



How the Light Gets in: Writing as a Spiritual Practice

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"When I begin to write, I open myself and wait. And when I turn toward an inner spiritual awareness, I open myself and wait." With that insight, Pat Schneider invites readers to contemplate their lives and deepest questions through writing. In seventeen concise thematic chapters that include meditations on topics such as fear, freedom, tradition in writing and in religions, forgiveness, joy, social justice, and death, *How the Light Gets In* gracefully guides readers through the artistic and spiritual questions that life offers to everyone.

Praised as a "fuse lighter" by author Julia Cameron and "the wisest teacher of writing I know" by the celebrated writing guru Peter Elbow, Pat Schneider has lived a life of writing and teaching, passion and compassion. With *How the Light Gets In*, she delves beyond the typical "how-to's" of writing to offer an extended rumination on two inner paths, and how they can run as one. Schneider's book is distinct from the many others in the popular spirituality and creative writing genre by virtue of its approach, using one's lived experience—including the experience of writing—as a springboard for expressing the often ineffable events that define everyday life. Her belief that writing about one's own life leads to greater consciousness, satisfaction, and wisdom energizes the book and carries the reader elegantly through difficult topics.

As Schneider writes, "All of us live in relation to mystery, and becoming conscious of that relationship can be a beginning point for a spiritual practice—whether we experience mystery in nature, in ecstatic love, in the eyes of our children, our friends, the animals we love, or in more strange experiences of intuition, synchronicity, or prescience."

How the Light Gets in: Writing as a Spiritual Practice Details

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Mary Lou says

This is the first I have read anything by Pat Schneider. Her poetry is beautiful. Her suggestions on how to address your spiritual well-being through writing is what interested me the most. I have journaled for years and so I was interested in her viewpoint. She doesn't fail to provide insights, personal experiences and methods. This book is divided into chapters that address aspects of spiritual life as well as our day to day life. I found this book to be well written, and her personal experiences enlarged, for me, the scope of spiritual writing. Through writing, one can come face to face with one's inner self and spiritual connection with that which many call God. I truly enjoyed this book.

Henrylyman says

I finished reading How the Light Gets In just a few days ago. It reads effortlessly, but every passage is a poem, so I took my time. I am hardly done with it, nor is it done with me. It will remain a constant companion.

It is an absolutely essential work, and I can well believe that it took seven years to write. I was continually struck by Schneider's deep introspection, her looking back into memory to apprehend herself in different times and places, and by the clarity with which she describes the texture of her world at any given moment. The writing is so palpable that I can still see and touch those worlds. Her childhood slum apartment inhabits me. And I am with her by the old peach trees where she believed she was "saved."

She explores the immensities in the most personal and understandable way, and without limiting them in the least. Her experience of mystery, of "strangeness," and her sense of a "presence" remain undefined, as they should, and untrammelled by any hint of dogma. She has put them into words without in any way drying them out. On the contrary, she brings them home and makes them universally acknowledgeable.

There are countless insights, well-earned wisdom offered but never preached. Sometimes they come directly from her, sometimes from others whom she quotes. One of these is Ben Shahn's "Form is the shape of content;" another, her counsel that as writers we should remain true to our original tongue, whatever it might be; another, her concise and all-too-true analysis of racism.

Then there are the poems, old friends and new, each of them carefully woven into the text. Amongst the cleverness and sensationalism so prevalent today, I miss such poetry.

J. Gray says

Ms. Schneider appears to be one who embodies Robert Bly's phrase "Eating the Honey of Words". And this work reveals much of what's hidden in all of us. She does so by revealing what was previously hidden in herself.

Jodi McMaster says

If you're interested in spirituality or self-discovery through writing, go to your favorite bookseller now and get this. Maybe it's just where I am in my life, but this wise woman has comforted me and assured me through her writing in ways she'll never know. Compellingly, wrenchingly honest, Pat Schneider's journey makes me feel as though I have a friend I've never met who will hold the branches out of my way while I look for my own path.

Alan Marr says

This is a special book. Some of the chapters are among the most moving words I have read anywhere. It spoke to me so deeply that I had to occasionally put the book down for a while to allow the words to go to the "bottom of the night" I am not a big fan of poetry but I found her poems accessible and very helpful. I will read this book many more times.

Cathy says

Pat Schneider pioneered the Amherst Writers and Artists method for leading writing workshops, often with traditionally silenced communities. With the AWA method, writing is generated in community, read aloud, and comments always focus on what is strong and memorable in the writing. Pat used this method as a spiritual practice to explore hidden aspects of her past and her spiritual journey, which has lead her through and out of Christianity, but doesn't exclude Christian readers from appreciating her book and the importance of brave and truthful writing.

Jane Schneeloch says

This book is many things. It is the personal story of a poor girl in Missouri who grew up to become a writer, mentor, and teacher to people all over the world. It is a very deep spiritual reflection of someone raised in fundamentalism, who married a minister, then later left the church, but who professes a sincere belief in the mystery beyond and within. It is a companion for writers, questioners, and anyone who has searched for a way to let the light in.

James says

This book isn't instructional like Julia Cameron although there is at least one writing exercise I want to try. It's more of a memoir about her personal relationship to writing and spirituality. It's also a biography but the biographical details are given when relevant to the theme of the chapter. There are many references to writers that have inspired her which are thoroughly cited at the end of the book so it's also something of a bibliographical autobiography. This book is a rich resource for anyone looking to develop writing as a spiritual practice.

Melanie Griffin says

I did not do this book justice because I read it over a six-plus-month period of time. I might have rated it higher if I had allowed myself to be absorbed by it, but then isn't it the author's job to write an irresistibly absorbing book? Pat Schneider put so much heart and effort into the book, perhaps too much. I found it a little dense.

The book is three-quarters memoir, which I generally enjoy, but I think that this one felt a teensy bit too much like a looooooong therapy session. She's working out her family stuff and her relationship with spirituality and God, and although that's interesting to a point, I think she may have passed the point. Her poetry, interspersed throughout the book, is quite nice.

Greg Correll says

Pat Schneider is a pleasure to read, a writer's writer, because she is always saying something tangible. Even when she confronts the infinite, the ineffable Presence that haunts and protects her writing, she is not one to doll up dogma. I've read more than my share of religious and spiritual writing, and she trembles her Merton self on every page, without making a hat out of the abyss, or striking a Marian pose.

She reads deep and wide; her quotes and mentions percolate erudition up through this otherwise lyric, feeling-brain work. I am not a believer and yet I understand the whole arc of her book, and relate to her sensation of Spirit, evoked with hundreds of elegantly crafted details from her writer's life. Every day I feel what she describes: the arduousness of picking up the pen, the transformative, even redemptive power of suddenly finding a Voice. And the otherworldly experience when words and ideas churn up from the aether.

Pure biology or divine spark, the inner experience of hitting your writing stride is ecstatic and sublime. Logic is redefined temporarily, to include the inventive synthesis of ideas, firing off in tens of milliseconds, to produce a human being in words, a rock on a table, or a King James Ecclesiastes.

I can surrender to her uneasy acceptance because of my own uneasy rejection, and with an open mind and heart, godless heathen that I am, because she does not hide the grey peripheries, the empty patches, the snarled yarns of belief and spiritual practice. A lifetime of care-full listening, to thousands of writers, has burnished away her easy answers about the unknown, the mystery.

In "Betraying Spinoza", Rebecca Goldstein says the philosopher thought God was so beautiful and loving and complete that he did not need to exist, and I see this idea peering out from Pat's down-to-earth stories, and in her intimate sense of wonder, her practical uncertainty. She refuses to be tied to ideology, or be led by the nose, and she has too much integrity to deny her own doubts. Instead of parading them as sly proof of something, her Frankness, or Experience, she just tells her truth.

Trusting one's own truth is one of the great gifts of Pat Schneider, to writers now and forever. She has turned it into a practice, informed by her early religious studies, and tempered by harder, sadder truths, told in living rooms and on porches around the world. Her honesty and focus make it a rare experience to read her—and she permits us a close read like few writers do. Not like the Annie Lamotts, nothing like that compulsive over-share. We are not made voyeurs when she describes the privacy of forgiveness, and how too often we beg for it but get "...no response that offers relief". We are being walked through complex and sophisticated ideas, under the guise of tea on the porch.

Framed within writing, her topics, her ideas, have immediacy and applicability to me. She quotes John Gardner that good fiction has strangeness as a quality, in her chapter called Strangeness. This works for me as a pragmatic caution against polishing off too much of my own strangeness in my writing. But the very idea of a chapter about the dissonant, imperfect, and uncanny—in her vivid example, wanting a Jesus again, but the "real" one: Semitic, raveled, struggling, compassionate, faltering—in a book subtitled "writing as a spiritual practice" is strangely natural to me. I understand when she says the Mystery of a ripening blackberry is unseen, and our inattention and ignorance is what is strange. I find it exhilarating to find the last line of that chapter, a last line of one of her own poems is profoundly hopeful: "And what is more generous than a window?" We live with strangeness, with Mystery, and it never quite resolves, but if we listen, look outside ourselves, and write, we see a way to live.

Pat doesn't get urgent and breathless in order to convince, or to breathe life into tired, familiar spiritual ideas. I used to have faith and I understand the way we kid ourselves with pious fraud, convincing ourselves we know more than we do, when we speak of the divine.

But Pat does breathe on these pages. She has a quiet and patient voice, in Kafka's sense: "You do not need to leave your room. Remain sitting at your table and listen. Do not even listen, simply wait, be quiet still and solitary. The world will freely offer itself to you to be unmasked, it has no choice, it will roll in ecstasy at your feet."

Pat talks about what we can't let go of, in her chapter about Fear. We can't lose our distrust of others, the cringe of memory, the places and people who fuzz into us when we sleep. She writes with personal candor, but this is a woman who rose—no, there's a better word, it will come to me—from poverty and orphanage, to theology and intellectual achievement, and went on to found a worldwide writing revolution. When she says "writing the truth is a political act...the form doesn't matter", she is simply reporting a fact, and her adamant sisterhood with all women at risk doth shine.

In her lifetime and mine, too many women have been and are still at risk. Most of us deplore this. Pat, helping to found women's writing groups in refugee camps in Kenya and Somalia, in villages in Malawi, puts her life where her words are, where her spirit and the spirit of mindful writing merge to become a legacy of change.

The word I am looking for does not have her rise from circumstances. I've met Pat, and had the honor of reading with her. I see her before me, her large, kind eyes, the small movements around her mouth as she speaks, her remarkable attentiveness. This is not a woman who outgrew being human, nor suffering, her own

or others. Her whole life is present on these pages, in the brilliant cut-gem aspect of her writing, in the canny sidesteps she made and makes around foolishness, and the way she always moves closer and closer to us, to the spark of life in others, in order to lose the fear of strange, to understand and love what is true and human.

She does not transcend her life, she abides. Her redemption, like mine, has come from writing, because writing is the one art that puts us inside ourselves, inside others, and outside looking in, all at once.

Writing is zizzy hair on neck and forearm, rising, when our sentence finds a shape and home. Writing is the one sure way to howl for good effect. Writing is whatever spirit is, allowed to grip our apish hand from within and guide our gracile fingers. It is not an outside force, acting upon us, it is writing itself, the turning inside out, the surrender to story that gives power to the homeless, the striving, the wounded and the lost. I have been all of those, and I testify: the better word for what Pat has done is all her words, and all the words of all who learned from her, were inspired by her.

Pat's book can be read as a master's class on memoir writing. As such it is easy to read, full of ideas, prompts, and insights—shown, not told. But it is her life that you will remember, Pat herself. I know Pat so much better now, and she is resonantly, splendidly herself and no other in this book. She is a strange and beautiful story, and she is just another mensch, making every effort.

She let in the light for seven decades; she shines for us here.

♥ Ibrahim ♥ says

Pat Schnider is an inspired writer, fully transparent, fully spiritual, highly sensitive, completely and genuinely, a master of her writing craft. Her spirituality is cosmic, along the lines of perennial philosophy, where God can be found in everything and no one has sole ownership of God. Her God is that-which-is unnamable: mystery. So the word "mystery" throughout the book refer to the book refers to the Divine Being. But I wish she had written Mystery with a capital "M" so we know what she is talking about.

Carolyn Francis says

I am reasonably obsessed with books about writing, and am almost always reading one; which goes some way toward explaining why I write so little despite "write a book" being at the top of any version of a bucket list I might ever imagine. Nevertheless, if one is going to procrastinate by reading books on writing, then this is a wonderful choice. It is intellectually and spiritually astute, and presents writing as a kind of vitality rather than the almost passive introspection some would like us to believe. Loved.

B. Lynn says

Awesome book, technique, and author. Every writer, and that's everyone who writes anything, should read this book.

Michael says

Rarely has a book moved me like this one did, but I need to go to bed and finish this review in the morning.

Darian G. says

Pat Schneider is a beautiful writer who knows how to layer her prose and fill it with description, meaning and metaphor. In her newest book, Schneider decides to delve into the connection between writing and the spiritual. She goes into great detail to reveal to the reader that the spirit is much deeper than mere intellectual assent and knowledge. To get to the deepest part of ourselves we need art, beauty, reflection, poetry, and metaphor. "When we humans dare approach the deepest and holiest experiences of our lives, all language becomes metaphor."

What Schneider describes as the "holy" and "deep" parts of ourselves, she does not necessarily mean as parts which are comforting, joyful, or peaceful. In fact, she shows that we need to often go back and fully experience the harsh realities of our past if we are to ever truly connect with God and what he is wanting for us to experience. "To write grief onto a page of lined paper until tears blur ink is often the surest access to giving or receiving forgiveness."

I believe while reading I came across perhaps the best definition of prayer I have seen. Schneider writes, "To be in an attitude of praise or thanksgiving, to rage against God, or to open one's inner self and listen is prayer." To fully engage in prayer she writes that we must open ourselves completely and intimately to God. She challenges us to look at our writing as an act of prayer "Naked of assumption and honest in our questions." She tells us that we should also look at our writing as an act of love, "Writing and prayer are both a form of love, and love takes courage."

"How the Light Gets In" is full of wisdom, worship, and winsomeness. The creativity is beautiful, and the nuggets are plentiful. If you are a writer, artist, creative soul who has always known there was a sacred link between your work and something far beyond yourself, this book is for you.

www.darianburns.com
