At Risk:
Teaching and Writing Outside the Safety Zone
Nan Phifer looked around the room, and a calm settled over everyone. Her eyes looked a bit tired from travel no doubt but she managed a warm smile. She gestured to the handout she had distributed and in a soothing voice said, "Now, in the middle of each empty picture frame you see here, I'd like everyone to write the name of a person who influenced you to become a teacher. This could be someone in your immediate family, a teacher from your past or present, a student you've had, or a famous author you've read and admired. It could be anyone." Like the rest of the group, I started tentatively at first, jotting one name at a time. But, slowly, my memories, the people who influenced my teaching career, came flooding back: my dissertation director Sue, my old cooperating teacher Mr. King, my mom, my TA directors Donna and Elizabeth, my personal rhet/comp superstars James Moffett, Lad Tobin, Wendy Bishop. Before I knew it, the page was filled, and I was still writing.

The 2004 CCCC in San Antonio had just gotten underway. I sat at a conference table surrounded by a dozen colleagues; we were all attending the annual AEPL workshop where Nan Phifer was graciously illustrating how she runs her memoir workshops in connection with the University of Oregon. The writing activity we were eagerly engaged in is just one of many presented in her book, *Memoirs of the Soul: Writing Your Spiritual Autobiography.*

Phifer's book is geared mainly towards beginning authors who know little about the writing process. Her carefully phrased prompts, instructions, and examples ask writers to begin at the surface of their existence and to burrow deeper and deeper into their hearts and minds. With each chapter, she challenges would-be memoirists to take another step inward, to inch closer to their own souls. In many ways, Phifer's book is like a deep-sea diving expedition or an archeological dig where the depth of the self is revealed layer by layer, league by league, chapter by chapter.

It begins disarmingly enough. After a brief explanation of the writing process brainstorming, drafting, peer review, revision—Phifer asks writers to examine specific artifacts, events, people, and places of significance. Many prompts in the first few chapters skim the surface only. Writers are directed to consider the people in their lives who have been important to them (alive or dead, young or old), places where significant events occurred (homes, parks, sanctuaries), objects they would be sorry to lose (handmade gifts, awards, books), and important activities (both physical and intellectual) (21-22). In each chapter, Phifer provides writers with specific prompts to follow ("A place I remember well is . . . " "My pulse quickened when . . ") and tells writers to draft quickly without regard to form or convention (32-42).
The scratching of pens and pencils slowly quieted. Nan spoke up in a cool, reassuring tone: "When you are finished filling in the frames, take a sheet of tracing paper and place it on top." I did so, and the blackened squares and hastily scrawled names of my teaching influences blurred through, but I could still read them. She continued, "On the tracing paper, as you read each name, think about your relationship to that person. What part of yourself responds to that individual? What did you learn from that person? What did the person teach you? What in yourself do you ascribe to that person? In each frame, I'd like you to write that quality, that element of yourself, that you associate with that person." Again, I began writing tentatively. This was no easy task; the focus had changed from the external to the internal. And Nan wasn't only asking me to write about myself, but to examine my internal relationship to those whom I identified as teaching influences. This was going to take some thinking…

As a teacher of writing, I've occasionally used memoir-type writing assignments like Phifer's in both first-year and advanced-writing classes. (One of my perennial favorites is having students write their own literacy histories.) Because of my semi-familiarity with memoir pedagogy, I admit that I was a bit ambivalent about the introductory chapters in Memoirs of the Soul. Though the examples of student memoirs that Phifer includes are often moving, her initial prompts (such as drawing a Valentine-shaped heart and filling it with the names of significant people) seem rooted in the same expressivist—and often sentimental—pedagogy that I myself have been criticized for using in the classroom.

However, around chapter 8 and 9 ("Adolescent Angst" and "Events that Shape the Course of Your Life" respectively), I found my misgivings shift ever so slightly. It is here that Phifer asks writers to do some hard work in confronting themselves, their choices, and their experiences, and to name their disappointments and frustrations, while revealing themselves as people who are not always in control. Some of my own research into the spiritual aspects of teaching writing have revolved around issues of imperfection, self-confrontation, and control; so, not surprisingly, my interest in her book was ignited when she guided me to write about "A time when I did not feel in control," "A time I realized my life would be different," "A time I felt humiliated," and "A time when I disappointed myself" (65-73). It was then I realized this wasn't necessarily the warm-and-fuzzy book it appeared to be. Clearly, a "feel good" pedagogical approach can play an important part of self-revelation when writing a memoir. But if would-be memoirists are willing to also do the difficult work of self-confrontation in writing and share it with others, this is when a manuscript can really come to life. As an author and experienced workshop leader, Phifer clearly acknowledges this.

"Now, I'd like you to examine all your notes and write a paragraph that describes why you became a teacher. When you are done, I'm going to ask you to get into groups of two and read your paragraph to your partner. When you share, wait until the person is finished reading, then make one positive comment about the paragraph and ask one question about something that was not mentioned or elaborated
on.” Nan’s directions were clear. Having had ample time to brainstorm, I quickly got to work. In my paragraph, I mused that I have a tendency to gravitate toward that which feels difficult; if I feel a sense of resistance, if I feel uncomfortable, or if an act feels like a challenge or obstacle, I believe I am being called to pay attention to it. Teaching falls into this category for me.

Because teaching is such a social act and because I am by nature rather reserved and private, I’ve often characterized teaching as a challenging task that forces me to stretch. This is a difficult, but important, realization. After reading my short narrative aloud to my partner, I glanced quickly around the room and saw everyone engaged in each other’s stories.

Ultimately, the real guts of Phifer’s book are revealed in later chapters: “Evolving Ideas About Religion,” “Confronting Crisis,” “Flip of the Compass,” and “Inner Peace” (chapters 16-21). This is where Phifer asks the beginning memoirist to examine and sometimes question deeply held religious beliefs. She acknowledges that our approach toward religion is not static; it is in flux as we learn and grow and change. Likewise, she asks us to face calamity, our own despair and agony, feelings of loss, and being lost. Of course, Phifer is careful to balance this deep and sometimes troubling self-confrontation with love and understanding: “How do you reveal the quality of tenderness in yourself and the quality of patience? What was your source of courage? Where did you find hope?” (140). She also challenges us to ponder the ways profound disruption can lead to inner peace.

As mentioned, Phifer packs her book with a great many excerpts by writers who have attended her workshops: traditional students, single mothers, ministers, musicians, teachers, grandparents. These samples provide the beginning memoirist with more than just models, however; Phifer presents these individuals as comrades, all of whom are cultivating the habit of introspection, all of whom are traveling down the same path. She also sprinkles little breadcrumbs for the reader along the way, pinches of advice and insight from famous writers and thinkers, like William James, Blaise Pascal, Franz Kafka, and Paul Tillich. Additionally, the last few chapters provide a suggested reading list, tips for using the book in different academic environments (such as first-year composition classes and high school English classes), tips for using the book in a writing group or alone, and suggestions for preparing a final copy of a memoir (including ideas on revising and proofreading).

Having seen Nan Phifer in action, I don’t think there’s anything quite like attending her writing workshops, but her book is a fair alternative if a trip to Oregon is out of the question.