



The Sacred Art of Writing

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A Cohort Through the Eugene Peterson Center for Christian Imagination

“Write as if you were dying. At the same time, assume you write for an audience consisting solely of terminal patients. That is, after all, the case. What would you begin writing if you knew you would die soon? What could you say to a dying person that would not enrage by its triviality?”
Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*

Purpose:

This Doctor of Ministry track will invite both established and emerging writers in multiple genres and contexts (those in traditional ministry and those whose work and writing moves them into broader arenas of service) to think deeply, theologically, and artfully about their work. As people whose very life arrives from the Word, Christians ought to be those with the deepest reverence for language. Yet, too often our writing is stilted, banal, clichéd, moralistic and bereft of the beauty and care our craft requires. If we are dealing with holy work simultaneously immersed in gritty humanity and divine transcendence, then our writing ought to carry a haunting lilt while piercing the heart and the mind. *The Sacred Art of Writing* aims to walk with students into this joyful, sacred calling.

Faculty Mentor: Winn Collier



Director of the Eugene Peterson Center and Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology and Christian Imagination, Winn has been a pastor for 25 years. In addition to writing for *The Washington Post*, *Christianity Today*, *Christian Century* and numerous other outlets, he has published books in multiple genres (spiritual creative non-fiction, fiction, and biography): *Restless Faith: Hanging on to a God Just Out of Reach*; *Let God: Spiritual Conversations with François Fénelon*; *Holy Curiosity: Encountering Jesus' Provocative Questions*; *Love Big, Be Well: Letters to a Small Town Church* and *A Burning in My Bones: The Authorized Biography of Eugene H. Peterson*.

Cohort Mentors:



John Blase | a former pastor, John has worked as an editor in the publishing industry for fifteen years (with David C. Cook and Waterbrook Penguin-Random House). He is a poet and creative non-fiction writer. In addition to ghostwriting for notable figures and publishing essays for numerous outlets, he has written *Jubilee: The Poems*; *Know When to Hold 'Em*; *Touching Wonder*, and *All is Grace: A Ragamuffin Memoir* (with Brennan Manning).



Marilyn McEntyre | a poet and essayist, Marilyn was a former professor of humanities at the UC Berkeley-UCSF Joint Medical Program and has spoken for numerous writer workshops, conferences, churches and seminaries. Marilyn is the author of *When Poets Pray*; *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies*; *Speaking Peace in a Culture of Conflict*; *Word by Word: A Daily Spiritual Practice*; *A Long Letting Go: Meditations on Losing Someone You Love*; *Drawn to the Light: Poems on Rembrandt's Religious Paintings*; *Dwelling in the Text: Homes in American Fiction*; *A Healing Art: Regeneration Through Autobiography*; *Occasions: Selected Poems* and other titles.

Guest Lecturers:



Leif Enger | a former producer and reporter with Minnesota Public Radio, Leif is a national bestselling novelist. Leif has written *Peace Like a River* (named one of the Year's Best Books by both *Time Magazine* and the *LA Times*); *So Brave, Young, and Handsome* and *Virgil Wander*.



Sophronia Scott | a novelist and essayist, Sophronia has written for *Killens Review of Arts and Letters*, *Saranac Review*, *Ruminate*, *NewYorkTimes.com*, *O, The Oprah Magazine* and numerous other publications. She is the author of both fiction (*All I Need to Get By* and *Unforgivable Love*) and nonfiction (*This Child of Faith*, with her son Tain, *Love's Long Line* and *The Seeker and the Monk: Everyday Conversations with Thomas Merton*). Winner of numerous awards, Sophronia is the founding director of the MFA program at Alma College.

Rationale:

In July of 2006, Eugene Peterson delivered a lecture at the famous Tattered Cover Bookstore in Denver, Colorado, titled “What are Writers Good For?” In it, he warned against “godtalk” — insisting that “One of the characteristics of language in the land of the living is that it is personal. When we use language that depersonalizes God into an abstraction or an idea or a project, the life leaks out of what we say and write, teach and pray. We are left with nothing but godtalk.” To avoid such a dreaded thing, he encouraged those present that day to concentrate on the language used between Sundays— when and where writers have a high calling “not to tell people what words mean, but to awaken their imaginations so that they see and experience words at work.”

For those of us tasked to hone our skill and craft, we must take the bare elements of words, metaphor and Scripture, the stories we know and the stories we want to birth in the world—we must take all this and, over a lifetime, keep our butt in the chair (Anne Lamott) and do the hard work of putting words to paper.

Our world needs brave and imaginative writers who recognize the holiness of words, who resist ugly, manipulative, commodified language, and who string together sentences that carry weight and

beauty. We need tenacious writers who avoid “godtalk”—who will honor their sacred task, in service to the God who is wholly other and yet shockingly human and write words that ignite fire and hope rather than enraging with their triviality.

Overarching Vision:

Each year will revolve around two annual intensives, one in the fall and one in the spring. Each intensive will emphasize both learning the craft (focusing on various genres) and workshopping our ongoing works. Once per year, we will have one guest lecturer, accomplished in their respective genre, to join us. Possible lecturers are:

//Schedule//

Potential Pre-reading for Opening Intensive: Selections from Annie Dillard’s *The Writing Life*, Stephen King’s *On Writing*, Frederick Buechner’s *Telling Secrets*, Anne Lamott’s *Bird by Bird*, Claire Messud’s *Kant’s Little Prussian Head and Other Reasons Why I Write: An Autobiography in Essays*, and Marilyn McEntyre’s *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies*. Other potential reading could be Vanita Hampton Wright’s *The Art of Spiritual Writing* (or *The Soul Tells a Story: Engaging Creativity with Spirituality in the Writing Life*) or Robert Benson’s *Dancing on the Head of a Pen*.

Year One: In addition to determining student projects, the first year will focus on the theological grounding for the sacred work of writing, the holiness of words, and the sacramental reality of language. As a way of emphasizing the novel, our guest lecturer will be Leif Enger. Examples of likely reading (still to be finalized) might include selections from Eugene Peterson’s *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, a reading packet including theologically-oriented articles, selections from Rowan Williams’ *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction (Making of the Christian Imagination)*, Leif Enger’s *Virgil Wander*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Emily St. J Mandel’s *Station Eleven*, Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, Kent Haruf’s *Eventide*, and Marilynne Robinson’s *Lila*.

Year Two: Our second year will deepen themes from year one in conjunction with exploring memoir and poetry, essay and sermons. Our guest lecturer will be Sophronia Scott. Potential reading might include a packet of theologically-oriented articles, Mary Karr’s *Lit*, Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Shulem Deen’s *All Who Go Do Not Return*, Dani Shapiro’s *Inheritance*, Deborah Feldman’s *Unorthodox*, St Therese of Lisieux’s *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of the Little Flower*, Sarah Broom’s *The Yellow House*, Pat Conroy’s *The Water is Wide*, Fleming Rutledge’s *Help My Unbelief*, Samuel Proctor and William Watley’s *Sermons from the Black Pulpit*, Tom Kooser and Jim Harrison’s *Braided Creek*, and David Whyte’s *The House of Belonging*.



October of year two will include our literary tour to London, Oxford, and other locals (*Writers’ Places and the Writer’s Life: A Lightly Literary Tour of Britain*, app. cost \$1800-\$2,000 + airfare), led by Daniel Taylor, a longtime English professor, essayist, award winning novelist, and world traveler. Daniel is the author of *In Search of Sacred Places*, *Death Comes for the Deconstructionist*, *Tell Me a Story*, *The Myth of Certainty*, *The Skeptical Believer* and numerous other titles and essays.

Year Three: Our third year will explore the short story, while providing extended space for workshoping writing projects. Potential reading might include Zadie Smith's *Intimations*, Andre Dubus' *Selected Stories*, James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*, George Saunders' *Tenth of December*, and Brian Doyle's *One Long River of Song*.

[year three will include our writers' workshop retreat, location to be determined but possibilities include Savannah, GA, Charleston, SC or The Colorado Rockies]

Ongoing: We will have at least one whole-cohort meeting via Zoom between intensives. Mentors will host 1-2 Zoom gatherings with their smaller advising circle.

//Other Details//

Candidates:

This cohort welcomes candidates with a master's degree who are able to articulate a theological undergirding to their calling to the writing craft and demonstrate appropriate experience and competency. Writing samples will be required in the admissions packet.

Final Project:

For their thesis, students will write a substantial, original literary work (or collection, in the case of sermons, short stories or poetry) or dissertation on a literary topic as their thesis, to be presented before the faculty advisor and readers.

Where:

The Cohort will meet twice a year for a week (Fall/Spring). Four intensives will be on campus at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan. Two of our intensives will include traveling in order to provide a literary pilgrimage and writing retreat. All travel and lodging expenses are the responsibility of the student.

When:

Three years, launching Fall 2021

Application:

Through WTS D.Min Program