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Theme Essay by Wendy Brown-Báez

Writing Prompts that Saved My Faith



When my youngest son died by his own hand, my life shattered, and my faith crumbled. All that was left was an aching darkness.

I'd always relied on my faith in a loving Creator when I hitchhiked, when I needed to pay rent without compromising creativity, when my oldest son was tempted to ignore curfew or steal, through multiple losses of loved ones. As a seeker who'd studied many religions, I knew, somehow, that I had a reservoir of faith to draw on from years of spiritual practice: prayer, meditation, devotion.

But eleven years ago, immediately after I heard the news of Sam's suicide, my imagination shut down. Anger and guilt

strangled my voice. I'd always relied on my intuition, and my first thoughts were: *Why didn't I know—and why didn't I stop him?*

I felt abandoned by the Divine. The thought “God is love” seemed laughable.

It would take years to retrieve my belief in a Higher Power for the Good. It would take sharing my poetry in cafes and cabarets, teaching, silent retreats, and joining a spiritual community. But it was writing that consistently brought me solace, direction, inspiration, and meaning.

In 2013, I took a risk by offering a writing workshop at SpringHouse Ministry Center in Minneapolis called “Spiritual Memoir.” I had no idea if I'd be able to participate on a deep level or if I'd just skim the surface. I had taught writing workshops for victims of domestic violence, homeless youth, heart patients, and HIV+ clients, and I knew I could facilitate such a group. But part of the way I create intimacy in a workshop is by writing and sharing my own work. With this fraught subject, I worried that I'd discover a painful truth: that I no longer believed in God as an omniscient being. I was afraid sharing my emotional truth would be discouraging to others.

The topics I planned to cover included “What do I want from God?,” “When prayers are unanswered,” and “The dark night of the soul.” Could I expose my doubts and not sound bitter? What would I find in my darkness? I knew these vital questions were going to stir up overwhelming emotions, and I wasn't sure I had the courage to answer honestly.

That evening, eight women and men joined me at a table in the small back room provided by the Center. SpringHouse offers space for three different congregations to hold services, and I learned when we introduced ourselves that we represented a mix of beliefs and practices. The participants appeared pensive and quiet, yet also excited about where this might take us.

I began by lighting a candle and asking participants to write down their intentions. Everyone eagerly put pen to paper. One of the first prompts I gave was “The first time I felt God as a presence.” This is what I wrote:

I felt God as a presence when I walked alone in the woods, when I danced in a meadow, allowing the joy of my body's movements to overtake me. I felt God as a desire to help others, to take care of those who suffer. I felt God as a desire to open my arms wide to life and to the people I felt close to, a feeling of compassionate exhilarating oneness with all of life. God was dancing in my blood and my bones. God was the music I strummed on my guitar and my desire for social justice.

I recognized this youthful affirmation as hope for the Divine to move me, to inspire me. I hadn't lost any of that, had I? It was something familiar, something unbreakable. And yet, I still struggled with how it felt, as though I couldn't repair that “unbreakable” bond. In response to the prompt “What do I want from God?,” I wrote:

No guessing. I want God to live up to my expectation of a loving presence, by showing me love in the way the world works. I want God to bless me and then uplift me from the pain of loss.

This surprised me. I was still asking for the Divine to comfort me, to give me a message, in ways I could comprehend. I realized I had expectations: I believed that to be on a spiritual path meant to not suffer, or at least to not suffer something so devastating. I didn't know if my life could ever be put back together. How could I, after all I'd witnessed, expect I would be spared?

In 2005, I had joined a circle of mourners lit by the white candles in our hands. While Sam's body was cremated, I had read aloud Jeanne Lohmann's poem “Praise What Comes.” Her closing lines are especially moving:

...At the intersections,
the boundaries where one life began and another
ended, the jumping-off places between fear and
possibility, at the ragged edges of pain,
did I catch the smallest glimpse of the holy?

Eight years later in my workshop, I wrote this for the prompt “A glimpse of the holy”:

Standing at the edge of meaning, wondering if God had deserted me or I had been wrong all along, ...I still wanted God, I still yearned for intimate connection. At the edge of a dark wood, I didn't yet know that I would feel lost and yet be guided each step of the way. I didn't know the darkness within me had to be plucked out inch by inch. I didn't know that as I did so, the holy would be breathing through me like a flute. A glimpse of the holy came with the prayer chaplain's words, my best friend taking me to dinner, a ride across the bay in sparkling sunlight, my grandson holding my face in his hands and saying, You have a nice face, Grandma.

Writing helped me find the spiritual foundation I was unable to articulate except on the page. In the workshop, I delighted in writing about books that had inspired me, mentors who'd encouraged me, guidance from within, the beauty of the world and the joy of praise and prayer. I realized that writing was my sanctuary. Along with the other participants, I asked hard and sometimes unanswerable questions. We were on a pilgrimage, a journey to the center, through the act of writing.

My ability to feel gratitude for the ragged edges, no matter how frayed or sharp, is probably something I couldn't have accomplished by force of will. But through the act of committing words to paper, I discovered ways to reaffirm my faith. As I examined my spiritual practice, I longed for it. As I wrote about the despair of my dark night, the light began to shine. To my prompt “What is written on your inner walls?,” I wrote:

My inner star chart points me to true north.... Remembering who I am, that I am not my circumstances and they have no power over me. Asking for help. Receiving it. I know God when I am deep in meditation and touch something eternal, a deep serenity, a knowing. When my bones sing and my heart soars. When I believe there is meaning despite suffering and that one day all tears will be dried.

Words can light the way. This I now know.

Publishing Information

- “Praise What Comes” by Jeanne Lohmann from her book *The Light of Invisible Bodies: Poems* (Daniel & Daniel, 2003).

Art Information

- “Sunset Behind Colonnade” (Corinthian colonnade with the peculiarly Palmyran projections from the columns, which originally held busts of civic notables and patrons in Palmyra, Syria, 2006) © [Saïd Nuseibeh](#) [4]; used by permission.



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Review, *Minnetonka Review*, *Mizna*, and *Talking Writing*, and in anthologies such as *Double Lives*, *Reinvention*, and *Those We Leave Behind*; *The Compassion Anthology*; and *All We Can Hold*. She was awarded the McKnight and Minnesota State Arts Board grant to teach writing workshops in nonprofits and for youth in crisis. She teaches in prisons as a member of the Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop as well as at Pathways Minneapolis and Face to Face Academy in St. Paul, Minnesota.

For more information, visit [Wendy Brown-Báez's website](#) [5].

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