This year, the Center responded to requests from members of the West Coast network and offered its fourth retreat for educators in Northern California. The tranquil setting of the Marconi Center, overlooking Tomales Bay, was perfect for creating retreat conditions. The group of professors that came together represented a wide range of experience with contemplative practice, personally and in their classrooms, but at opening circle they all expressed openness to sharing a reflective space and practicing together.

Over the weekend, Arthur Zajonc and Mirabai Bush offered introductions to mindfulness-based practices and contemplative inquiry techniques that can be used in classroom settings, but Mirabai emphasized at the first meeting that what is most important is that educators practice themselves, to focus their own awareness and develop their own responsiveness, capacities that are critical for teaching and learning. While examples of what others have done are helpful in exploring possibilities, practice brings an awareness that applies to everything we are called upon to do in our lives and is part of a way of living and being that is relaxed and alert.

On the first morning the group explored sitting and stilling practices alternating with mindful walking. The winding pathways through majestic trees offered a particularly welcome setting in which to practice this tradition, drawn from Asian and Western monasticism, in which one becomes conscious of all the sensations that arise through the simple movements. At the morning’s end, the group prepared for and entered a time of silent practice, which they would share through the next 30 hours. Silent practice also derives from monastic traditions and, in secular application, has value for quieting the mental activity that goes along with conversation, allowing greater access to inner perception. It is a challenging practice, however, especially during activities such as meals, when sociability is often in the foreground. The thoughts and feelings that arise during the time one is dedicated to silence are an opportunity to
notice what’s going on outside and inside and to cultivate a sharper awareness of the whole environment.

In the afternoon, Arthur Zajonc introduced exercises that extend contemplative awareness to include contemplative inquiry. The four-stage process, which alternates between focused and open attention, explores how ways of knowing can be extended beyond the discursive, logical inference of ratiocination to include introspective methods that lead to new discoveries and insight. Throughout the period of silent practice, Arthur and Mirabai responded to written questions submitted by the participants. They addressed questions about the ethical foundations of practice, how to create a personal practice, and why mindfulness takes so much effort.

By the second day of silence, the sitting meditation sessions had become very still. The contemplative exercises that Mirabai and Arthur guided felt more refined, and participants took up the opportunities to look inward and to explore nature with greater focus and engagement. When the time came to break the silence in the afternoon, Mirabai suggested that “silence is the beginning of mindful speaking.” Practice with silence develops the ability to ask oneself, before speaking, “Is this helpful? Is this true?” One may find one doesn’t need to say so much. As a way back into the speaking world, participants first wrote for five minutes, finishing the prompt, “During the time spent in silence, I learned that…,” before turning to a partner to engage in mindful listening practice. The speaker spoke for five minutes as the listener listened without interruption and then related back to the speaker what he or she heard.
The final evening of the retreat was given to conversation, as the educators spoke in small groups about the relationship of contemplative practice to teaching, learning and knowing. Sharing their experience and questions and offering their ideas to help one another, the participants found many points of convergence and recognition. These supportive and stimulating conversations, many of which continued during breakfast on the final morning, are a wonderful feature of these contemplative gatherings. Somehow, it always seems that just the right people have come.

At the closing circle, many participants shared how they were able to find very particular personal and professional value in their retreat experience. Doing anything with contemplative awareness, such as changing the dressing on an injured patient or climbing a rock face looking for the next handhold, is experienced more fully. Arthur referred to the words of George Dreyfus, who says that, in a sense, enlightenment is freedom, and we are not free in our attention when it is constantly “solicited” by external agents. Mirabai read *At This Party*, by Hafiz, reflecting the feeling in the room that the group had created, as the participants prepared to return to their wider circles of connection with renewed openness and gratitude.

**At This Party**
I don’t want to be the only one here
Telling all the secrets
Filling up all the bowls at this party
Taking all the laughs
I would like you
To start putting things on the table
That can also feed the soul
The way I do.
That way
We can invite
A hell of a lot more
Friends.
The following institutions and departments were represented at the retreat:

- Universidad de Quintana Roo Language and Education
- Seattle University Communication
- St. Martins University English
- University of Victoria Nursing
- UC Berkeley Spanish, Portuguese
- Syracuse University Health and Wellness
- Trinity Christian College Psychology
- California State University French
- Arizona State University Dance
- Gustavus Adolphus College Classics
- Vassar College Italian
- University of Massachusetts Dartmouth Teaching and Learning
- San Jose State University Social Work
- Fairmont State University Language and Literature
- Evergreen State College Undergraduate Education
- University of Victoria Nursing
- Wittenberg University Religion, East Asian Studies
- Stockholm University Stress Research Institute
- University of Michigan Social Work
- California State University Nursing
- Prescott College Humanities
- California State University Social Work