

### **Interview with Nancy Oelklau, author of *Alphabet Meditations for Teachers: Everyday Wisdom for Educators***

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to interview Nancy Oelklau, who is here to talk about her new book “Alphabet Meditations for Teachers: Everyday Wisdom for Educators.”

*A native of southwest Oklahoma, Nancy Oelklau began her career as a high school English teacher in Marshall, Texas. She earned the B.A. in Communications, cum laude, from Oklahoma Baptist University, the M.A. in English from the University of North Texas and the doctorate in Educational Administration from Texas A&M University, Commerce, where she was named an outstanding graduate. For nine years she served as assistant superintendent for instructional services in Marshall, TX, followed by nine years as executive director for the Texas Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. Her previous book “Journey from Head to Heart: Living and Working Authentically” won first place in the Spirituality/Inspiration Category in the 2008 Reader Views Literary Awards and was selected as their Book of the Year.*

**Tyler:** Welcome back, Nancy, and thank you for the opportunity to interview you today. To begin, will you clarify—is this book for teachers to use with their students or for teachers to use individually for their own wellbeing?

**Nancy:** It’s for teachers to use individually or in small groups for their own wellbeing. It’s designed to instill calmness and peace of mind in teachers and other educators; thus, students benefit.

**Tyler:** Will you explain just what you mean by “Alphabet Meditations”? Is the book arranged alphabetically?

**Nancy:** Yes. It’s an interesting story. One morning as I awoke, I was inspired to begin writing meditations for teachers. I picked up one of the many small blank books that I keep on hand. When I opened it, I realized it wasn’t a blank book—it was an address book, divided by the letters of the alphabet. So I said, “Okay, then, I’ll write Alphabet Meditations for Teachers. It’s perfect.” For the next twenty-six days I opened this little book and wrote a meditation for whatever letter I had opened to.

**Tyler:** Will you tell us about the structure of the book? For example, I understand the meditations are written as poems?

**Nancy:** Most people would call them poems. I think of them as messages from, to, through my heart. The native language of my heart seems to be poetry.

**Tyler:** Nancy, for those not familiar with meditating, would you explain just what meditating is, and how it can be beneficial to a person?

**Nancy:** Simply stated, meditating is clearing the mind of chatter and feelings. It's allowing the thoughts that are constantly racing through most of our minds to settle, like sand to the bottom of a glass of water. We take three or four long, deep breaths. We allow our brains to relax, and neuroscience has proven that our brains work best in a state of relaxed alertness. In this relaxed state, thinking about nothing, we become calm, and we intuitively know what to do next. At the end of the book I recommend a process for meditation and reflection using the Alphabet Meditations.

**Tyler:** Will you give us an example of why meditations would be useful for a teacher?

**Nancy:** One teacher told me that she was asked to cover a class for another teacher who had to be away. It was a math class, and as she walked in, the class was restless. Also, she was nervous because she wasn't a math teacher. When she realized she was nervous, she said to the class, "I'm feeling a little unsettled, and I'm going to take a few minutes to close my eyes and take some deep breaths so that I can relax and be at my best for you. If you'd like to join me, please do." And she closed her eyes, took three to four deep breaths, and focused on the intention of being her best for these students. Some of the students joined her, some did not, but all of them quieted down, and she had a successful class with them.

**Tyler:** Nancy, so our readers get a better idea of what the meditations are like, will you give us one of your favorites, or at least a short passage from one?

**Nancy:** Excerpt from A is for Adam

They trust me to know there is  
More than one way to learn.

They trust me not to give up on them,  
Even though they make it tough,  
And it would be so easy  
To walk away.

I'm here for a purpose.  
They trust me;  
I'm worthy of their trust.

Fill me today with  
Creative strength of  
Creative trust.  
Help me trust them, too.

**Tyler:** That’s great, Nancy. It seems to remind the teacher that even unruly students want a teacher they can trust to lead them. Besides trust, what are some of the other themes of the meditations?

**Nancy:** Schools are complex organizations with lots of moving parts. It’s very easy for teachers to get distracted and forget that the most important thing is their relationship with students. My hope is that “ALPHABET MEDITATIONS” helps teachers keep their focus on what is truly important and tune out all the rest. These meditations keep bringing teachers back to what is most important—how they feel about and relate to their students. I’m so excited right now because I’ve recently seen two school districts in which I felt true respect between adults and children/teenagers. It was heartwarming and refreshing. Truly, I’d like to start an epidemic of respect in schools.

**Tyler:** Nancy, is the book geared toward any specific types of teachers—teachers of certain grades or age groups, or teachers of certain subjects?

**Nancy:** Well, I thought it would be most appealing for elementary teachers; however, one reviewer who had taught at the junior college level believes its applicability goes beyond K-12 schools. And other educators—principals, central office administrators—might find it useful, as well.

**Tyler:** Do the meditations have to be read and practiced in alphabetical order? How do you suggest the book is best used?

**Nancy:** I suggest that the book be opened at random and savored, one meditation at a time. A meditation might open a faculty meeting or be used in professional learning communities with reflection to find solutions through intuition.

**Tyler:** What benefits might students receive from a teacher who uses this book?

**Nancy:** A teacher who is anxious or upset has a negative effect on students. They “pick up the vibes” and respond accordingly—often negatively. A teacher whose mind is clear and whose heart is peaceful is more likely to be patient and kind. These are qualities that are good for students.

**Tyler:** So you think it would basically help discipline in the classroom by removing the elements that lead to unruly behavior?

**Nancy:** It will help discipline in the classroom by creating a more peaceful teacher and thus, one more able to deal effectively with any kind of behavior.

**Tyler:** Dealing with children can be both frustrating and rewarding. How might these meditations help a teacher deal with the frustrating aspects—students who interrupt the class, don’t do their homework, or are unable to get along with their classmates, for example?

**Nancy:** When I was an administrator, I used to marvel that a student who was a model child in one teacher’s classroom could be a “holy terror” for another teacher. What teachers are thinking and feeling gets communicated even more clearly than the words they say. ALPHABET MEDITATIONS focuses teachers on the one most important thing in the classroom—their

relationship with each student. These meditations suggest that we see students through eyes of compassion and a genuine desire for their highest and best.

**Tyler:** That's really great advice, Nancy, and we see that reflected in popular films—that the teacher with the right attitude can turn around a student or even a whole school. Would you say then that meditations improve attitude and attitude is what can help a teacher succeed?

**Nancy:** I prefer the term “state of mind” to “attitude” because “attitude” is an abstract concept. Let me get even more specific. Once I worked via telephone with a group of teachers. One day a teacher told me about behavioral problems she was experiencing from a little boy in her class, and she asked me what to do. She had tried the district's discipline management program, had been to special training—had tried everything. She was desperate. I said, “Okay. Since everything else has failed, let's just try an experiment. First I want to ask you a question. When this little boy was acting out today, what were you thinking about him? Well, there was a long silence while she remembered the awful things she was thinking, out of her frustrated, angry state of mind. Next I asked her whether she could think of anything this little boy did well. Did he have any admirable trait? Well, she had to think a very long time about that, but she finally came up with one. So I said, “Tomorrow when you go into the classroom, keep this admirable trait in mind, and when you look at this little boy, ask yourself, ‘What can I do to bring out his best?’” A month later, I asked about this little boy and how he was doing. Her answer, “His behavior has drastically improved.”

And that's the power of what a teacher is thinking and feeling.

**Tyler:** Nancy, I was struck by one of the testimonials for the book, from Caroline Eick, Ph.D., who said "Alphabet Meditations for Teachers is a most needed antidote to the toxic side effects of our accumulated reactions to institutional rigidity and regimentation; to models of efficiency that privilege technocratic instruction over meaningful and organic teaching and learning." I think people who do not teach forget there is more to being a teacher than teaching children. Will you explain what are some of the “institutional” frustrations of teaching, and then how your meditations can help teachers deal with these issues?

**Nancy:** Today the pressures of accountability—preparing students to pass tests that determine whether or not they pass and how their school is ranked—are tremendous. Added to that are behavioral problems, and pressures from parents, as well as from administrators who are eager for their schools to fare well. I've even heard in some schools that a department chair has the authority to decide which tests a teacher can and cannot administer and whether or not that teacher can give retests when students do not do well. So there are pressures even from colleagues. These are interesting times.

**Tyler:** Nancy, given this rigidity and pressure in schools from an institutional level, do you see your book being used by an entire school of teachers or endorsed by a school, or do you think it's a book for individuals to choose? I guess I'm wondering whether “meditation” might be perceived as too touchy/feely by school administrations or boards?

**Nancy:** I can't speak for them. Frankly, I prefer that it not be endorsed by administrations. Enlightened schools are turning more and more to professional learning communities, small groups of teachers within a school who meet together to learn and improve. I see it being used there, and I see it being enjoyed by individual teachers.

**Tyler:** Have you received any responses from teachers who have used your book, and if so, what kinds of responses did you receive?

**Nancy:** Here's what one teacher said: "The author's meditations take you beyond curriculum and instruction to the spiritual aspects of classroom life. Keep it nearby, as its wise words will be inspiration and a blessing to you and your school."

Just as reading starts with letters, these reflections for teachers begin with the spiritual, personal side of teaching, which cannot be measured in test scores, grades or reports but in love, affirmation and acceptance of the little lives we encounter each day."

**Tyler:** Nancy, I wanted to congratulate you also on having your previous book "Journey from Head to Heart" chosen as the Reader Views Book of the Year. Now that you've completed "Alphabet Meditations," do you have any other books you are working on?

**Nancy:** As a matter of fact, I've just completed a new manuscript with two colleagues, Irene Watson and Liliane Desjardins. The title of the book is "REWRITING THE SCRIPT: TRANSFORMATIONAL RECOVERY FOR FAMILIES." I'm very excited about this book. I believe it will help many people.

**Tyler:** Thank you for the interview today, Nancy. Before you go, will you tell us about your website and what additional information can be found there about "Alphabet Meditations for Teachers: Everyday Wisdom for Educators"?

**Nancy:** Tyler, I don't have the web site up yet. But I plan to launch [www.AlphabetMeditations.com](http://www.AlphabetMeditations.com). There, people can read this interview, a sample meditation, and comments from people who read the manuscript.

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