

Citation

Winfield, M. I. (2006). Book Review. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education* [Online], 2 (2), 22-27. Available:

Book Review

Maria I. Winfield
The University of Georgia
herains@uga.edu

Dillard, C. B. (2006). *On spiritual strivings: transforming an African American woman's academic life*. New York: State University of New York Press. 118 pp. ISBN10: 0-7914-6811-9, \$40.00 (hardcover).

The title of this book, *On Spiritual Strivings: Transforming an African American Woman's Academic Life*, references a transformation for the author, Cynthia B. Dillard. However, I write this book review from the positionality of my own personal transformation. I use the word transformation to indicate metamorphoses in assumptions and actions. This book will alter the lives of people who accept Dillard's "invitation into a relationship" (p. xv). Dillard expresses two related and relational desires: (1) that these stories provide fruitful spaces of contemplation and reflection so the reader might experience a spiritual connection with the stories; that the reader may find in the stories wisdom, knowledge, and an example of another way of being engaged in the life and work of teaching, research, and service; (2) that the reader will also be transformed by what is here, by her experience with this book (pp. xii-xiii).

Dillard extends this invitation in one hand while offering a sacrificial gift in the other; she presents her essence. As she has written in earlier works, she is "willing to embrace all of me for the good of all of us" (Dillard, Abdur-Rashid, & Tyson, 2000, p. 457). In other words, even as Dillard creates a communal space for an examination of a spiritual epistemology, she simultaneously strives beside us. This book is particularly relevant for language and literacy pedagogy because it illustrates literacy as making meaning through writing and illustrates how the use of stories can change people's lives.

The title, *Spiritual Strivings*, is a phrase re-emerging from *The Souls of Black Folk* by W. E. B. Du Bois (1999) and defined as "our ongoing desire and quest to bring a sense of clarity to... both our African and American souls" (p. x). Dillard expertly uses the theme of spiritual strivings to examine the potential for spiritually-centered teaching, service and research. Working within an African and Black feminist framework, she illuminates "the transformative possibilities that lie in making a more conscious connection to Africa in our work, and the process by which such connections can transform an academic life into one whose purpose is healing and service through teaching and research" (p. x). Through her narratives, poetry, storytelling and essays, Dillard effectively directs the reader toward these transformations via eight chapters:

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Chapter 1 - The Substance of Things Hoped For, The Evidence of Things Not Seen: Examining an Endarkened Epistemology in Educational Research and Leadership; Chapter 2 - What Is It and Where Does It Live? Toward Defining Spirit Within a Research and Teaching Paradigm; Chapter 3 - Walking Ourselves Back Home: The Education of Teachers With/In the World; Chapter 4 - Looking at the Real Nature of Things: Life and Death as One Eternal Moment in Teaching and Research; Chapter 5 - Suddenly but Always Queen: Embracing a Methodology of Surrender in Research and Teaching; Chapter 6 - Akwambo: From Speaking Words to Inviting the Voice of Spirit in Research; Chapter 7 - Out of My Darkness I Find My Light: Naming Self, Naming Spirit; and Chapter 8 - Coming Full Circle: Creating and Being on Purpose.

Dillard uses these chapters to guide her readers into relatively uncharted territory while taking care to keep the itinerary both well-structured, and easy to follow. In chapter one Dillard defines and elaborates an endarkened feminist epistemology:

I use the term "endarkened" feminist epistemology to articulate how reality is known when based in the historical roots of Black feminist thought, embodying a distinguishable difference in cultural standpoint, located in the intersection/overlap of the culturally constructed socializations of race, gender, and other identities, and the historical and contemporary contexts of oppressions and resistance for African American women. (p. 3)

Dillard explains that the term "enlightenment" does not adequately articulate Black feminist thought because language is epistemic. Since language is a vehicle for transporting people to understandings of their personal realities, words "must possess instrumentality: [They] must be able to do something toward transforming particular ways of knowing and producing knowledge" (p. 3). Therefore, Dillard creates the term "endarkenment" to imply "a shift in the research metaphors" (p. 3) and to problematize taken-for-granted notions about educational research. One of these taken-for-granted notions is the idea that spirituality must be separate from intellectuality. However, Dillard explains the ways spirit and intellect are two parts of a unified whole, even as initial transformation can occur within individuals and societies on a spiritual level.

According to Dillard, spiritual epistemologies are particularly relevant to Black feminist thought and central to endarkened feminist epistemology. In chapter two she states, "Only when spirit is at the center of our work can we create a community in love" (p. 37). Speaking against entrenched notions that scholars must dichotomize the academic and personal, she discusses how spiritual epistemologies convey our fully human selves within teaching and research communities. Spiritual epistemologies consist of three essential elements. The first essential element is the amalgamation of intellectual and spiritual ways of knowing.

Fundamentally, if we see research and teaching as both intellectual and spiritual endeavors, then the purpose of our research will be to more fully love and serve human beings and to serve life. In this way the academic life of a teacher or researcher will not be centered in the long-standing ego driven rewards we've held up in the academy as so important, but instead on making the world a better place, on ending oppression, on becoming more fully human ourselves through the work we do in the world. (p. 42)

In other words, endarkened feminist theory places spiritual epistemologies at the center of academic work. Endarkened feminist methodology emphasizes intentional and

rigorous reflexivity that radiates outward for the good of humankind. Thus, creating opportunities for transformation is central to spiritual epistemologies.

The second essential element of spiritual epistemologies is the idea that “an academic life is creative and seeks to heal mind, body, and spirit” (p. 42). Dillard explains:

As human beings, we are meant to continue being creative, as the divine Creator's force extends through us, manifesting the dreams of the universe through the work that we do. Such creativity should be central to the purpose of research and teaching. Teaching and research practices are dynamic and creative practices, not solely practices of the mind: Engaging one's spirit as a part of those practices is key to the creation and transformation of one's inner and outer life—and thus, the whole of life. (p. 42)

We do not live, teach, or research in isolation. As the world decreases in size via the navigational possibilities of a technological society, human beings become increasingly interconnected. Individuals are related to each other in myriad ways as part of a global family. The time has come for all of us to be more concerned about all of us, which is the final facet of a spiritual epistemology. Dillard asserts, “Finally, *an academic life is a political life, with peace and justice as its aim* [author's italics]” (p. 43). Dillard tells us that, as responsible members of the human family, academics in the global neighborhood would do well to study peace and empowerment instead of war and oppression. Further, she reminds us:

All that we do in every aspect of our lives speaks volumes about what we value and believe to be true about whatever we are undertaking, whether teaching, research, or service. We acknowledge by our every action, whether peace and justice are fundamental to the well-being of human relationships and life on this planet. From my perspective, this is not an optional part of an academic life that places spirit at the center. Part of our responsibility as teachers and researchers is to engage in continual examination, reflection, and definition of who we are in our academic lives—and who we are becoming. This will give us insight into ways to create an academic life that serves and does not destroy and that resists those spaces and places that resist social justice, through embracing a paradigm where culture and spirit are central and peace and justice is the work. (p. 43)

Dillard's initial chapters provide erudite details designed to help her audience to travel from point “A” to point “Z” in the exploration of an endarkened feminist epistemology that places spirit at the center of research and pedagogy. The remaining chapters invite her audience to experience her personal transformations while simultaneously offering junctures for transformation in her readers' lives. Dillard's rich narratives about her teaching and researching practice provide inspiration and a road map for readers who want to transform their own pedagogy.

As I stated earlier, *On Spiritual Strivings* has been transformative in my life. Many times in this book I found myself asking a question and then finding the answer within the next few sentences. Dillard's vigorous and rigorous qualitative study explains each concept and gives concrete examples to help her audience experience her journey alongside her. She does this by first specifying her positionality as a creative and spirit-filled African American woman-academic—Queen mother, re-searcher-teacher, and the entirety of her multiple identities. Second, she turns a theoretically and biographically

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“critical gaze” on her own academic life even as she seeks to empower others to walk with “intellectual and spiritual integrity.” Finally, she moves beyond explication to exploration as she invites us to actually experience *Spiritual Strivings* with her.

There were times while reading this book when I wanted to cry:

I am looking for real colleagues

I am looking for real, honest colleagues. (p. 11)

These lines almost made me cry as I remembered my own professors, students, and colleagues in my varied academic journeys—from the professor who avowed, “Blacks are genetically intellectually inferior to whites,” to students who I felt assaulted me, to colleagues that looked in the face of a truth I told and called it a lie. I almost cried remembering.

There were times while reading this book when I cried tears of joy:

Mpeasem is a true testament to its name:

It means “We don’t want any trouble.”

We just want a school.

Gracious Creator,

...A place where parents love their kids
and know that education and opportunity
are intimately connected

To freedom... (pp. 57-58)

These lines induced joyful tears as I pondered the possibilities of educational systems that would truly be about the business of creating opportunities for all children to reach their highest potential. I cried imagining.

There were times while reading this book when I laughed out loud:

I knew that, like the brothers earlier in the day, she too recognized one of the many carryovers of African womanhood that could not be oppressed or suppressed, even through the violence of the slave trade: the African woman’s ass...and her look of recognition is one I will never, ever forget. (p. 101)

These lines were reminiscent of Stevie Wonder’s lyrics because they brought some “joy inside my tears.” I was transported to that African village that did not want any trouble, opened my heart, and was transformed. My tears contained laughter.

There were times while reading this book when I sobbed out loud:

The lump in my throat finally gave way to streams of tears as I walked out of the building. And five days later, my Dad died. (p. 69)

These lines deracinated a sorrow from deep inside my soul as I recalled the loss of my own father. It was sadness that became poignant when I subsequently read the query from Dillard’s father, a question my father often asked of me: “Are you running away from something or towards something?” (p. 114) I cried empathetically.

Empathy is a transformational notion. If you are willing to open your heart to joy inside of tears, then the spiritual strivings so humbly and graciously shared in the slim, 118-page tome will not allow you to remain unchanged. You no doubt will be “running towards something”. The something that you run to will be divergence and an opportunity to travel down a different road. Personal transformation can occur while you read Dillard’s provocative book, not simply because it is emotionally evocative but also because hope soars through its passages.

Spiritual Strivings is a hope-filled book written from an endarkened feminist perspective that has six core assumptions. They are:

1. Self-definition forms one's participation and responsibility to one's community.
2. Research is both an intellectual and a spiritual pursuit, a pursuit of purpose.
3. Only within the context of community does the individual appear (Palmer, 1983) and, through dialogue, continue to become.
4. Concrete experience within everyday life form the criterion of meaning, the "matrix of meaning making."
5. Knowing and research are both historical (extending backwards in time) and outward to the world; to approach them otherwise is to diminish their cultural and empirical meaningfulness.
6. Power relations, manifest as racism, sexism, homophobia, and so on, structure gender, race, and other identity relations within research. (pp. 18-26)

In summary, within an endarkened feminist epistemological landscape, self-definition is centered in community responsibility; research carries a dual purpose of intellectual and spiritual pursuit; dialogue is circular because it contextualizes researchers within the researched community, resulting in a fuller human existence for all; concrete daily experiences "form the criterion of meaning" (p. 23); epistemologies are fluid as they draw from historical knowledges and extend "outward to the world"; and power relations descend from "identity relations" in research because all research is socially constructed.

Dillard offers epistemological and theoretical gifts to the research community as sanctuaries where we can socially construct our research and transition together: "Such transitions [are] imbued with a sense of grace, because they often leave us confused, unknowing, and frightened, humbly aware of our hearts, minds, and spirits in relationship to the world and awakened to others in new and important ways" (p. 115). I hope readers will accept her invitation to embrace *Spiritual Strivings* for the good of humanity. Like Dillard et al. (2000), "I am an African-American woman teacher willing to embrace all of me for the good of all of us" (p. 457). I stand upon a plateau searching for the distant silhouettes of those who will also be transformed. I know they will appear. For them, for you...I wait.

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Received: 7/17/06

Revisions Received: 9/10/06

Accepted for Publication: 10/23 /06