

Inscribed on the Senses:
A Conversation with Brenda Miller
- Katharine Jamieson

Brenda Miller and I spoke on a mellow autumn day, sharing a park bench and shielding our eyes from the golden, mid-morning sunlight reflecting off the Iowa River. Miller, an Associate Professor of English at Western Washington University, had agreed to an interview with me after presenting a panel discussion, “First Person Third: An Exploration of the Uses of Varying Points of View in Creative Nonfiction,” at the University of Iowa’s NonfictionNow Conference. Our conversation was shaped by her extensive background in bodywork, spirituality, creative nonfiction writing and teaching, and the intersections of these seemingly divergent paths in her own work.

Published in 2002, Miller’s book *Season of the Body: Essays* (Sarabande Books) was a finalist for the PEN American Center Book Award. She has received four Pushcart Prizes, and her essays have appeared in such periodicals as *The Georgia Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Fourth Genre*, *The Sun*, and *Yoga Journal*. She is the co-author of a textbook *Tell it Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction* (McGraw-Hill, 2003).

Katherine Jamieson: Many of the essays in your book are about your career as a massage therapist, and how working with the body impacted your perspective and relationships with others at a young age, in your 20s. How do you think this early training in “body work” has shaped your writing? How does it relate to the title of your book *Season of the Body*?

Brenda Miller: Well, it’s interesting, I just returned from three weeks at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts where I was writing quite intensively. While there I had an epiphany about my writing that stems from my childhood, where I realized that I’ve always been intensely interested in the senses and how the world inscribes itself on the senses. Of course when I was five, I didn’t put it that way.

I was trying to pinpoint when I became a writer, actually, in the writing I was doing, and I realized that all the very early things I wrote were sense-based and sense-related. The very first story I wrote was about a blind boy named Daniel, and the surprise in the story is that you don’t know he’s blind until the very end. Then you realize that in the whole story you never got any sight imagery, you just got all the other sensory images, like the breakfast cooking and the smell of the stairway and the sounds of children playing outside, but you didn’t get sight.

Even before I was a massage therapist I was drawn to the body as a medium of experiencing the world, without really knowing it. I probably became drawn to massage therapy intuitively in that way, too, experiencing other people and the world through that medium of touch. How that affected my writing later on, I’m not sure, because I think it’s all part of the same continuum. In the prologue to my book *Season of the Body* I say that I see the act of writing as akin to the act of massage, you have to be intuitive and you have to listen intently to what’s going on. In writing you have to put yourself in that intuitive state as well.

KJ: How did that impact the name of the book? Did you want to tie in those ideas?

BM: “Season of the Body, the essay in the book, that title, it still doesn’t even make sense to me. (*Laughter*) It’s just a phrase that came into my head, and I really liked it. “Season of the Body,” I found out later, is more of a religious term, in terms of communion and Jesus’ body, so it actually has all these layers of resonance.

Also, hunting season, because the essay is about hunting in a way; it’s precipitated by that and so, you know, how our bodies are always in this “open season.” Season, in terms of “seasonings”, because a lot of that essay is about eating and food. I think I was trying in this obtuse way to get all those layerings of meaning in, and somehow the publisher also liked it as the title of a book. And people seem to resonate with it.

Whenever you put any book of small pieces together, publishers want it to have some kind of theme. When I’m writing I don’t have that in mind, but when you put them together you see that, intuitively and unconsciously, you do have these obsessions and themes that come out no matter what you’re ostensibly writing about. All those essays, in some way, involved the body. I mean you can’t really help it, that’s how we get through the world, right? Embodied in some way.

KJ: Some writers focus more on place or character, but your work seems so grounded in the body, it’s distinguished that way. Cass Fleischer was talking yesterday about how “all writing originates in the body.” There’s another poet I heard say that “every poet is trying to recreate the mother’s body” in their poetry. Do you still feel that your writing usually originates from a sensory experience?

BM: I think so. Lately, I’ve been allowing myself to play again. I was just at this writing colony and I had no project, nothing really in mind, so I allowed myself to play. My quota was 1000 words a day and I would sit down and start writing them as a letter to a very good friend of mine to have that automatic audience, something to bounce off of. I would always start with just a description of what the day looked like, or where I was sitting, or something I had heard the night before.

I would start with some phrase that appealed to me and begin mining that for why? I think that’s the question that drives most of my work: *Why am I remembering that? Or, Why is that in my mind?* Because there are, as you know, millions of things that come into our minds everyday, so why that particular memory, that particular phrase, why did that stick with me? Then that drives the essay forward, until I can figure it out or come to some sort of metaphoric resolution with it.

KJ: In your essays you discuss various forms of structured religiosity, including your own Jewish background and Vipassana meditation, as well as more open experiences of “spirituality,” as a massage therapist and yoga practitioner, and in nature. How do you see these different ways of connecting with “spirit” in your work? Do you consider yourself a spiritual writer?

BM: I do consider myself a spiritual writer. I think that’s always going to be my overriding concern: our connections with whatever we define as spiritual and how we access that, honor that, express it without sounding dorky. Getting an understanding about why so much of culture and society is built around these religious structures. It’s such an abstract thing, yet it seems so vital to society and to individuals.

I’m very much involved in a Buddhist meditation practice right now and just recently, in the last couple of years, have started calling myself a Buddhist. I’ve formally taken some of the precepts of that religion and begun seeing it as a

religion, not just a practice to calm down or for stress reduction, but deepening that practice and seeing it as a vital part of my spirituality. I'm starting to love the ritual and the formality. It's mindfulness based in Thich Nhat Hanh.

But, I'm still very Jewish, especially around this time of year when we've had the Jewish New Year and the High Holidays. I just love them. I love the rituals involved with the beginning and the end. It's very akin to many of the things we do in the Buddhist religion as well. I tend not to, at this point, go back to synagogue so much, but adapt those rituals in my own life.

This year I had my colleague and her family over for Rosh Hashanah, and we had a traditional dinner then went to a nearby creek to do what's called *Tashlikh*. It's a repentance ceremony where you take breadcrumbs and throw them in a body of water to represent the sins you've created over the years, kind of wiping the slate clean. You do it in water because the fish never close their eyes, so they're the witness for you of this cleansing act. I love that, and I don't ever want to give that up.

KJ: That's interesting because in Zen practice there's a wooden instrument called a "mokugyo" which is the shape of a fish for the same reason, because it never closes its eyes and is always a witness to the practice.

BM: Exactly, exactly. A lot of us are hybridizing spirituality these days, and I think that's a healthy thing to make it as relevant as it can be.

KJ: Do see connections between your writing and awareness practices like meditation and yoga? How have these practices impacted your work?

BM: Yes, and in fact I'm developing a new course in the spring where I'm going to encourage, if not force, the students to meditate. (*Laughter*) I realized in teaching that we keep correcting the same mistakes over and over that beginning writers make and I want to get beyond that and go to the root of those symptoms. I think it's a question of how we can pay attention to the world. And of course that's what meditation is all about, being able to settle down and pay attention without judging, without reacting, without interpreting first, just seeing what arises from that.

I think especially with young people these days, their attention is so distracted, especially at school. Where I teach they're taking incredibly hard course loads and working full time, and I see them getting physically ill from this. I want to create a place where they can rest, connect with their deepest selves and do their writing. Not worry so much about the surface, technical issues right now, just see how they resolve themselves by paying more attention to the concrete objects of the world.

The real challenge is deciding what the content of such a course will be. I think I'm actually going to teach it as a spiritual autobiography course, and have them think about their spiritual histories, how they define spirituality for themselves, that connection. They don't have to see writing as a spiritual act, but I think they might come to see that it is an important part of their development. When you write, I really strongly believe, you are connecting with something ancient, something that is not you and is you at the same time. That's where that deep, wise voice comes from—it's not me saying these wise things, it's something else. Some people say channeling, but I don't really see it that way either, it's just you're connecting to something that's always there.

KJ: Stephen King talks about that in his book *On Writing*, that when we write it's like unearthing dinosaur bones from the ground and putting them back together. That's really interesting; I wish I could take your class!

BM: (*Laughter*) I'm very nervous about it because it's almost a taboo subject somehow to talk about spirituality in the academy. The resistance I'm imagining, and I could just be imagining it, is that there is this romanticized version

of the writer as very hard-boiled, drinking a lot, doing drugs, staying up all night and smoking. I'm asking them to key into the writing process in a very, very different way.

I'm not going to say that the other way is wrong either, many people have written just fine that way, too, but I just want to try it a different way. With spirituality in the classroom, there's always that tricky thing: Are you teaching religion, you know, if I make them meditate, am I making them be Buddhists? We have a lot of Christian Fundamentalist students who might see meditation as a very evil thing, so I'm just going to have to tread lightly and see what happens.

KJ: Seems like a brave thing to do though.

BM: Well, thanks! There is a quite a movement happening. There's a *Center for Contemplative Practices in Society* that has an academic program that gives professors money to develop these kinds of courses. They just did a wonderful conference in Massachusetts last summer that was all about incorporating contemplative practices. That's another way to put it, as contemplative practices. It's not spiritual practices; it's just the mode of contemplation and how to bring that back into our ways of knowing. So much of our education seems focused on critical thinking, as it should be, but I think we lose that contemplative aspect of the ancients. That's how they learned, by contemplating the texts, contemplating the objects before them.

That Society is a great resource and a great support for doing these kinds of things. First they had a conference in New York City and more than 200 people came, there was much more interest than expected. The simplest thing and the most exciting thing about that conference was being in this room with 200 academics in complete silence for 15 minutes at a time. We were meditating together, doing different forms of meditation. It was so powerful, something so simple. It's just nice to know there are other people in academic circles who don't see it as some kind of flaky, New Age thing that we're doing with our students, but something that could be another way of knowing and revolutionary in how we teach, too.

It's really about paying attention to our students' spiritual selves, and not only their spiritual selves but their emotional selves. Every day we see students who are so stressed out, and they come to our offices and we acknowledge it, but I don't know if we're really addressing what they need in order to learn effectively. Especially with writing, and creative nonfiction writing, where I'm asking them to really look at painful stuff. So maybe give them tools to deal with that.

KJ: It's an exciting idea. I can also see how it goes against the grain of some of the academic, rationalistic thinking that we should just be vehicles for these thoughts and ideas without having them impact us. As a person trained in healing work, how do you see the connections between healing on a physical, emotional and spiritual level, and writing?

BM: I know for myself and because I teach beginning writers, the impetus to write usually comes from trauma. You're , trying to take something that happened in the past and turn it into an artifact you can look at. The tricky thing about life and memory and time is that it passes and changes and everything starts to feel like a dream in some way; it doesn't seem real. What we're doing when we're writing is making it real for ourselves and turning it into something solid we can get a handle on.

An important part of the writing process is that we come to it to heal, but that can't be the only reason. That's the difference between private journal, diary writing, and literature. There's a place for both.

KJ: You said before that in the writing process we draw on memories from our past to make them real because the life we're living can just pass and sometimes seem like a dream. Taking the Buddhist perspective that life really is just a dream, how can we make sense of that as writers, knowing both that there is no solid reality in front of us but trying to capture it nonetheless?

BM: I've started to write about that, because you know my current book is about meditation and writing and art and they do at times seem very opposed, and at the same time very aligned because it's all about paying attention.

I tend to play with form and have the form reflect the fact that things are always changing. I'll have a lot of gaps, silences, white space, fragments and sections that don't seem like they need to be in the order they are, they could very easily switch. I think that's part of why we're drawn to blowing apart the conventional narrative, because the conventional narrative is a lie, so how can we get at a different truth? It might be to explode those forms and see what happens.

It is hard because if you were true to this path of meditation or Zen or Buddhism, you really wouldn't say anything. (*Laughter*)

KJ: Lots of white space!

BM: Yes, you would just observe that moment and that moment and that moment go by, instead of trying to codify it. I think the Buddha said that everything started going crazy once people started talking about it, you know: Just shut up and experience it.

KJ: I guess it goes back to the haiku form, which is really a moment, an experience.

BM: It's a moment that goes by....then there's those beautiful sand paintings the Tibetan monks do, the mandalas that take weeks or months to create then just blow away. I've thought about how you could do that in writing.

A friend of mine does this exercise with his students called "The Poetry Tree." They'll sit and write some poems in class about a certain topic then go and tie them to a tree, just let them be destroyed by nature. They can't keep a copy, they really have to let it go.

KJ: It does seem like an inherent contradiction in writing because there is a permanence about it. When we put together a book, that's an effort or a desire towards permanence. Yet we're writing about the impermanence and celebrating the impermanence.

BM: Yes, it's one of those paradoxes that creates an interesting tension.

KJ: Who are some of the spiritual writers who have influenced you?

BM: I don't know if you'd call them spiritual *per se*. It's interesting because when we think about spiritual writing it can also be writing like Thich Nhat Hanh, kind of instructional writing. Even some of the ancient Buddhist writers, their writing can actually be quite dull. It's not really literature *per se*.

That's not the kind of spiritual reading I want to do, or have my students read. It's more the poets who are just observing, these people who aren't necessarily calling themselves spiritual writers or consciously writing from a spiritual perspective, like Mark Doty or Eamon Grennan, who will just observe something quite intensely until it yields some meaning. Jane Hirschfield is a Zen Buddhist, but her writing doesn't talk about Zen, it enacts it by observing something very closely: the sound of a hammer in her neighbor's yard and then thinking about joy. Really capturing the movement of the mind as observing phenomena.

KJ: As the editor of *The Bellingham Review* you evaluate hundreds of submissions of poetry, fiction and nonfiction. What are the crucial elements that set accepted submissions apart from others?

BM: We do get thousands of submissions, especially for the contests. When it's standing on its own like that in a pile of 1000s, it has to be a very strong voice that attracts your attention, which is kind of a nebulous concept. It's hard to pinpoint what makes that voice. That first page has to be as good and polished and startling as it can be, otherwise it will get lost in the crowd.

You have to have a sense of what other people are writing right now. Even though your material might seem unique and fresh to you, writing alone in your room, actually hundreds of other people are writing the same thing. Every year, in the contest especially, there's some theme that will come up in almost everything we read. One of every five essays might deal with a parent with Alzheimer's, so that just happens to be "up" in the world. It's a great topic, but once you've read twenty essays on it, it has to do something different. I think, especially with creative nonfiction, whatever your ostensible topic is there has to be some other theme that's emerging that makes it different.

I try to be a real advocate for new writers, and I try to correspond as much as I can with the writers I'm publishing.

KJ: Do you have a particular mission in terms of what types of work you're trying to get out into the world?

BM: We're trying to do more cutting edge. Although we do like traditional stories quite a bit, too. But really trying to be a home for work that might not find a home in a more traditional-minded magazine. Poetry, too. It's harder to find that in fiction these days. With our fiction contest it's always a struggle to come up with those ten finalists that we can really be behind. I don't know if fiction is going back towards a more traditional stance or not, but I think nonfiction is really exploding with experimentation.

KJ: What do you think is the role of literary journals and magazines in the writing and publishing world today?

BM: We're kind of the farm team. It's where people can break in and get seen by the big leagues. If we weren't there, how are you going to start getting published, get your books published, get the attention of agents? It's kind of a vetting system, you make your way through these ranks and establish your credibility and validity by publishing in these small magazines. For some people who might never publish a book, it's a way to have a voice, get your voice out there.

I think it's very, very important. We're so beleaguered in terms of finances, every literary journal practically is, and we're constantly having to justify our mission to funders. I think the publishing world would become quite homogenous without these literary journals as a think tank for young writers to emerge into the world.

KJ: In terms of your interest in spiritual writing, are there journals that speak specifically to that type of writing?

BM: *Tiferet* is a multi-faith journal that publishes writers from a variety of faiths, even non-traditional ones. *Prairie Schooner* likes the Jewish stuff, I send my Jewish stuff to them. There's a magazine called *Image* out of Seattle that's very ecumenical, a lot of different traditions, they celebrate spirituality in that way. *Parabola* magazine, that's a very good magazine.

KJ: One thing writers struggle with is when they include real people in their pieces, their family or their friends. In terms of your Buddhist practice thinking about what is harm, how does including people in your work figure into this?

BM: It's a good question. When I'm drafting I can't think about that, I just have to write it. When it comes to having it published I will start asking permission of people if they can be in it. Usually people are quite honored to be in your work because it's a real validation that they were important to you.

It gets trickier with some of the essays I'm writing right now. I'm trying to imagine my mother and father around the time they got married, that world and how I see it. I don't know if it will make it into the finished pieces. I'll probably talk to them before I publish it because that really is going into their stories. I have written things where it seems like it's just not my story to tell, so I'll cut it out of the essay.

When the book was published, the publisher did ask me to contact those people and ask if it was OK to use their names. Everybody did want their names in it. What I get more is people who come to me and say, "Well why wasn't I in that essay, I was on that camping trip too!" The people you leave out want to be in it.

KJ: On the panel yesterday, you mentioned setting a goal to write a humorous essay. Why did you set that particular goal for yourself?

BM: I've written one really funny essay and that's in my book, the "How to Meditate" piece, it's in the "How to" form and people love it. I've come to see that humor is a gift to your reader, because laughter is in short supply. The laugh opens you to the more serious stuff that can come in.

David Sedaris is a great example of this, his work is hilariously funny. But you'll notice there's always a serious point he gets across toward the end, and you're so open to it and it devastates you.

KJ: Do you think there could be room for both spiritual and humor writing in the same piece?

BM: Oh yeah, definitely, because there's so much to poke fun at with spiritual life. That's what the "How to Meditate" piece does, it's poking fun at some of the earnestness with which we approach the spiritual life.

KJ: Do you think that humor could be an entrée into thinking more spiritually?

BM: Yes, my teacher is always saying "we need to hold the practice lightly," that this image of the meditator being all serious, brows furrowed and trying so hard is not meditation. It needs to be held, like anything, very lightly, and you need to be able to make fun of yourself. Someone just sent me an e-mail about this new book called *Zen Judaism*, it was so great. I think it's a wonderful forum for that, not to take ourselves so seriously, and I think that's very healing too—not to take it *all* so seriously.