After going to one class in that little room filled with our circle of chairs, I described my spiritual journey as:

Connection, relationships, motivation, dynamic, moving, shifting, aware, reflective, open.

In asking to be a part of the class these themes are still evident as I was 
“excited to be able to learn from others and to have the opportunity to question, reflect, and potentially find meaning towards where I should go from here—I plan to treat this class as much of a relationship building exercise as academic course.” But when I made this list, “connections, relationships, dynamic, reflective”, I wasn’t thinking about books, I was thinking about people. I was thinking about conversations. It seems kind of silly, being eager to be in Comparative Literature class and have defined my journey as based off of people. I had left books out of the completely.

I had been a little scarred by reading. I remembered this on the first day of class when everyone could list their favorite young adult books for hours and I had a hard time coming up with some. I remember Rachel looking at me like an alien when I said I actually didn’t really love to read. I don’t blame her. But reading had made me so mad. I got so mad at myself for not “understanding” the author’s point and for missing other activities and for not liking it; “I remember wanting so badly to be able to delve into a book for hours and not come out until I had turned that last page. But instead I was distractible, and not wholly present, always wondering which conversations I was missing in the living room.”
I walked in to Dorothe’s office and said, “I don’t like reading. It makes me mad”. She handed me a handout with the Tree of Contemplative Practices on it, which has been taped above my dresser ever since. She drew my attention to a practice called lecto divina—reading was a way of mediation and contemplation. My first thought was, “Oh wow, that's going to take a long time” and then I sighed knowing immediately that such a response proved that this was just the practice for me. That night

I snuggled into my bed. I looked at my Grandma’s quilt that is on it and smiled as I crept a little more under the covers. I opened The Amber Spyglass and took a deep breath, looking over at the desk for ‘academic reading’ and consciously choosing something different. I told myself ‘this is going to take longer than usual and that is ok. You will get to the other things on the list at another time. Let them go. Be fully present.’

This was the first time in a long time that I started to give reading the energy that it was worth. I recognized that academic reading was simply different and this kind of reading wasn’t about a summary. Often in class, we talk very little about the plot but about a feeling a segment had brought up or memories. This connection requires more than a skim.

I was enthralled by the Child Literature listserv discussion about reading. It came as an assignment at such a perfect time and I read every line like a “Reading for Dummies” guide. I saw an old self in Julius Lester’s reader: “who knows how many times during that three hours that reader was interrupted by the phone, noises outside, and how many times that reader’s mind wandered off while her eyes continued down the page?” As Lester went on, I started to see what I had been missing in reading—reading as a relationship. Lester even compares reading to being like “any other meaningful interaction between human beings.” Reading as relationship. Interaction. Hmm are these words sounding familiar? Lester put this relationship so beautifully describing that “the writer is involved in finding the words, the narrative, the ideas that will be the axe to crack the frozen sea within the reader and...readers are the recipient of those words who meet them with words from their own narrative.” Reading as relationship between author and reader—both have a piece they have to give to the other. Part of the piece that I have to give as the reader is my own narrative. It is this narrative that makes reading meaningful.

Throughout this class, I struggled with how that narrative is created and how I know that the narrative I’m following is really my own. In my first reflective essay I referred to this narrative as my “aliveness list” derived from Mary Malone’s list of what actions or feelings convince her that she is alive. I thought immediately of my aliveness list.

The feeling of holding warm tea in a jar. The taste of swiss chard and eggs. The feeling of missing someone even when you saw them yesterday, or hours ago. Knowing you’ve made someone’s day. Knowing you’ve ruined it. Not regretting it. My out of practice fingers still finding that same Christmas medley on the piano. The taste of wanting to brush your teeth. The sight of
old people smiling. The feeling of a knit scarf around my neck. The sound of voices in harmony and one voice in passionate dissonance. Laughing on the floor, with limbs having no where to go but up. Sitting five people on a couch. Trying to dance while running.

To me, a list of this nature equates often to passions, those things that actually mean something to me, pluck a heart string, pull my lips back into a smile, or let the water run from my eyes. This list outlines why I care. But that isn’t so straight forward. I realized how easily I compare my list, or narrative, to others and how easily some relationships make me question the genuineness of my narrative. In that reflective essay,

I recognized the importance of surrounding myself with relationships with people who, too, are becoming more confident in their own lists and not constantly comparing lists to create their own. Dependence, for me, has seemed to occur when I am the one trying to create their list for them. Dependence is when the list I made for them is the only one they know of. Interdependence occurs when I can hold tight to the things that I love and simultaneously love where someone else is. I don’t have to evaluate myself based on other’s priorities.

While I think this is true, I think I hadn’t yet realized the role that books have in providing a safe space to create this narrative. Not only do I bring a narrative into the reading but I can revise, rethink, and reaffirm my narrative throughout the process. Further, the relationship is perfectly interdependent. I am not dependent on the book and the book is not dependent on me as we both bring our own lists into the relationship. But the author doesn’t compare or judge my narrative, I am free to explore and question, that’s even encouraged. There isn’t a right or wrong to compare myself against because interpretation is part of the game. I’m allowed to disagree if I have been a respectable reader—I don’t have to worry about hurting anyone’s feelings. I’ve realized that reading has the potential to be the ultimate artist date. Going to the UVa Art Museum by myself I was struck by how much I let myself be influenced by my friends. It was refreshing and rejuvenating to “skip things that I didn’t like and spend time on what I did. I realized that I, and only I, was determining my reactions and that felt good.” In a book, its just me and other potential ways of thinking. Other perspectives. Lenses. I can re-read passages I love and then stop and think, “I loved that, what was it about that structure that made me want to cry?” Flipping pages in a book, I can take it all in and choose what I like and dislike according to only me and the narrative I feel most confident in at the time. I am realizing that reading provides such an important space for someone like me who is a people pleaser and a helper. My narrative seems to be easy to distract based on someone else’s demand. Books provide the niche in which I can truly engage with myself. I can begin to understand my true reactions that are unfiltered with no one to please. I have for so long thought of self reflection as intertwined with conversation but the relationship between author
and reader is one which allows for a deeper discussion and requires me to articulate what I think my true narrative is.

In re-reading my writings on the struggle between pessimism and optimism, I saw the effects of this new relationship with reading. I wasn't ok with just accepting what was handed to me, which I often do just to avoid conflict. I stood up for myself. My previously unhealthy relationship with reading was taking a turn for the better. The date under my grandma's quilt must have been beneficial. The tea soothed me. I allowed myself to struggle with a previously assumed narrative in optimism. I truly shocked myself with unfiltered reactions of pessimism. I even admitted that I felt that "optimism had done me wrong". But my own writing surprised me when I said, "I regained a confidence in my own way of thinking this week and that there is 'so much to see here'". Through deep engagement with my narrative and those characters I was exposed to in our readings, I finally allowed myself the space I think I had been craving. The space for internal dialogue. For true, unfiltered reflection. And a regained confidence in my own way of thinking. A regained confidence in me and my narrative.

True to the characteristics of spiritual journeys that I defined at the beginning of class, my relationship with books shifted as I became more aware and reflective. I became open to new connections. I just still wouldn't have expected these relationships and connections I'm speaking about to be with books and words instead of people and spoken conversation. Feeling confident in my reading skills, I opened up Keesha's House and by the end was utterly confused by how I felt: "I flipped the last page, sighed, and thought, "I want to write. I want to tell these stories". I've never felt like that before." I had fallen in love with the "words on the page and the dialogues on paper". All of a sudden, I had made the connection that the self-reflection, the internal dialogue, and safeness, was a space that the author created in words. I had honed my reading skills in such a way that fit Lester's notion that "writers need good readers who care about words and how they fit together to make sentences, paragraphs, and eventually books". I recognized the responsibility that words have, and thus the power.

Reading strings of words when they connect in ways that makes my heart ping or my eyes close or my mouth falls open makes me realize the value of honing such a skill. I want to be able to write in a way that translates to emotion. I want to use words to connect strangers' experiences. I want words to make people ask questions of themselves. I want my writing to be accessible, open 24/7, handicap access, public transportation, the works.

True to my synthesizing mind, I had made the connection between reading and writing and the power residing in both. My style of reading, one built on genuine reactions in a safe space, became my style of writing. I wanted to write with conviction, as Taylor Mali said so inspiringly. Speak with authority. In formulating ideas for my creative writing assignment, I had set a goal to write in a way that my reader would be able to interact with, "I want them to not be able to help BUT interact. React." Like with reading, there is an adjustment period of understanding the different modes of academic writing and writing for an impact. In both Keesha's House and House on Mango Street I was enthralled with words' ability to convey feelings. Feelings make an impact. In the feedback on my first reflective essay, it was clear that I
hadn’t quite made the jump yet. I was stuck in the abstract and afraid to let the feelings and imagination find their place in making an argument. They are truly the star of the show and I had left them out, falling back into academia habits of solely abstract thinking. But by the time I gave writing another shot, this time in a solely creative and imaginative realm, I was able to give in to the sensory writing that I love and actually get a reaction. I still think about Jessica Felt’s comment on the first draft of my creative writing project. She said, “Really, I actually fell in love with love all over again.” I had written in a way that made people feel. I had made words hold the responsibility they deserved. I was so proud of myself.

I believe in the power of farmers markets, a place where human interactions and connections “make me unbelievably happy—seeing people come together, meet people they otherwise wouldn’t have, understand different perspectives, share smiles, hear stories, make connections. Farmers markets represent the most beautiful example of this in a society where opportunities for such connections are rare”. I believe that what’s so powerful about farmers markets is the passion that surrounds them. But the more I think about it, the more I think I could have written my “This I Believe” about the world of community, passion, and trust that books have made me want to live in. And that when I said I had fallen in love with farmers markets and the people that follow, I might have also been able to say with books and the people that follow them. I thought that a spiritual journey was a process between people. A result of relationships between people. But I realized that a spiritual journey for me depends on alone time and individual contemplation—a safe zone to disagree with things, love things, and a safe place to write a narrative. But what’s amazing is that this safe, individual reflection lends way to a drive to share and instill a reaction from others through writing. A connection with myself hone the skills needed to make powerful connections with others. In taking the time to create a clear narrative, I take the time to clarify thoughts and learn to express them with conviction. I believe in the power of words, reading them and writing them. I believe in the connections they yield, the relationships they build, the passion they ignite, and the dynamic narrative that they demand and mold.
I read *The Golden Compass* when I was in 5th grade and it took me months to get through. By the time I got to the end, I don’t know if I even really remembered what I had read. In the beginning of our class, we were asked why we read for pleasure. I was immediately brought back to this experience with *The Golden Compass*. I think I remember this instance so vividly because it was so frustrating. I remember wanting so badly to be able to delve into a book for hours and not come out until I had turned that last page. But instead I was distractible, and not wholly present, always wondering which conversations I was missing in the living room or what homework I was supposed to be doing, running lists in my head at the same time, etc. So I made it my goal this semester to enjoy reading. Truly enjoy it. Its hard to get out of the habit of reading for a bullet point list of arguments. Or to read for the “gist”. Instead, reading can be therapeutic and meditative and calming. I was determined to give in to that state that it felt like everyone else could find so much easier than I. Tonight I snuggled into my bed. I looked at my Grandma’s quilt that is on it and smiled as I crept a little more under the covers. I opened *The Amber Spyglass* and took a deep breath, looking over at the desk for “academic reading” and consciously choosing something different. I told myself “this is going to take longer than usual and that is ok. You will get to the other things on the list at another time. Let them go. Be fully present.” I think that’s been my biggest struggle: being fully present. Its not nearly as easy as it sounds. I listen to my friend and find myself running lists in my head when I should be engaged in only them at the moment. I sometimes feel like I rush things, everything, by always thinking about my next commitment. Reading became solely a commitment and tonight I made the conscious agreement with myself that I would attempt to see it differently.

I've had conversations with readers who tell me that they read a book of mine in an afternoon, and then proceed to argue with me about something in the book. Once I said to someone, "I spent three years writing that book. How dare you think you know it better than I do after you read it in three hours." And who knows how many times during that three hours that reader was interrupted by the phone, noises outside, and how many times that reader’s mind wandered off while her eyes continued down the page?

Writers and readers are each involved in translating experience through the word. The writer is involved in finding the words, the narrative, the ideas that will be the axe to crack the frozen sea within the reader, to paraphrase Kafka. (And that frozen sea within can be no more than finding the book that will entertain me at a time in my life when I can use some entertainment.) Readers are the recipient of those words who meet them with words from their own narrative.

The reader's narrative may find in the author's words meanings of which the author was unaware and did not intend. But this is what occurs in any meaningful interaction of human beings. Authors and readers can know the same text but in different ways. But this is also true of readers and readers.

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**NatalieRoper.02.29.12.A Me Date.**

I went to the UVa Art Museum (Shout out to August and Cathy, who had similar ideas) and realized I had never been alone. Art museums might be an alone thing for me from now on. I realized that when I come with my friends I let their opinions drive what to look at, how long to look at it, and if I like it. Also, its usually been Final Fridays so the art is rather secondary to the dip and 1 free drink. I skipped things that I didn’t like and spent time on what I did. I realized that I, and only I, was determining my reactions and that felt good.

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**Reflective Essay #1**

I recognized the importance of surrounding myself with relationships with people who, too, are becoming more confident in their own lists and not constantly comparing lists to create their own. Dependence, for me, has seemed to occur when I am the one trying to create their list for them. Dependence is when the list I made for them is the only one they know of. Interdependence occurs when I can hold tight to the things that I love and simultaneously love where someone else is. I don't have to evaluate myself based on other's priorities.
This week, I read Snow White and struggled with the ideals of optimism versus pessimism. Most anyone that knows me would categorize me to be very much on the optimistic side of the spectrum, which is why I was so troubled when I felt myself being more pessimistic in response to Snow White. I wasn’t attempting to find a more uplifting meaning or lesson. I wasn’t smitten by the slam poet’s interpretation of fairy tales. Instead, I felt threatened by what I saw as naivety. I was frustrated by trying to determine what children would need to know in order to avoid the situations I was seeing play out in the story. I was upset by how I was contemplating about how I would take the make believe out and the realism in. So many times have I believed in people more than they believed in themselves but just to see them choose inaction, or the wrong action. I trust everyone but its hard to be the only one who sees the good in someone because there is only so much that I can do to prove their goodness to themselves. Often I just become disappointed that they don’t live up to the high expectations I have set. I get so emotionally invested trying to relate that I end up living so many people’s problems that I actually have NO control over. Amongst this internal dialogue I read Snow White and heard DeWolfe say “Dance with every prince charming you meet because Cinderella never knows when its gonna hit midnight”. I was nauseous as we talked about the frightening similarities between typical child abuse situations and the Brothers Grimm Snow White story. And so I just reached for self-preservation. I think all of a sudden I just felt like optimism had done me wrong. That maybe pessimism is safer, less dangerous to my soul.

But then I wondered, in the words of my mother, “what’s the alternative?” Just assume the worst and that what you see is what you get? This world is unchanging, dark, and depressing? Then along came Zeely, a warm story of the values of imagination and believing in something, to remind me easily of what I love about make believe, what some people think optimism merely is. It connects people. Hope connects people. Hope is what causes “the rigid masks of our faces to melt”, and for strangers to “sit side by side” (p.95). Geeder saw a Queen in Zeely and just by Geeder believing, Zeely may have seen herself to be a Queen, too. Believing instills hope. Its easy to get bogged down but without a little bit of imagination, we can’t get past that smog to see what could be. Without that hope of change we can’t convince ourselves that we can make it. Like Geeder, I regained a confidence in my own way of thinking this week and that there is “so much to see here”. I can hold on to the snake and the turtle and let life’s lessons play themselves out. I don’t have to learn them all before I can experience them.

I re-listened to DeWolfe’s Grimm Fairytale. This time, I was most struck by the last section:

“I as her father figure can only enfold her in my arms defend her like arms against mother earth/ Because life may be, a grim fairytale. but she makes me, make believe, to never let reality, tell you, what your imagination, is worth.”

Optimism isn’t the same as naivety. Naivety is thinking you can protect everyone from everything, stop danger before it happens, or solve every problem before someone has the opportunity to experience it for themself. Optimism is realizing that there is so much to see even if reality is going to go on beating us down. I think that is true courage. Let’s let our imaginations soar and not be afraid to let our world fail us because sometimes, it just might prove us wrong.
NatalieRoper.02.15.12.A late discovery.

I flipped the last page, sighed, and thought, “I want to write. I want to tell these stories”. I’ve never felt like that before. I don’t really like writing. I’ve always felt that I wasn’t very good at it or that it was equal to having a conversation. This book engulfed me. My pages are covered in underlines, brackets, notes, stars, and dog ears (I don’t know why I thought I needed so many different symbols of emphasis?). Engulfed. I fell in love with the words on a page and the dialogues on the paper. I became convinced of the importance of capturing a story that can be passed down. I am passionate about the value of conversation and the vitality of sharing perspectives but this book did this through writing in a way I hadn’t given time to before.

I was so struck by the way it was written. I marveled at the way each line meant something. That’s why I have so many underlines. I guess each word is under more pressure to mean something vital when the whole book is only 109 pages. The words have a larger responsibility. But words always do. Reading strings of words when they connect in ways that makes my heart ping or my eyes close or my mouth falls open makes me realize the value of honing such a skill. I want to be able to write in a way that translates to emotion. I want to use words to connect strangers’ experiences. I want words to make people ask questions of themselves. I want my writing to be accessible, open 24/7, handicap access, public transportation, the works.

Words transport memories. Navigate meaning. Structure journeys...

I felt like I could have written pages on every single one of these lines I starred and dog eared in Keeshas House. I realized that I probably should. I think a lot. I talk a lot. But what I love is thinking about perspectives and how they fit. I love finding the “right” in everyone’s view and then finding a “right” that we can all agree on. Maybe I should just trust myself to write some things down every once in a while. I need to practice using words in the way Helen Frost did that made me melt. Words preserve trains of thought and these processes are just as important as the end result. I think I tend to remember the conclusion but lose sight of the magic that happened to get us there. Or sometimes the magic was in an event that I didn’t even think connected. I’ve never been a journal-er but I think I’m going to start trying it out. Even just a line every once in a while.

Child Lit: Author as Arbitor? Julius Lester

Writers need good readers who care about words and how they fit together to make sentences, paragraphs and eventually, books.

Reading and writing are both creative undertakings requiring probing intellects and sensitive spirits. I’m not sure the idea of ‘authority’ has any place in such an undertaking.

In my morning pages, I have been working on describing how I feel in a way that is clear and maybe relatable. I think relatable, is a key goal for my writing. I want my reader to be able to interact. I want them to not being to help BUT interact. React. I've decided that I want to write something in the styles of one of these books.

Reflective Essay #1 Feedback

Overall, I think your essay would have benefited from the vivid sensual images that make your regular blog post so engaging to read. Drawing on the strength of your imagination will break up your abstract thinking.

NatalieRoper.04.27.12. This I Believe.

I believe in the power of farmers markets. It was one of the first weeks of school when I found out about the Charlottesville City Market. My friends and I walked to the bus stop and picked up the trolley. It got downtown and we turned 180 degrees to see a usually dead parking lot bustling with life. I was overjoyed just observing from a far. Being a college student for a solid three weeks, I was eager to see other generations beyond our 18-22 year old bubble. Children were dripping with juicy strawberries. Dad’s were holding babies in backpacks on their chests. Grandparents were struggling up the hills but smiling the whole time. I stepped onto the asphalt and felt healed. How many times have you heard someone say that? I was homesick and lonely despite the friends I was lucky to have made. I was overwhelmed with college culture. And I felt like this farmers market was just waiting for me. My friends poke fun at me for how often I talk about “communities coming together”. I do talk about it a lot because its something that makes me unbelievably happy—seeing people come together, meet people they otherwise wouldn’t have, understand different perspectives, share smiles, hear stories, make connections. Farmers markets represent the most beautiful example of this in a society where opportunities for such connections are rare. I walked onto that asphalt and was overwhelmed by the feeling of community. I love smiling at a stranger and having them smile back. I love asking a stranger how their week was and having them stop and actually respond. And, well, I love goat cheese. Unconditionally, I think. I fell in love with farmers markets and the people that follow them. What’s so powerful about farmers markets is the passion that surrounds them. You have to be passionate to get up every week at 4am to drive to the market, unload a truck of produce, and sell in the hot sun until noon. You have to be passionate to run a market without a salary, as many market managers are volunteers. You have to be passionate to fight for your market as many markets are under threat to be uprooted for development. You have to be passionate to understand the rarity of thousands of people coming to one place every week. You have to be passionate to appreciate the smiles that aren’t so readily available with strangers the rest of the week.

I believe that farmers markets provide a rare niche where we can recognize the value of community. Smile to strangers. Stop and talk to your neighbors. Meet generations. Understand our food. The more I go, the more I want to live in a world that is built on community, trust, and passion.