



Honoring the Written Word

"Regardless of one's profession after graduating, writing is the preeminent skill students need after they graduate," said David Holler, assistant professor of rhetoric and composition and managing editor of *Writing for a Real World*. "It is the skill they will need most in their professional lives."

The anthology, sold at the USF Bookstore, is most often used as reference during classes, with professors pointing to particular essays as examples

EXCELLENCE IN WRITING: THE BEST OF STUDENT ESSAYS

of how to structure well-crafted writing assignments. Students also learn from critiquing the essays since they are not perfect and do contain areas for improvement, Holler said. The essays are published just as they were submitted in classes taken during the 2007-08 academic year.

Selecting the winning submissions was a daylong task. The 13 faculty and staff judges reviewed 98 submissions in a blind review, and each submission was read by at least two readers. Every winning submission had to pass the review of at least four readers. The result was 13 winning essays.

The writing is judged on several criteria, including research, documentation, style, and whether it is a genuinely interesting and unique approach to the subject matter.

Because the essays may be on any topic and include students' thinking, not simply a rehashing of facts, they serve as more than an example of good writing—they may spark discussion among those reading them.

"Readers are encouraged to examine these essays, understand them, even quarrel with them," journal editor David Ryan, assistant professor of rhetoric and composition, writes in the anthology's introduction.

The topics are as diverse as the courses available. Faith-based community organizing. Nobel laureate Wangari Maathai. The Abu Ghraib torture scandal. Maternal depression. Pain management.

Yet the essays published in this year's *Writing for a Real World* have one thing in common—they all represent the best undergraduate writing at the University of San Francisco. Now in its sixth year of publication, *Writing for a Real World* honors the finest examples of academic writing from across all disciplines by publishing the winning essays in an anthology.

The following excerpts of several essays in this year's *Writing for a Real World* show what's on students' minds—and how they choose to express that in writing. **Read the essays** ►



THE ABU GHRAIB TORTURE SCANDAL:

THE EFFECTS OF OBEDIENCE TO AUTHORITY AND SITUATIONAL POWERS

Written for a rhetoric and composition class, the essay by sophomore Kathleen Cuyugan explores the torture scandal in the context of psychological experiments conducted by social psychologists Stanley Milgram and Philip Zimbardo. Both demonstrated that everyday people could commit torturous acts when blinded by an obedience to authority.

Because Cuyugan was learning about the experiments during a psychology class she was taking at the time, exploring their connection to Abu Ghraib seemed a natural topic.

There is no excuse for the horrendous crimes that were committed at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay; however, there are ways of explaining what happened and why.

Just like the Milgram study of Obedience to Authority, the military runs on commanding obedience, and in this case no one defied the orders—even when they knew it was wrong. In the Stanford Prison Experiment, all of the chosen guards had no training—a situation that is exactly the same as Abu Ghraib, where not only did the commanding general have no training, but often the Military Police had to conduct interrogations that they never knew how to do. Furthermore, the entire battalion was under intense pressure from the White House to produce results and information as quickly as possible, creating an atmosphere of extreme tension (on top of the fact that the prison was under constant attack and in the middle of a combat zone). Control had to be quickly obtained from detainees and as clearly seen in the Stanford Prison Experiment complete control over a person can cause immediate changes in behavior from a “good and normal person” to someone committing “sadistic” crimes.¹

...There is no justification for the crimes that (Charles) Graner or any of the other soldiers committed, but the Milgram and Zimbardo studies show how to understand how and why it happens. Almost everyone who reads about the horrendous acts would say to themselves, “I would never do that,” but one can never say how they would react in a particular situation until they have experienced it. All of the participants in the Milgram and Zimbardo studies were seemingly “normal” yet they turned their backs on their morals when an authoritative figure was pressing them to do something or when they believed that they weren’t being watched. Just like the Stanford Prison Experiment, most of the Abu Ghraib abuses were occurring during the night shift—when the soldiers thought no one was looking. Soldiers were so caught up in the situation that they felt free enough to smile and take photographs with the beaten or dead detainees. According to (General Antonio) Taguba, they even put the pictures as their screensavers.²

The key to the prevention of another Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo Bay is awareness—awareness of the power of a situation: and being able to step back and understand what is happening. The Milgram and Zimbardo studies give examples of how human behavior changes in a situation presented in a particular environment. It is up to those who have the knowledge to have perspective and recognize when they are in those situations.

To read the complete essay, go to www.usfmagazine.com.

“Before delving into such a dark and complex topic, I never had to ask myself questions like would I have stopped the other soldiers from torturing the detainees? Obviously I would have said to myself, ‘Of course,’” Cuyugan said. “Yet you can’t say what you would do unless you were in that situation. Being in that mental state of war, fatigue, constantly being under attack, you could never know how you would react to anything. I think truthfully accepting that it could have happened to me was the most mortifying challenge.”

1. Meet author of prison abuse report. (2004, May 11). CBS News. Washington. Retrieved on October 29, 2007 from <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/05/11/iraq/main616723.shtml>

2. Villalon, D. (2007, October 4). Gen. Antonio Taguba speaks at the University of San Francisco: Exposed torture at Abu Ghraib. ABCnews.com. Retrieved on November 1, 2007 from <http://abclocal.go.com/kgo/story?section=local&id=5691412>.

Portraits of Christ: An Introduction to the Gospels

In his essay, Alonzo Miller '08 takes one passage from the Gospel of Matthew—the Beatitudes—and examines it as one portion of the gospel writer's portrait of Christ.

The assignment was part of a theology and religious studies course designed to introduce students of all faiths to the historical-critical methods of biblical interpretation that examine the history of the Bible itself.

“Blessed Are The Peacemakers” (Matthew 5:9)

The existential state of “peace” was and remains to be an important attribute in Jewish religion and culture. The Hebrew term for peace, *shalom*, is still used by contemporary Jews today as a salutation and is included in the latter portion of the Levitic benediction, perhaps as a reminder of how desirable such a state of being is. Catholic liturgy has also lent itself over to a salutatory blessing of peace as demonstrated in the *Pax vobiscum* (i.e. “Peace be with you”).¹ Because peace was generally regarded as a blessing to the Hebrews, this Beatitude has clear connotations to the messianic age in which a dramatic transfiguration of the earth would come about by peace. The word “peacemaker” denotes the activity of peacemaking. As to what exactly are the activities of a peacemaker are left up to what seems personal interpretation. In that vein, good arguments for just war theory as well as pacifism have and continue to be made.

“Blessed Are Those Who Are Persecuted” (Matthew 5:10)

It is in this last Beatitude of Matthew that the “kingdom of heaven” is referred to once again, creating a beautiful, poetic structure to the text and reiterating the central theme of the pericope. Persecution is a result of the quest for the righteousness of God.² Matthew’s audience knew of the pains of persecution quite well after experiencing the destruction of the second temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 C.E. Righteousness was viewed as a requirement for salvation, as demonstrated in a number of Hebrew scriptures, particularly those of Proverbs (Prov. 11:19; 12:28).³ In this passage of Matthew, persecution is paired against righteousness... In order for one to occur, so too must the other. Perhaps the best example of this Beatitude in action is Jesus Himself. Radically in pursuit of God’s righteousness, Jesus’ faith was refined and purified, necessary for the attainment of righteousness and an entrance requirement into God’s kingdom.

After interpreting each of the eight Beatitudes, Miller sums up his essay by emphasizing the need for them, even in today’s world.

Conclusion

The Beatitudes of the Gospel of Matthew have been treasured by Christians for centuries and are considered to be central tenets of the faith. Revered by scores of religious leaders and philosophers of every persuasion, these eight simple verses provide a clear moral compass upon which individuals may guide their lives. How we interpret these time-honored passages and live them out in our own day is, in fact, the challenge. Today, poverty remains rampant and maintains itself in our faulty political systems, fueling vast despair and hopelessness from generation to generation; wars continue to be waged and fought with little case or cause; persecution, religious or otherwise, perpetuates with senseless genocide occurring with little intervention. Even now, in these contemporary times, the world shows a need for the attributes and traits purveyed in the Beatitudes, stated in simple words by Erik Kolbell: surrender, empathy, patience, self-denial, contrition, sanctification, wholeness, and lastly, but conceivably most important, courage.⁴

To read the complete essay, go to www.usfmagazine.com.

1–3. David Hill, *New Century Bible Commentary: The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1981).

4. Erik Kolbell, *What Jesus Meant: The Beatitudes and a Meaningful Life* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2003).

“I have always held the Gospel of Matthew in high esteem, not only as a person of faith, but also as a student of great literature,” Miller wrote in a commentary published alongside his essay. “I gained valuable insight into the many historical and literary components present within this sacred text and, as a result, have broadened my perspective of the gospels in light of contemporary research.”



Anabel Cassady also opted to write about an issue related to the war in Iraq—private military firms. Her essay stemmed from a class on written communications. She chose to focus on the private military firm Blackwater in particular because she had never heard of the corporation before her professor mentioned it in class.



Corporate Combatants: Abuses of American Private Military Firms

I believe that the single, most plausible solution to the issue of PMFs and their corporate abuse is to change the legal status of private military contractors....Currently contractors are capable of ignoring laws set out to protect innocent civilians of war. But these laws are there to protect the contractors themselves. By working in this legal gray zone, contractors do not follow and are certainly not protected under any international law.

In regards to time, cost, effort, and risk involved, I believe that clarifying the legal status of private military contractors is the most apparent solution. If the U.S. government is going to continue to use and hire PMFs, then private contractors should be held accountable. In 2001, when Donald Rumsfeld legitimized PMFs as a part of the war machine, he pointedly neglected to clarify their legal status. United States private contractors must be legally treated as U.S. soldiers, and held accountable for their actions. Alexandre Faite, legal advisor of the International Committee of the Red Cross, claims, "The fact that they carry weapons and may be de facto placed in situations where they can exercise some form [of] authority are additional reasons to insist on their obligations under humanitarian law."¹ For all intents and purposes, they are soldiers, and should be treated as soldiers. The U.S. government must clarify the legal status of PMFs, making them adhere to the Geneva Conventions and the same protocols as the U.S. military. Private contractors should no longer be given impunity for their crimes.

As of right now, too little is publicly known about the PMFs in Iraq and elsewhere. The amount of money spent, the number of contractors deployed, crimes committed, and people killed, are all estimates. The U.S. government has continued to turn away from any legal matters regarding PMFs. But I believe that by legally classifying contractors as soldiers, our government will no longer have the choice to overlook their crimes. Furthermore, the lives of innocent civilians as well as the contractors themselves will have greater protection.

No longer will the deaths of innocent victims, such as the father of six shot in al-Hillah, the Iraqi body guard shot and killed by a drunken contractor, and the twenty innocent Iraqis shot and killed in Baghdad, be overlooked and untried. No longer will the lives of contractors, fallen at the hands of brutal adversaries, continue to be unprotected by laws or conveniently forgotten about by the U.S. government. No longer will laws, such as the Uniform Code of Military Justice, MEJA, CPA Order 17 and Executive Order 13303, be ignored by or give impunity to PMFs. And most importantly, no longer will the legal status of PMFs continue to risk the lives of innocent human beings as well as the reputation of the United States in the Middle East and throughout the entire world.

"I couldn't believe and still have trouble doing so that our very own government not only supports, but is connected to this exploitive corporation (Blackwater)," Cassady said. "All I can hope for is that after reading my essay, students will be aware of the existence and abuses of PMFs. I hope that by gaining a true understanding of the harm caused by these private security corporations, students will begin to spread the word among their family and friends."

To read the complete essay, go to www.usfmagazine.com.

1. Faite, Alexandre. "Involvement of Private Contractors in Armed Conflict: Implications under International Humanitarian Law." *Defense Studies*. 4.2 (2004).

Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement



Before taking a class on nonviolence through the politics department, Allison Domicone '08 knew little about the Green Belt Movement and its founder, Nobel laureate Wangari Maathai. But when it came time to research and discuss any topic of interest relating to the course, Domicone found herself drawn to this Kenyan woman and to the idea of nonviolence movements in Africa in general.

“There’s not a whole lot of it and I think it’s really fascinating that it’s coming out of these countries that have dealt with so much colonial oppression and conflicts,” Domicone said.

Maathai, true to her spirited quest for social justice, was not content with merely planting trees, for she knew Kenya’s problems went much deeper than careless environmental practices. In a relentless pursuit of fairer democratic practices, she would play a critical role in speaking out against the government and the single-party state throughout the 1980s and 1990s. She advocated constantly for democracy and fair representation in Kenya at a time when autocratic regimes were the status quo in much of Africa.

Perhaps one of the best examples of Maathai’s commitment to nonviolent activism was during the Uhuru Park struggle in late 1989....In the Uhuru Park struggle, Maathai was instrumental in speaking out against the construction of a proposed *Kenya Times* Media Trust business complex, which was slated to be built on the outskirts of the park, Nairobi’s own green belt. Horrified at the plans to build a 60-story tower, a parking garage for 2,000 cars, and a massive statue of President Moi, Maathai was determined to fight against such an outrage.¹ She was well aware that her adversary was a ruthless and dictatorial regime with a steadfast grip on power, and the fear of whom permeated all aspects of Kenyan daily life; it would take much more than a well-aimed pebble to knock this Goliath down.

...At the time, Maathai’s voice was one of very few speaking out against the complex, but she was not deterred. As a result of her vocal stance and determination, Maathai began to feel the painful effects of speaking out against a harsh regime. She and the Green Belt Movement suffered humiliation and belittlement from the government, as members of Parliament took to openly discrediting the Movement as a “bogus organization.”² Although one might assume that Maathai’s work ought to have spoken for itself and been counter-proof enough against the government’s accusations, it is important to keep in mind that the government still had a stranglehold on the mainstream press, and its grip on the public was still a menacing one. As a result, the average Kenyan dared not go against the regime, even if he or she may have in fact sided with Maathai.

Fortunately for Maathai, the fact that the government was reacting so outlandishly and harshly did after a time produce a positive effect. Because the government overreacted and was less than forthcoming with a decent answer to Maathai’s simple question as to why the *Times* complex ought to be built, its actions produced a backlash. The more the headlines read “MPs Condemn Prof Maathai” and “Prof Maathai Under Fire in Parliament,” the more the public and the international community began to see through the actions and words of the regime.³ ...Maathai was overjoyed to learn that Kenyans themselves had begun to take action into their own hands and, following her example, wrote letters offering personal statements as to why the complex should not be built. Despite these encouraging advances in the struggle, Maathai continued to wage her courageous campaign, knowing the work had only just begun. When in November of 1989 ground was broken for the complex in Uhuru Park, Maathai filed a legal appeal and issued a press release, both of which helped to garner more support from Kenyans themselves.⁴ Maathai’s struggle was now regular front page news....It was not until February 1992, however, that the construction fence in Uhuru Park finally came down, providing concrete proof to Maathai and others who had opposed the tower’s construction that they had won. **USF**

To read the complete essay, go to www.usfmagazine.com.

1-4. *Maathai, Wangari*. 2006. *Unbowed*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Maathai’s Green Belt Movement (GBM) started with the simple idea of planting trees around Kenya to promote a healthier environment and to empower marginalized women and men by giving them a modest income to grow and cultivate the tree seedlings. The movement grew from there, also focusing on women’s rights, fighting poverty, and advancing democracy, all the while adhering to nonviolence tactics.

To read the complete essays, go to: www.usfmagazine.com

