

REL/ENG 394: The Spiritual Quest

General Studies: HU, C

Professor Tracy Fessenden

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Office hours: After class and by appointment in West Hall 136 or via zoom

Course Description:

More Americans than ever before identify as “spiritual seekers,” whether they also identify as members of a particular religious group or not. But what do spiritual seekers seek? Do spiritual quests pursue a single, common goal, or are spiritual yearnings also indelibly stamped by culture, place, and lived experience? How do histories of trauma and oppression produce the desire to heal, and how are spiritual resources for healing used (or abused) beyond the contexts that give rise to them? Is spirituality a feature of religion, a critique of religion, a purer form of religion, or an alternative to religion? What do the voices of spiritual seekers tell us about living with justice and injustice? About solitude, solidarity, and community? About care for the earth? About grief, resilience, and joy?

We’ll listen for answers in contemporary American spiritual writing and its antecedents in the Americas, Asia, Europe, North Africa, and the African diaspora. Our sources speak from Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Jewish, Native American, and DIY spiritualities, often in conversation and combination with one another. Readings are drawn from contemplative, theological, mystical, and ethical writings; anthropological and other scholarship; and memoir, fiction, and poetry. All readings will be provided in Canvas.

Course Objectives:

Through close study of the spiritual work and writing of a rich diversity of Americans and the communities with which they identify, the course aims to promote awareness and appreciation of the varieties, uses, and expressions of spirituality in the contemporary United States. The knowledge and discernment acquired in the course may encourage students to investigate the larger contexts in which their own ideas and experiences of spirituality are embedded, with the goal of cultivating greater resilience and capacity for meaningful connection in their lives and communities.

Course Commitments (h/t Prof. Richard Parker at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government):

The class assumes that discussions among people of goodwill who disagree in matters of spirituality and religion can and should be vibrant, tolerant, and constructive. These topics are often considered off-limits for discussion because they involve what for many are our deepest and most personal feelings and beliefs. I therefore ask each member of the class to participate in creating an environment of goodwill and mutual flourishing by honoring these commitments:

First, let each of us not presume, or ever respond as if, anyone else in the class intended to wound, silence, or undermine another person; *neither should our own words or conduct ever carry such intentions.*

Second, what we say in class is to remain in the classroom and on our protected Canvas site. The vitality of this course depends on our willingness to explore our own confusions, doubts, and beliefs, and some may not wish to have these broadcast outside the classroom.

If you feel uncertain about making these commitments, please see me about choosing an alternative to this class. *If you believe that these commitments have been violated during a class for any reason, please communicate this to me immediately.*

Required Texts: All texts will be made available on Canvas

Writing Assignments:

From the menu of writing assignments below, you are asked to select three for the semester. These written assignments will be of roughly equal length (about 1,000-1,250 words) and all will carry equal weight in grading.

Close Reading Exercise: The practice of close reading invites careful attention to how all the elements in a text work together to shed light on its subject and to draw in the reader or audience. Choose an assigned poem, or a passage from one of the assigned works of fiction or non-fiction, and carefully analyze its words, style, tone, images, rhythms, sounds, or other significant parts. How do the author's choices illuminate their beliefs about the nature of spiritual yearning, or seek to have an impact on the reader's emotions? How, in short, did this reading affect you, and how did it do that?

Creative Rewriting Exercise: Write a creative retelling of an assigned work. For example, you might choose to rewrite a poem as a short story, manifesto, or how-to guide, rewrite part of a memoir from the point of view of another protagonist, remake a non-fiction piece as a poem, or embed the work in a new era and setting. Along with your retelling, write a short accompanying essay (no more than 500 words) on why you decided to rework the text in the way you did, why you chose this text in the first place, and how reworking it from the inside, as a teller, made you look at it anew.

Language Exercise: Language shapes how we look at our world, and the language of spirituality is at once potent and elusive. How does spiritual experience push us beyond language, and how then can we invoke that experience in words? Delve into the resources of language to explore what often feels unsayable by choosing one of these two options.

Option 1. Write two or three poems (they can be brief) devoted to spiritual yearning, each accompanied by a few sentences explaining your language choices.

Option 2. Submit a glossary of three to four terms on or associated with spiritual seeking (with each entry approximately 300-500 words). You might delve into the history and disparate uses of words and phrases we encounter in the course, or propose new terms that can illuminate new, underdiscussed, or underappreciated sides of spiritual experience.

Typology Exercise: Our class readings offer up a variety of spiritual seekers—for example, the mystic, the cultural healer, the spiritual hobbyist, the self-help guru, the restless unbeliever, the reluctant saint.

Option 1. Identify and name two contrasting types of seekers based on the course material. Write about the qualities of each by performing a close compare/contrast reading, grounded in particular examples that appear in (or are suggested by) the course materials.

Option 2. Identify and name a particular kind of seeker and explore this figure in a creative mode: write a mini-bio starting with childhood, write a psychological case study, or inhabit the seeker in the first person by writing a monologue or poem.

Time-Travel Exercise: Revisiting sources from the past can hold a mirror to our own present, just as juxtaposing sources from different cultural locations can illuminate the

varied qualities and ideals of each. Write an essay that places sources from different times and places in conversation with each other or with our own here-and-now.

Option 1: Compare two works from the course written in a different period and/or cultural context. Analyze how placing the two texts in interpretive juxtaposition illuminates the distinctiveness of each. Be thoughtful in your choices: you might choose two works from very different contexts that share a common trope or theme or two works from similar contexts that depict spiritual striving in differing ways.

Option 2: Imagine one of the pre-2000 texts on the syllabus has just been reissued. Write a review for an audience of general readers that explains what the text is, how or if it might still be relevant, and why or whether they should read it. (Feel free to check out *The New York Times Book Review*, *The London Review of Books*, and other review sites for inspiration.)

Online Module:

Each week, make *three* posts to our Canvas discussion board, as follows:

- Post a show-and-tell item related to that unit's content—a song, poem, video, image, or text—and explain, in a few sentences, why you chose it: how it demonstrates, clarifies, complicates, or otherwise nods to something in the week's reading. Note: your post must be original; if another student has already posted the same show-and-tell item, you'll need to come up with something new. (Due Monday at 7 pm)
- Post a content-rich question to your fellow students, directly related to that week's material, and tell us why you are asking. Your question might begin, "How did you feel when you read . . ." or "What did you think about . . ." or "How do you make sense of . . ." or in some other way that invites a thoughtful and informed response, not a yes-or-no answer. Then add a sentence beginning, "I ask because." Why does this question matter to you? This is a class about the spiritual quest, with many of our sources drawn from religious texts, and your questions about religion are fair game. Please however refrain from proselytizing—that is, seeking to change another's religious beliefs, promote one's own religious beliefs to the exclusion of others, or convince others of the rightness or wrongness of the religious beliefs we encounter in class. (Due Monday at 7 pm)

- Post a content-rich response, of two or more sentences, to a show-and-tell-item, or to another student's question. Same rules apply: please refrain from proselytizing. (Due Tuesday at 7 pm).

Class Schedule

In-person Discussion: Wednesdays 1:30-2:45, West Hall 120

You are responsible for coming to class prepared to discuss the reading assigned for that day.

Online module: Weekly assignments are due each Monday (parts one and two) and Tuesday (part three) by 7:00 pm unless otherwise noted.

Grading:

Class participation: 30%

Participation includes coming to class prepared, honoring other members of the class with your thoughtful attention, and contributing constructively to the class dialogue in discussions and in-class writing exercises. Partial credit may be awarded. If you are ill or unable to come to class on any day, please be in touch with me as early as possible for an alternative assignment in order to receive participation credit for that class.

Online posts: 15%

Credit will be given for complete, constructive assignments that are posted to our Canvas site on time. Partial credit may be given.

Written Assignments: 45%

Each written assignment will count toward 15% toward your final grade. See the grading rubric on Canvas.

In-class facilitation: 5%

Every student will be responsible for leading the class in a brief discussion of one assigned text. See Canvas for dates and details.

Lightning presentations: 5%

Our final day of class will be devoted to 3-5 minute flash presentations, possibly in groups or pairs. Read a poem, give a TED talk, offer a performance piece . . .

Class Schedule

Week 1: Introduction, Expectations, and Defining Our Terms

No online assignment this week.

Week 2: Spiritual Yearning, Belief, and Unbelief

Elizabeth Drescher, from *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America's Nones* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), "The Religious and Spiritual Ecosystem," 53-58.

Jan Willis, from *Dreaming Me: Black, Baptist, and Buddhist: One Woman's Spiritual Journey* (Wisdom Publications, 2008), "A Baptist-Buddhist," 335-40.

Fariha Róisín, excerpt from *Who Is Wellness For? An Examination of Wellness Culture and Who It Leaves Behind* (HarperWave 2022)

Poems:

Mary Karr, "Disgraceland" (2004)

Craig Arnold, "Meditation on a Grapefruit" (2009)

Christian Wiman, "Even Bees Know What Zero Is" and "All My Friends Are Finding New Beliefs" (2020)

Week 3: Spirituality, Justice, and Injustice

W.E.B. Du Bois, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), 4-12

Winona LaDuke, from *Recovering the Sacred: The Power of Naming and Claiming* (2005), 11-16

Poems:

Langston Hughes, "Goodbye, Christ" (1932)

Sherman Alexie, "The Powwow at the End of the World" (1996)

Lucille Clifton, "The Photograph: A Lynching" (2003), "Slaveships" (2000)

Natalie Diaz, "Abecedarian Requiring Further Examination of Anglikan Seraphym Subjugation of a Wild Indian Rezervation" (2012) and "The Clouds Are Buffalo Limping Toward Jesus" (2012)

Week 4: Spirituality, Trauma, and Grief

Fariha Róisín, from *Who Is Wellness For? An Examination of Wellness Culture and Who It Leaves Behind* (2022), "Introduction," 1-25, "Who is Wellness For?" 227-234

Christian Wiman, from *My Bright Abyss* (2013), "Preface," and "My Bright Abyss, 6-15; "A Million Little Oblivions," 128-140

Poems:

Sherman Alexie, "Grief Calls Us to the Things of This World" (2007)

Lucille Clifton, "Sorrows" (2007)

Don Paterson, "The Lie" (2009)

Christian Wiman, "After the Diagnosis" (2011)

Week 5: First Writing Assignment Due. No class meeting or online modules. I will be available for individual meetings with all students either in person or via zoom.

Week 6: Spirituality, Solidarity, and Hope

Howard Thurman, "Commitment," from *Disciplines of the Spirit* (Friends United Press, 1963), 13-37

Gloria E. Anzaldúa, "Let Us Be the Healing of the Wound," from *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality* (Duke University Press, 2015), 9-22

Michael Robbins, "Equipment for Living: Poetry's Complex Consolations" (2015)

Poems

William Stafford, "A Ritual to Read to Each Other" (1998)

bell hooks, from "Appalachian Elegy" (2012)

Week 7: Spirituality and the Earth

bell hooks, "Earthbound: On Solid Ground," from *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, 116-120

Enrique Salmon, "Sharing Breath: Some Links Between land, Plants, and People" in Alison Deming and Lauret E. Savoy, *The Colors of Nature: Culture, Identity, and the Natural World* (Milkweed Editions, 2011), 196-210

Roy Scranton, from *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization* (City Lights Books, 2015), "Coming Home," 13-27

Poems:

Denise Levertov, "In California" (1989)

Wendell Berry "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front" (1999)

Melissa Tuckey, "Ghost Fishing Louisiana" (2013)

Week 8: Spirituality, Consumerism, and Therapeutic Culture

Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, from *Selling Spirituality*, "Spirituality and the Rebranding of Religion," 1-29 (excerpts)

Alexandra Schwartz, "Improving ourselves to death," *New Yorker*, January 15, 2018

Lisa Miller, "Who Owns Yoga?" *Washington Post*, January 11, 2012

Philip J. Deloria, from *Playing Indian*, "Introduction: American Indians, American Identities," 1-9

Adam M. McGee, excerpts from "Haitian Vodou and Voodoo: Imagined Religion and Popular Culture," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 41(2):231-256 (2012)

Week 9: Second Writing Assignment Due. No class meeting or online module. I will be available for individual meetings with all students either in person or via zoom.

Week 10: Pay Attention: Spirituality and Mindfulness

Simone Weil, excerpts from *Waiting for God* (trans. Emma Craufurd; G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1951)

David Foster Wallace, excerpt from *Something to Do With Paying Attention* (McNally Editions, 2022)

Thich Nhat Hanh, "Three Wondrous Answers," from *The Miracle of Mindfulness* (Beacon Press, 1975), 69-78

Anonymous, *The Cloud of Unknowing* (14th century), excerpts

Poems:

Rab'ia, "I am fully qualified to work as a doorkeeper" (8th century)

Ha Jin, "A Center" (2018)

Week 11: Loneliness, Solitude, and Community

Martin Buber, from *I and Thou* (trans. Walter Kaufmann; Touchstone, 1970).

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet* (Trans. Stephen Mitchell, Vintage, 1984),
Letters 1-5

St. Teresa of Avila, excerpt from *The Interior Castle* (1577)

Paul Tillich, "Loneliness and Solitude," in *The Eternal Now* (Scribner, 1963), 4-9

Poem:

Jean Valentine, "Sanctuary" (2004)

Week 12: Writing a Spiritual Life

Augustine, excerpts from *The Confessions of St. Augustine* (@ 400 CE)

Dorothy Day, excerpt from *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of the Legendary Catholic Social Activist* (HarperOne, 2009)

Mary Karr, excerpt from *Lit: A Memoir* (2010)

Jan Willis, from *Dreaming Me: Black, Baptist, and Buddhist: One Woman's Spiritual Journey* (Wisdom Publications, 2008)

Poem:

Michael Robbins, "Walkman" (2016)

Week Thirteen: Spirituality, Resilience, and Joy

Naomi Shihab Nye, "Before You Know Kindness as the Deepest Thing Inside..."
(Interview with Krista Tippett,) 2016

Christian Wiman, "Still Wilderness" in *American Scholar*, September 2017

Poems:

Rabi'a, "O My Lord, the stars glitter" (8th century)

Jalalu'l Rumi, "The Children of Light" (13th century)

Walt Whitman, "Song of the Open Road," (1856)
Emily Dickinson, "This World is not conclusion" (@1860)
Nelly Sachs, "But perhaps God needs the longing" (1966)
Lucille Clifton, "won't you celebrate with me" (1993)

Week 14: Third Written Assignment Due. No class meeting or online modules. I will be available for individual meetings with all students either in person or via zoom.

Week 15: Lightning Presentations

Accessibility

A request for accommodations must be submitted through Student Accessibility and Inclusive Learning Services (SAILS; formerly the Disability Resource Center). If you require accommodation, please make your request as soon as possible. SAILS will let you know what documentation is needed. <http://www.asu.edu/studentaffairs/ed/drc/>

Title IX

Title IX is a federal law that provides that no person be excluded on the basis of sex from participation in, be denied benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity. Both Title IX and university policy make clear that sexual violence and harassment based on sex is prohibited. An individual who believes they have been subjected to sexual violence or harassed on the basis of sex can seek support, including counseling and academic support, from the university. If you or someone you know has been harassed on the basis of sex or sexually assaulted, you can find information and resources at <https://sexualviolenceprevention.asu.edu/faqs>

As a mandated reporter, I am obligated to report any information I become aware of regarding alleged acts of sexual discrimination, including sexual violence and dating violence. ASU Counseling Services, <https://eoss.asu.edu/counseling>, is available if you wish to discuss any concerns confidentially and privately.

This syllabus is subject to change. Any updates will be posted as Course Announcements on Canvas.

