

## Book Review

### How the Light Gets In: Writing as a Spiritual Practice

Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Pat Schneider, longtime writer and teacher of writing, is mother of four grown children, all of whom are writers. In 1994, she published the classic guide for beginning and expert writers, writing alone or in writing groups -- [The Writer as an Artist: A New Approach to Writing Alone and With Others](#). She founded the training programs and website known as [Amherst Writers & Artists](#).

The purpose of [AWA] workshops is on the one hand to affirm that art belongs to all people, and all people are capable of creating art with words, and on the other hand to affirm writing as a powerful methodology for healing and empowerment.

In this book, we learn much about Schneider's professional and especially her personal life as she records her own hero's journey. Her theme is taken from Canadian singer Leonard Cohen ["There is a crack in everything. That's *how the light gets in*."]. She committed to writing as a spiritual practice to create the volume. She delved for the cracks in her life – writing through them repeatedly to learn the lessons associated with her difficult childhood (poverty, absent father, alcoholic mother, a period in an orphanage followed by living with her mother, separation from brother) and the ways in which her adult life was impacted by her early life. Experiences of old age (e.g., loss of loved ones, broken hip) raise the old ghosts as well as new concerns through which she writes.

We are treated to inspiring quotations from authors such as Gandhi, Dillard, Whitman, Milosz, Swenson, Eliot, and Coleridge. We see the impact of specific writing prompts which drew out the author's new understandings, often in a supportive writing group. Moreover, her experiences often press her for expression through poetry – accessible poems which expose cracks through which light gets in.

One favourite writing exercise Schneider presents begins with the instruction to imagine a doorway, or a breakfast table, or a hallway. Then we are asked to address three questions: "What is the quality of the light? Where is the light coming from?" And then, "Is anyone nearby or are we alone?" Then we are to write what we see and then follow where the writing leads.

Besides showing eloquently how to write as a spiritual practice, Schneider offers sage words and images on this topic.

Sometimes writing sits in you/like a wild animal.

... my own writing that matters most to me are those pieces that have taken me out to the very edge of what I know and do not know I know. That fine point, that intense moment of seeing, of discovering—that is the writing that matters most.

Write out of silence to silence. Write out of mystery to mystery. Write out of not-knowing to not-knowing. Write to summon those you love.

Why haven't our poets, artists, novelists, given us more images of the relief that can come when we open our hands and our hearts, when we accept our own story and tell it, at least to ourselves, honor it so that we can let it go?

If you write the truth, you will change the world. If you write privately, you change your own inner world, and that changes the outer world. If you write publicly, you give voice to what is, and that assists what is becoming. If you help someone else to write the truth, you may not live long enough to know it, but you will have changed the world.

Whether as a private act or a public act, by writing we can howl, sing, or plainly and humbly tell what is true. When it becomes public, our howl of outrage can waken the world to injustice. Our singing writing can waken the world to beauty and to joy.

Writing together with honesty and courage, the leader writing and reading aloud first-draft work along with the participants, requires a mutual honesty and vulnerability that simply crumbles the walls of difference.

Pat Schneider ends her hero's journey with Joy as she deeply knows writing is her calling. She offers us writers a blessing (excerpted):

May you hear in your own stories  
the moan of wind around the corners  
of half-forgotten houses  
and the silence in rooms you remember.

May you hear in your own poems  
the rhythms of the cosmos,  
the sun, the moon and the stars  
rising out of the sea and returning to it.