

**Course Syllabus**  
**Stones Speak: Nature as a Window to Humanity**  
**IDH 2930 - 29299 Section F008 - Fall 2024**

**Instructor:** Todd Best  
2013 Farrior Hall, email: [tabest@ufl.edu](mailto:tabest@ufl.edu)

**Office Hours:** Thursdays, 9-10am or by appointment

**Class meetings:** Wednesdays, period 9 @ Little Hall 119

**Required Text:** Annie Dillard. *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters*. Harper Perennial; Revised edition (2013) 176 pgs.

Annie Dillard. *Holy the Firm*.  
Harper Perennial; Revised edition (1998) 76 pgs.

**Course Description:**

In 2014 President Obama awarded a National Humanities Medal to the accomplished writer Annie Dillard (Pulitzer Prize, 1974). Dillard's unique perspective captured in her narrative essays which put nature into conversation with humanity have helped her achieve such recognition. In this class, we will explore *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (accompanied by *Holy the Firm*), which represents some of Dillard's most compelling work. How might nature speak to us? And how can we look and listen in order to understand what might be heard? If one follows Annie Dillard into the woods, streams, oceans, islands, meadows, and prairies, and, if one listens closely enough, the sights and sounds of these places will have things to say. In these excursions, Dillard seizes opportunity after opportunity to draw on the mysteries of life and death in the natural world and beyond. In doing so, not only does she see the wonders that come to life when pausing long enough to reflect, but also she allows the non-human world to inform human experience, leading to a fuller picture of what it means to be human. In a remarkable way, then, readers of Dillard come away with both a greater appreciation of the world "out there" and a richer understanding of our humanity, in effect seeing the two worlds as more intertwined than what we often imagine. In sum, this class is about learning how to see in all senses of the word.

This seminar style (conversation-based) course will provide students the opportunity to read and discuss Dillard's essays carefully and reflectively. We will consider Dillard's work alongside related short articles, poetry, and film. Most importantly, our reading will culminate in ongoing classroom conversation to work out Dillard's ideas. Additionally, students will participate in reflection through short writing assignments as they interact with the essays. Written assignments: 500 word creative review essay/project, 1000 word final essay/project, 10 short (100 word) reflection posts.

### **Course Objectives:**

1. Read Dillard carefully and reflectively, treating Dillard as a conversation partner
2. Understand and articulate Dillard's ideas, placing in context of wider human experience
3. Engage the text \*critically and respond \*personally
4. Discuss the text in a thoughtful way that includes both careful reading and careful listening

\**Critically* does not mean negatively only. It means that it is expected that you will be able to distance yourself enough to fairly and thoughtfully analyze the content, evaluating in ways that allow you to offer thoughtful response and not merely agree or disagree. This critical stance should be framed by a generous posture on your part. Please read "Reading Charitably" in Canvas.

\**Personally* means two things: 1) as you read you are not merely seeking to find what you like and dislike about the book; more than that, you are entering into a conversation with the book/author. 2) As you interact with the reading, you allow the content to be filtered through your own experience in life.

### **Class Flow and Structure**

The class' structure will be quite simple: reading and in-depth conversation. Each week, students will come to class having read and entered a brief reflection of the content for the week. During class, we will discuss the reading. There will be no lecturing by the instructor, though sometimes a side bar at the white board will be used to enhance the conversation. Periodically, there will be additional assignments in the form of short Film/Creative Review essays.

### Reading and Conversation

Each week we will read one or more chapters plus a supplemental article, video, or poem. Students will be responsible to read and actively discuss the material each week, as well as write a reflection of personal engagement. *Depending on class size, students may have rotating responsibility to lead part of the discussion.* In-class discussions will sometimes be led by the instructor, sometimes by class members, sometimes by the collective class. Each class member should come to class ready to contribute every week, and not merely to listen.

Each week, students should come with 1-2 discussion questions that you would want to ask if you were leading a discussion on the assigned reading. As much as possible, questions should reference specific passages in the text. Questions should be included in the reflections (see below).

### *A Word About Academic and Human Discourse: Going Beyond Civility*

This is a humanities class that raises existential questions related to the human experience. It probes issues that are sometimes thorny, don't always have clear answers and includes ones in

which people can have strong differences of opinion. One way to think of the class is to see it as a big conversation about big issues. Optimal participation comes from the ability to be fully engaged: observant, reflective, and imaginative as we enter into conversation. In order for us to have a successful class, we need to be able to talk to and with each other well. That involves a conversation in which members are humble, respectful, thoughtfully engaged, and still free to critique (offer friendly push-back). We want to see the articulation and discussion of individual perspectives, while leaving room for disagreement and friendly critique. All of us should respectfully listen to the author's views as well as each other's, without becoming dismissive or defensive, a common default when disagreement is detected; and after listening, we need to be able to converse about what we hear. As these ideals are upheld we hope to create an environment where we all sense that, fundamentally, we are in this together in spite of our differences. (Please see article in Canvas: "Reading Charitably".)

All in all, it will be useful to grant ourselves a freedom to think in large terms about life - at the deepest levels of personal conviction. This is not a facts and information class, although we certainly hope to be learning something; this is a class in which we will think about our cultural and media discourse through a lens: pondering and learning about what it means to be human by processing, thinking well about, and interacting over the big ideas that come to us through our reading and discussion.

#### *Other helpful tips:*

There will be several places in which religious ideas are fully in view. A little background in the Christian tradition would be helpful, but not mandatory. If you come across something that you are unfamiliar with, you should pause and look it up. For those who do have knowledge and background in this tradition, we will lean on you to help shine light in places where we may not all have that context to think about.

More broadly, a freedom to think in large terms about life - even explicitly religious terms if you find them relevant - will be useful to our conversation. This is not a facts and information class; this is a class in which we learn about what it means to be human by processing, thinking well about, and interacting over the big ideas that we read.

#### Attendance and Participation

Since this is a discussion-based class that meets only once a week, attendance is vital and assumed. Except for emergencies, absences must be cleared with the instructor prior to class. Students will be permitted **one** absence over the course of the semester. A second absence will lower the course grade by ½ a letter grade, and a third or fourth absence by an additional full letter grade each. Students cannot receive credit for the class if there are more than four absences.

In addition to attendance, each student is expected to contribute to classroom discussions weekly. Participation will be measured by verbal contribution in class, questions to classmates,

furthering and expanding the conversation, etc. Further participation could include posting in Canvas connections between class readings and your observations in culture (bringing to our attention related articles, books, poetry, film, artwork, thinkers, personal experiences).

### Weekly Reflections

Students will write 10 weekly brief reflections (100 words minimum, 250 words maximum) in response to the reading assignments. Each weekly reflection should include 1-2 thoughtful questions that could lead to discussion in class. Reflection assignment details will be posted in Canvas.

\*\*Reflections will be submitted weekly **AT MIDNIGHT THE DAY BEFORE CLASS**, with instructor response periodically. Details will be provided in class. See assignment sheet in Canvas - Assignments.

Students *may* consider using the following questions as prompts: (these are also helpful for class discussion)

- Which of Dillard's ideas most captured your attention this week?
- What do you find confusing or troubling in them?
- What do you find most compelling in her thinking?
- How would you criticize her thought? (basing your critique on good reasons)

Each weekly reflection should include 1-2 thoughtful questions that could lead to discussion in class.

### Creative Review

A film/art review essay or project - 500-1000 words. Details will be given in class.

### Final Reflection Essay/Project

The final assignment will be a culmination of each student's engagement in the class. While it will take some effort, it should be enjoyable to do. 1000-1250 words. Details given in class.

### Film Nights

Film and other art forms are excellent avenues for gaining insight into the kinds of issues and questions we will encounter in this class. Discussing film with others can nurture deeper understanding as well as forge connections with our fellow viewers. In this spirit, we may try to have one or two film nights in which we will view a film and have a short follow-up discussion. If you cannot make a film night, it will be your responsibility to view the selected film on your own. Dates and details to be announced.

### **Assignments and Grades:**

Attendance and Participation 25% (250 points)

Weekly Reflection Posts 30% (10 x 30 points = 300)

Review Essay/Project 20% (200 points)  
Final Essay/Project 25% (250 points)

All assignments will be submitted through Canvas/e-learning as directed. Students will receive ½ credit for all late assignments up to one week from the due date. Assignments more than one week late will not be accepted. Grading for assignments will be based on 1) the accuracy of your understanding of the material; 2) the organization and clarity of your writing; 3) the persuasiveness of your arguments; and, 4) not least, your focus on responding to questions as asked.

**Grading Scale:** 93-100 (A); 90-92 (A-); 87-89 (B+); 83-86 (B); 80-82 (B-); 77-79 (C+); 73-76 (C); 70-72 (C-); 67-69 (D+); 60-66 (D); 60-62 (D-); Below 59 (E)

**Classroom Decorum:**

Students' full attention is expected while in class. Please turn off and store out of sight all cell phones, computers, and electronic devices prior to class. No electronic devices should be turned on in class, unless clearly related to class discussion (see instructor). This is a weekly conversation, and for us to have a good conversation we need everyone to be engaged in face to face fashion. I will avoid the "eyes in the sky" instructor if you will avoid "checking out". Get your money's worth from this class by staying attentive and engaged.

Students are expected to act in accordance with the University of Florida policy on academic integrity. Cheating, lying, misrepresentation, or plagiarism in any form is unacceptable and inexcusable behavior. For more information, visit:

<http://www.dso.ufl.edu/sccr/honorcodes/honorcode.php>

**Accommodations for students with disabilities:**

If you require classroom accommodation because of a disability, you must first register with the Disability Resource Center <http://www.dso.ufl.edu/drc>. The Disability Resource Center will provide documentation to you, which you then give to the instructor when requesting accommodation.

**A brief note about reading in community:**

*Late Request*

With love's confidence I'm asking,  
if you should offer this book  
to another, ask of him  
as now I ask of you

to read slowly,  
and thoroughly, tasting  
each word's trouble.  
Without doubt, certain passages  
should never stand alone,  
but will require assistance  
offered by others to further  
endow their meaning. I fear  
for the reader who dabbles,  
who gleans, who hurries to take  
and flee, and who by doing so acquires  
nothing but a novel form  
of his current poverty and error.

—Anonymous author of The Cloud of Unknowing

**Stone Speak Fall 2024 - Course Schedule (check weekly - a work in progress)**

| Date     | Reading/Content  | Assignment Due   |
|----------|--|------------------|
| Aug. 28  | how to have a class like this  | dive in          |
| Sept. 4  | Living Like Weasels (TST)<br><a href="#">The Force that Drives the Flower</a>  | reflection 1 due |
| Sept. 11 | An Expedition to the Pole (TST)<br>+Studies in Seeing:<br>- <a href="#">Ansel Adams &amp; Instagram</a> short film   | reflection 2 due |
| Sept. 18 | In the Jungle (TST)<br>The Deer at Providencia (TST)<br>+ podcast: <a href="#">On Being - David Whyte</a>  | reflection 3 due |
| Sept. 25 | Teaching a Stone to Talk (TST)<br>On a Hill Far Away (TST)<br>Film Night 1 (tba)<br>+ <a href="#">Poem: Adventures in New Testament Greek: 'Nous' - Scott Cairns</a> | reflection 4 due |
| Oct. 2   | Possibly: Guest speaker Joel Parker: an  |                  |

|         |  |  |
|---------|--|--|
|         | exercise in seeing through art<br>reading: <a href="#">"Skill and Vision" by John Lessore</a><br>+FILM & DISCUSSION @ 5-7pm          |  |
| Oct. 9  | Total Eclipse (TST)<br>+Studies in Seeing: short film: <a href="#">Overview</a>  | reflection 5 due   |
| Oct. 16 | Lenses (TST)<br>Life on the Rocks: The Galapagos (TST)<br>+Studies in Seeing:<br>Radiolab - <a href="#">"Update: Eye in the Sky"</a> | reflection 6 due   |
| Oct. 23 | A Field of Silence (TST)<br>God in the Doorway (TST)<br>Mirages (TST)  | Creative Review Essay<br>due by Oct. 25, 12am<br>(no reflection due)       |
| Oct. 30 | Sojourner (TST)<br>Newborn and Salted (HTF)  | reflection 7 due   |
| Nov. 6  | Aces and Eights (TST)  | reflection 8 due   |
| Nov. 13 | tba: film? attention/seeing  |  |
| Nov. 20 | God's Tooth (HTF)  | reflection 9 due   |
| Nov. 27 | NO CLASS - Thanksgiving  |  |
| Dec. 4  | Holy the Firm (HTF)<br>+ <a href="#">"Seeing"</a> from Pilgrim at Tinker Creek   | reflection 10 due  |
| Dec. 11 | tba article on attention<br>Course Wrap up   | final paper due on<br>DECEMBER 13,<br>extension available upon<br>request. |

[-Annie Dillard and Secret of Seeing](#)