

Waking Up: Virginia Woolf's "Moments of Being" and the Warren Wilson College Service Program

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In an essay published after her death, Virginia Woolf discusses the state a person enters when she is completely present in the potential and profundity of a single, transcendent moment. Woolf calls such alerting instances “moments of being” (Woolf 1985, 18-19). In these rare times, we awaken more than usual. Woolf’s articulation of moments of being is one way I have been able to grasp some of the experiences of social injustice I have encountered the four years I’ve attended Warren Wilson, a small liberal arts college in the mountains of Western North Carolina. As one of seven “work colleges” in the country, Warren Wilson requires that every student work fifteen hours a week as part of an on-campus work crew. In addition to on-campus work, each student completes a service commitment with off-campus direct service, policy, and advocacy agencies. This academic year, the college is shifting the service commitment to an experientially based model measured by learning outcomes (Smith 2012), but during my undergraduate years (2008-2012), students met the commitment by completing 100 hours of service over the course of the four years. Twenty-five of these 100 hours were to be completed within a particular “issue area.” During my time at Warren Wilson, I struggled to wrap my mind around the idea of separate justice issues. I view separate social justice issues as a school of fish rather than as individual islands.

And the hours logged on my service transcript don’t necessarily communicate which experiences taught me the most. As I reflect upon the last four years, I collect armfuls of the moments of being that did. I remember realizing on many occasions that successful social justice work necessitates an awareness of connectivity and layeredness. I also remember the ways I’ve chosen and been forced to ignore such interdependent relationships. The more I reflect, the more difficult it becomes to isolate a single social justice issue to write about. What issue would it even be?

I could write about colonialism. The summer of my sophomore year, I travel to Nicaragua for a week to build a house. I try not to build pity, imbalanced power dynamics, more blind privilege, or an imperialist mentality. As we erect a cinder block house, more hurricane-proof than the tin structure before, I take a break in Los Lopez’s equatorial heat. I could write about finally *seeing* my blonde, white, US American citizen self, how that day I walk to the store with my sister to buy a Coke like it is nothing, pocket change, and how I don’t realize the impact of my privilege, thrown about, until I leave the store and make eye contact with children sitting outside. How I want to crawl back into the noisy refrigerator with the Cokes I hadn’t purchased. I feel guilty and want to disappear. On the walk back to the work site, I realize that this is privilege I have every day; today is merely the first day I have held an awareness of it.

My father is on this trip, too. Back in Wisconsin, in order to pay for the trip’s costs, my dad took another job in the mornings washing boats at the marina. Here in Nicaragua, we know my father is a “wealthy” man. In the afternoon, he buys ice cream for every person at our work site. What does “power” mean? People back home often

think my father is a college professor instead of a factory worker because of his white man skin, his height, the way he talks. But I don't think he or I knew much about Nicaraguan history before we arrived in the country, how the US disputed its democratically-elected government in 1909 and then again in 1984. Now, we buy ice cream for kids in this country where we don't even speak the language. I wear a shirt made in Nicaragua.

Or, I could write about Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, what it was like to take a Break Trip with other Warren Wilson students trying to figure out the same issues of power and privilege as I was. We unload the truck we came with and organize the cans in a garage-big food bank. We clear out moldy papers from Grandfather Johnson's living room and clean the kitchen. Katrina happened three years ago and the FEMA trailers that weren't fit for Louisiana were dropped off in South Dakota. Grandfather Johnson's wall displays a photo of him shaking hands with JFK. I start wondering about promises.

The group learned in a North Carolina classroom that the rates of diabetes and other health hazards here are astronomical. We have read that the life expectancy for men in Pine Ridge is 48 years old. For women, it's 52. Once in South Dakota, we travel in a white van the whole week, seeing the sites. I don't know how to convey what Wounded Knee looks like in the new millennium, beer cans scattered underneath a 40-year old sun-blistered sign marking the massacre. There's a Christian cemetery here, its stone crosses designating the only marked graves. Some women in the cemetery try to sell us beads. My privilege and whiteness stand at Wounded Knee, exchanging too few dollars for bracelets. I didn't learn about Andrew Jackson's role in the Trail of Tears until an Appalachian Studies class I took when I was 19.

My first year at Warren Wilson College, a school where every student works 15 hours a week on-campus in addition to completing a service commitment, I started on the Service-Learning Crew, knowing that this was one of the ways I could work with the college to give students the opportunity to wake up as I had started to in high school. I spent two years there. I believe that the same thing happened to others on that crew that happened to me: the more I worked with issues of social injustice and the more I studied issues outside of the classroom, the more work I realized needed to get done. But there's no way to do all of it singlehandedly. The summer after my first year, I felt a deep split in me. I didn't know how to take care of myself. That summer, I stopped reading the news for a while. I started to write seriously for the first time.

When I returned to school in August, I spent another amazing year on the Service-Learning crew, conducting the Children and Food Issue workshop, learning how to garden, and trying to plan service-learning programming with LGBTQ organizations in Asheville. In my classes, I was falling in love with creative writing and discovered writers like Naomi Shihab Nye, Lucille Clifton, Joy Harjo, and A. Van Jordan who addressed social inequality and identity issues in their work. That spring, based on an instinct, I applied to the Writing Center crew. The two threads of my interests fused as moments of being kept coming:

At Room in the Inn, a travelling women's shelter, it's just warm enough to sit outside with a fire we've built. One woman shows me wounds on her legs. The

marks are from an abusive partner who hit her with a crowbar at their campsite. But they're healing, she says.

We're cooking at the Welcome Table meal program and encounter some homophobic comments. I say nothing, and neither does anyone else. It is painful to know that we each are granted our own delineations of personal privilege and power.

I have tutored an adult student for four semesters through the Buncombe County Literacy Council. One week, she gets into a car accident. I pray she isn't undocumented.

I spend the summer interning at the Lord's Acre, a hunger garden in Fairview, North Carolina. I ride in the back of a pickup truck with a dog and two other women on the way to work. I've already forgotten the name of the woman who walks several miles everyday on that road to buy a case of beer. My boss has known her to do that for years. Sometimes we give her a ride to the store, but this morning, as we often do, we drive the car past her, to the garden where we grow food for others at the food bank.

At a gay bar in downtown Asheville with my friends, I see a man I met the month before at Loving Food Resources, a food pantry for people who are HIV-positive or in hospice. I remember he forgot his hat in the shopping cart and I ran outside to give it to him. Here, he laughs with his friends as I play pool with mine.

A man at the bus stop downtown shows us the scar on his chest from a recent pacemaker surgery. He's 70, he says, and is carrying a sleeping bag and several packages to his campsite off of the highway. Social security should be coming soon. I hand the man five dollars before getting on the bus, where I remember that I just spent more than twice that much on a dinner for myself. With a skinny, long beard, the man looks a lot like my mother's brother.

I don't know what to do with these moments. I want to catalogue them for delivery somewhere where they will resonate. I want to tell their whole stories. I appreciate the act of writing because it circumvents the coldness of statistics, because unlike data, writing sits with its nuances. Sandra Cisneros says that as a writer, she spends her whole life looking backwards. I think that some of us have to take that stance. Many have written it: "Poetry is not a luxury" (Lorde 1984, 36-39). "The writer must be of use" (Piercy 1982, 49). "What is poetry which does not save nations or people?" (Milosz 2001, 139).

Maybe this essay can be the footnote to my service transcript, a citation for the bigger picture of what my years with the Warren Wilson Service Program have allowed me to experience. Through service, I've been able to unearth connections our society wanted me to ignore. The intersectional feminism I've developed in my gender and women's studies classrooms and the activist sentiment I attempt to imbue into the poetry in my creative writing courses are founded upon powerful service learning experiences.

Graduation approaches and I have secured a job at the Civic Education Project for the second summer in a row. I will work as a teaching assistant in a small classroom of 14-year-olds. In addition to covering a curriculum about power and privilege and the history of social justice movements in the United States, we will work on a number of service learning projects in Baltimore. The program encourages students to figure out how to consciously engage with their communities.

I have applied to two creative writing MFA programs with a focus on the writer-as-activist. In my entrance essays, I found myself writing about service-learning experiences derived from the Warren Wilson Service Program. During the writing process, I became increasingly excited about the future as I articulated something profoundly important to me: I am committed to doing justice work no matter where I land.

Social justice is a process, not a product. I have found that for the poet to truly “be of use,” she must maintain an openness to moments of being, from building a house in Nicaragua to wiping tables at a meal program to riding the bus home late on a cold Friday night. Service learning serves the poet, enabling her to view life as a series of moments of being.

I would like to express deep gratitude to Professor Kathryn Burleson, the Warren Wilson College Service Program Office, and the Service Learning Advisory Committee.

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