Proposed Project: Exploration of Intersection of Spirituality and Creative Nonfiction

Relevant Course Work:
English 101 (Craft of Language)
English 102 (Texts and Contexts)
English 343 (Creative Nonfiction)
Theology 350 (Beauty of God)
Art 180 (Encountering Mystery)

Proposed Project:

The overarching goal of this project is to discern and explore where spirituality and literary creativity intersect. Creative nonfiction writers seek to tell true stories, to communicate the abstract in tangible and visible ways that often allow for better self-understanding. Because of the abstract and individualistic nature of spiritual development and the fluidity and malleability of Creative Nonfiction as a style of writing, the two fields blend and interconnect. Theologically, examining the language and thinking tied to forms of expression and art can reveal a great deal about the interconnectedness between one’s encounters with God, human reason, and the continuous divine revelation available to individuals through their spirituality. Artistically, a growing comprehension and development of skill surrounding one’s ability to reflect, synthesize and express the innermost moments and experiences in a way that her audience, each with their own background and relationship with the Divine, can somehow still understand and relate to reflects true proficiency in writing as a form of storytelling and expression. This project is two-pronged. Firstly, I will read a variety of spiritually-motivated creative nonfiction, from writers of different stages of spiritual journeys, representing different faiths, in order to gain understanding of how writers utilize literary techniques to tell true stories of spiritual quests. I am particularly interested in how they balance their individual experiences, their personal spiritual journeys, while also tapping into universal themes and connecting to their audiences. In that sense, I am asking: what are the universal elements of spirituality that can be explored in personal writing, in creative nonfiction, and that are the techniques and styles to do so?

Contemporary creative nonfiction writers I will explore include:
- Mary Karr, *Facing Altars: Poetry and Prayer*
- Marina Keegan, “The Art of Observation” and other essays
- Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*
- Christian Wirman, “My Bright Abyss” and other essays
- Walter Wangerin Jr., “Ragman” and other essays
- Andre Dubus, *Broken Vessels: Essays, Meditations from a Movable Chair*
- Terry Tempest Williams, “Refuge” and other essays
- Scott Russell Sanders, *The Force of Spirit*
- Jan Richardson, *In Wisdom’s Path*
- Brian Doyle, “Pop Art” and other essays
- Daphne Merkin, *This Close to Happy* and other essays
Secondly, my hope is to develop my own literary voice as I explore the spiritual through creative nonfiction, composing my own collection of literary essays. My goal is to interweave my own spirituality and life experiences about family, my upbringing and other pieces of my life that have shaped me in a way successfully done by the authors analyzed. In the vein of the authors I have read, I wish to write essays that are unique to my experiences and perspectives yet recognizable and relatable in larger themes and emotion to the collective human experience.

Methodology:

This summer, Erin Breen, a junior English and Theology major, will work under the supervision of Dr. Jennifer Spinner to research and complete the following tasks

- Read various works on spirituality by creative nonfiction writers to discern how their spiritual development and creativity intersect and motivate their writings, and how these individuals sought, found and shared the Divine through their creative work.
- Create a bibliography of “spiritual creative nonfiction writers” to share with other writers and readers of the genre.
- Compose my own spiritually motivated Creative Nonfiction (at least three essays) – with the end goal of publication in literary magazines such as Creative Nonfiction, Hippocampus Magazine, Riverteeth Journal, Forth Magazine, 1966 Magazine, Under the Gum Tree Magazine, The City Quill and Glass Mountain Review

Mentor Contact Information:
Dr. Jenny Spinner
jspinner@sju.edu