differences of all sorts, the limit to “a narcissistic and imperialistic inflation of sameness” (Irigaray, 1994a, p. 79).
5. In earlier writing, Cixous counters notions of death as closure--originating she says from the classic psychoanalytic (masculine) conceptions of desire--with a feminine desire, which she rethinks in terms of life, a dispersed openness that does not yearn to return to itself (1986, p. 87)--one that is motivated by love, generosity and excess. She refers to the female body and a feminine libido. Libido is “something which can be defined from the body, as the movement of a pulsion toward an object”; she emphasizes a “decipherable libidinal femininity” (Cixous & Conley, 1984, pp. 51-52). Cixous uses the term “economy” to discuss a relation of spending and return, a feminine libidinal economy that invests itself freely and bountifully while a masculine libidinal economy invests itself with an eye on the return to itself (Cixous, 1986, pp. 86-87; Cixous & Conley, 1984, p. 52).

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Biography

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