

**The Sixth Annual Summer Session on  
Contemplative Curriculum  
Development**  
August 8 – 13, 2010  
Smith College, Northampton  
Massachusetts  
*By Beth Wadham*

The sixth Summer Session was the largest yet, with over 40 higher education professionals from the US and Canada, Australia, Japan, Sweden and Saudi Arabia. They gathered at Smith College for a five-day exploration of how contemplative pedagogy can inform course development across disciplines and within specific fields. Many also

came seeking integration, a way to make whole something that appears fragmented. In their quest to bring professional vocation and personal meaning into a closer relationship, and to bring a more holistic education to their students, they sought an expanded understanding of learning and teaching, and exposure to new methods.

A faculty of fellows and other leaders in contemplative education, who have been using contemplative methods for many years, gave presentations each morning. The afternoons were available for independent study, work in small groups, or in contemplative practice sessions with Arthur Zajonc and Mirabai Bush, Directors of The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society. The evening programs ranged from a presentation on research supporting contemplative methods to a Funk Buddha hip-hop performance.

**Contemplative Pedagogy: Principles and Design**

Arthur Zajonc led off the week with an overview of contemplative higher education in "Contemplative Pedagogy: Principles and Design." He characterized the situation today as consisting of a number of solo courses taught by over 150 contemplative practice fellows and others; a small but growing number of collaborative faculty networks in a variety of institutions; a handful of programs and concentrations; and a professional membership organization: the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education.



Educators are finding that contemplative practice cultivates the development of their student's inner resources in the following ways:

- Support student's attention, openness, and emotional balance;
- Invite students into an experiential dimension of learning and promote greater engagement;
- Expand and deepen research to include contemplative inquiry and insight.

By way of example, Zajonc described "Eros and Insight," a course he teaches to first-year students at Amherst College in collaboration with his colleague Joel Upton, a Professor of Art and Art History. In the first class, the theme of silence is introduced, and students are invited, through silent practice and a contemplation of the theme in poetry, to "awaken to their own genius."

Zajonc reports that many in the class of 28 students are wondering, "What kind of wakefulness is that?" But they, and Zajonc, are often surprised by what arises out of their own creativity. He shows images of a Zen monastery, assigns a Basho poem, and then, most centrally, asks them to "be still and silent" for a period of time. Then, they write 150 words characterizing the experience. The exercise has proven to be remarkably effective for many students. As they cultivate single-pointed attention and disrupt habitual ways of seeing, they can become fresh observers.

When introducing a practice element to his course exercises, Zajonc finds it helpful to give the students some of the rationale for why it's being asked or assigned. He allows for their questions, and then gives clear instructions. After an exercise they are offered opportunities to process the experience through journal writing or sharing in the classroom.

One practice he introduces uses a bell sound. The exercise has four-parts. First, students sustain attention to the sound of a bell, as it takes shape and pulsates and then recedes into silence. Then they are prompted to "sound the bell inwardly," summoning a memory or afterimage of the sound. After this, the instructions call for letting go of the sound memory, allowing what Zajonc calls "open attention." Finally, he asks them to extend this openness to allow for "letting come," or for something to arise out of the silence.

While he finds students at Amherst know a lot about concentration and focused attention, the idea of open attention is usually unfamiliar. They wonder—Is it lack of attention? Sleeping? At first, it may feel like no attention at all, and there can be some discomfort with the void. But with practice, a meditative state can be cultivated, one that has a luminous quality of consciousness and presence, at the threshold of sleep. From this stillness, Zajonc suggests, subtle thoughts, "alighting like butterflies," images, and feelings can arise.

As the students talk together afterward, and share the results of "investigating their own minds" they become more attentive how the mind behaves. As they develop tools of self observation, they are able to report on their own mental phenomena, how

their minds are distracted, then reigned in, then wander again, with greater precision. Knowing one's own mind is revealed as a whole research topic of its own.

An introduction to self-awareness can be a foundation for the development of more sophisticated "contemplative inquiry" methods. As Zajonc observes, everyone in the academy is involved in some kind of inquiry, from research in laboratories to other kinds of explorations, and there are many different types of methods. While logical inference and deduction are crucial, he considers them insufficient for particular types of discovery and creation. One can't leap to a general statement, for example, and hypotheses can't be induced or deduced, but moments of insight and wonder can catalyze fruitful questions.

To demonstrate how the exploration of the bell sound can be the basis for a contemplative inquiry method, Zajonc invited participants to take an issue or question from their own vocational or personal lives and engage in a process. The first step is to describe the issue from the outside—characterizing its objective quality or "outer phenomenology," and write or represent the issue using some notation. Then, describe the issue from an inside, or subjective perspective. There may be emotional and ethical content, and these can be explored imaginatively and meditatively. Again, some form of representation can be used to express this perspective.

After bringing attention to both kinds of data, Zajonc suggests moving into a state of "letting go" or open awareness, to be followed by "letting come." When thoughts, images or other material presents itself during these mental states, it can have the quality of insight or comprehension at a deeper level.

These different modes of inquiry have been described by Howard Gardner as making use of multiple intelligences, and by James Hillman, in *Archetypal Psychology*, as research and "insearch." The process of descending into the issue, Zajonc finds, can reveal new aspects to the question, can invite a new understanding and expression of it, and opens the way towards a careful, synthesizing, creative response.

### ***Architecti et usus Meditatio: Architecture and the use of meditation***

Peter Schneider, Professor of Architecture and Chancellor's Scholar, College of Architecture and Planning at the University of Colorado Denver, is a pioneer in contemplative education. In 1997 he received a Contemplative Practice Fellowship for developing the course, "Found Spaces: mindful practice in architectural design," and he has continued to explore the influence of *contemplatio* and *meditatio* – both terms rooted in architecture's ancient history - on the shapes and forms of contemporary architectural practice.



The ten scrolls of Vitruvius, surviving from 26 BCE, are the classical texts for the study of architecture. They set the ground for the use of meditation, describing two kinds of

knowledge: “knowing how” and “knowing that.” Knowing how can be understood as doing the practice and knowing that is considered an explanation of the way it’s done. Schneider finds the fundamental act of architecture to be “paying attention to doing what you are doing while you are doing it,” an act which requires continuous reflection.

Building is an activity by which we make shelter, make marks on the world, as he relates, but places already exist. As Louis Khan, the most mystical of architects, whose writings about architecture often read like Zen koans, observes, “an arch has an existence but no presence.” In a similar way, Schneider emphasizes that an architect’s respect for the underlying individuality of things will affect design and the way people experience space. His students, before beginning their design exercises, are well served by asking big questions: What is a shelter? What is a home? All structures have both an interior and an exterior, and he invites students to explore, imaginatively, both the interior experience and external appearance of their inhabited spaces.

As an example, he describes an exercise that activates the early memories his students have of building shelters or forts. This is a cross-cultural phenomenon, as nearly all children engage in the practice of creating these for themselves and those close to them. When prompted, we can recollect those places, and Schneider asks students to list five terms to characterize what they constructed. When participants share their lists, many similarities can be observed. As children in “rooms of our own,” we often feel hidden, safe, protected, and comfortable. There may also be common design elements, such as a secret entrance or threshold.

Students, Schneider recognizes, are not blank slates. We all have elaborate “environmental biographies” and learning how to recover those memories has a role in creating architecture that is responsive to human needs. Schneider is interested in sensitizing his student’s perception of architectural space, and has been surprised at the results of these kinds of exercises. Given the opportunity, most students find they can skillfully apply their mindful attention to the past and meaningfully recollect the places they remember. He also finds that their writing about these experiences has, over the years he’s been working with these methods, been consistently very high quality.

In a design studio class, for an assignment to plan a cell for a monk, the students need to understand the rituals involved, and learn from the people they’re designing for. The assignment includes engaging in a sitting practice of their own, paying attention to what’s going on around them. He shows a film clip of a Buddhist monk, walking very slowly, and asks the students to adopt a similar practice, walking contemplatively and paying attention to sights and sounds. After recollecting their experience through writing after each activity, they are prompted to reflect on their experience of the architectural elements, like stairways and doorways, and include both physiological and psychological impressions.

The resulting designs can be great events in their minds. They find ways to consider the experience of the people who will inhabit their creations as part of the design

criteria. To design a school, for example, Schneider finds it important to go back in time, asking, "What is a school? What is teaching? What is learning? Although students, especially first year, tend to want answers, Schneider is committed to giving them opportunities and information that provoke the kind of questions that can lead to their own discoveries.



### **Philosophy: The Art of Wondering**

Reneé Hill, Associate Professor of Philosophy and History has been involved in bringing contemplative practice to a historically black college, Virginia State University, since 1999, when she developed the course "The Path of Inner Experience" as part of her Contemplative Practice Fellowship. On Wednesday morning during the Summer Session, she settled herself cross-legged on top of the large oak table at the front of the Browsing Room in Neilson Library, and invited her listeners to participate in a relaxation exercise. It's the kind of thing she does with her students in "Introduction to Philosophy," which she characterizes as a "stroll, with one another, through the content of the course." The exercise is part of a welcoming ritual that invites students into the space, acknowledges their presence (names are called out and she asks how they're doing), and offers them some quiet, peace, and focus before they address the topics on the syllabus.

It wasn't always this way. Although Hill has been meditating for 30 years, during her first years of teaching she didn't "stray far from the can," and taught philosophy in a traditional way, "bludgeoning students with arguments and counter-arguments." She still wants to challenge their perceptions and "press against the things they think they know for sure," but she now she begins with wonder. Asking questions like, "What is true?" and "What is real?" leads to the problem about other minds (we never know if we're seeing the same color) and introduces the idea of radical skepticism more effectively than analytical arguments.

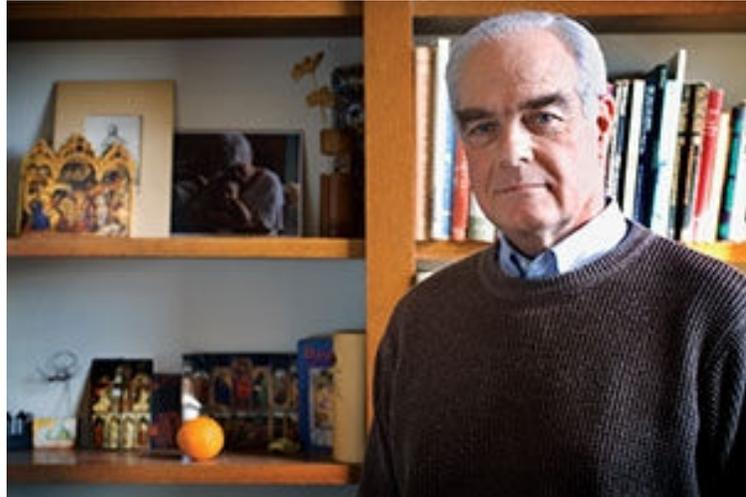
Teaching with contemplative practice, she searches for meaningful ways to get her students to think carefully. She asks them to consider, "What makes me what I am?" and "What makes up my identity?" as questions to hold lightly. She shared with participants an exercise she uses to explore identity with her students in which they select, from array of images from art, design, the natural and human world, one that they are drawn to as an expression of themselves. Then she structures a listening exercise between partners to share the reasons why—including the emotional content and the values expressed.

Most of the students in Hill's classes are taking the first and only philosophy class in their lives. They're frequently the first generation in their families to attend college. They're worried about jobs and other practical matters and they rarely have access to conditions allowing for quiet contemplation. In the 15 weeks she has with them, Hill has to determine: What does she want to share? Most of all, she'd like them to slow down and experience wonder.

Her practice for teaching consists of first determining the essence, kernel or take away for the students. And then she is reminded to remember—even that is not that serious. She doesn't believe the content is the most important thing, and she is conscious that what she models for the students is what they will most remember. She asks herself whether she can teach out of her own sense of wonder.

### Apertures of Awe

Joel Upton, Professor of Art and Art History at Amherst College, offered a description of his seminar "The Art of Beholding," not as a prescription for an art history course, but to explore how others might bring "beholding" into their own disciplines. He recognizes that his goal, to encourage students to become beholders, suggests that they are not yet qualified to directly behold art. The process is one of beginning to behold, and involves beholding themselves as they grow toward it.



He promised to outline the six deliberate and defined steps toward a palpable sensation of awe, an awakening that starts with doubt and confusion, and by necessity cannot take any longer than 16 weeks, but first he told his listeners a story.

Many years ago, in Arcadia National Park on Mount Desert Isle, on a perfectly clear and sunny day, Upton and his two young daughters began a climb up Mount Cadillac for a 360 degree view of the landscape below. Along the way, they followed the cairns that were placed there to guide hikers. When the weather changed dramatically, and a storm blew up, the girls put on their yellow raincoats, and Upton changed the plan from an ascent to a return. But somehow, reversing direction, they were unable to find the cairns along the way down the mountain. Although the girls' spirits remained bright, and getting lost seemed to them to be just another game, their father became stricken with "major mortal awareness." And, during a subsequent moment of insight, he also realized just what had to be done. If a descent wasn't possible without going terribly astray, they would have to continue to climb, through wind and rain, and only by reaching the top would they be able to find the pathway down.

The memory of the day passed into history, until Upton was asked to do this talk for the Summer Session. He considered the academic predicament of an "endless forest" of information: myriad sources subdividing and metastasizing as we try to penetrate the thicket. One can become truly lost on that mountain, he observed, and it might not be enough just to "add moments of contemplation while heading down." Instead,

Upton suggests we need to turn around, whatever the conditions may be, look up, and “behold” what is before us through an “aperture of awe.”

Step one in this process for his students in Art History is to identify one painting to “behold with.” According to Upton’s concept, this means to “engage the work’s human realization according to a unique and shared embodiment--rather than merely or exclusively to observe, analyze or situate it culturally and historically.” Although he allows for a semester-long encounter with one work of art, the beholding relationship is one he hopes his students will sustain for the rest of their lives.

Step two is a “superficial” gathering of information about the work, consisting of when, where and by whom it was painted, its size and basic composition.

Step three consists of an analysis of form, line, shape and color, giving the subject full attention.

Step four is an investigation of the content, or iconography, of what is represented. Students often find there are almost infinite possibilities here.

Step five asks students to identify the contradictions that comprise the work, for example the tensions between horizontal and vertical aspects, as well as the deeper conflicting elements, or “paradoxes of human being” that give rise to its composition.

Step six is an invitation to contemplative beholding, in which students seek out, by way of contemplation, “intimations of the reconciliation of contradictory reality,” engaging in contemplative exercises alternating focused attention and open awareness.

As they move toward the “threshold” of contemplative beholding, what began as a relationship between a subject (the observer) and the object (the painting) becomes closer to a subject to subject, or delicate, “I and Thou” encounter. The tensions they’ve identified in the work of art are not considered inconsistencies to dispel, or contradictions to resolve, but opportunities to break free from instrumental modes of thinking toward a dynamic artistic encounter that continues to generate new ideas.



### **What Can Literature *Mean* after Bergen Belsen, Hiroshima, Biafra, Darfur, and Kabul?**

Linda-Susan Beard, Professor of English at Bryn Mawr, who led this presentation and discussion, is all too aware that no one is going to have a good time in her course, which triangulates the literature of the Holocaust, Apartheid and Rwanda. She asks herself why she has taken on the task, and she says she sometimes feels like the Ancient Mariner with his commitment to talk for the ghosts who can no longer speak for themselves.

Her courses, which also include African American Literature and African American History, have been called “suffering courses.” In them, she wants her students to experience the stories of both victims (not objects) and perpetrators (still human), and see past the opacity and false masks that have defined them. She wants them to move “beyond comparative atrocities,” in which a confinement of 6 years is measured against one decades-long, and hear the weeping specific to each. She wants them to grow in vision and insight.

The works they read are acts of documentation and storytelling. In encountering them, she asks her students to try to “listen to the burning bush without burning to death,” and find their place as members of an interconnected and interdependent community that includes those who have heard, for example, the sounds of their neighbors burning. The syllabi are comprised of award winning books: *Atonement*, by Ian McEwan (2001); *Half a Yellow Sun*, by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2007); *Literature or Life*, by Jorge Semprun (1998); and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, by Khaled Hosseini (2007). The books generate questions for discussion and writing that ask students to be deeply contemplative and compassionate.

She finds that these books need to be read with “a faithfulness to a disciplined quiet” and offers contemplative “respite rituals” that can be integrated into longer classes or field trips, such as taking a walk, sketching, or gazing at the beauty of the natural world. To see and to look are sometimes joyful, sometimes painful experiences, and she doesn’t want students to feel overwhelmed. Sometimes students can’t finish the assigned reading, and occasionally, during class discussion, she’ll suggest, “Let’s be still,” offering silence as a possible response to things which are beyond words. But ultimately she presses them, through her example and steady attention, to summon the courage that is involved in speaking about the unspeakable and attempting to name the unnamable atrocities that human beings have perpetrated upon one another. She encourages them to look again, and attempt to rehumanize images “from underneath.”

Toward the close of the week-long session there were still many questions and themes that had been touched on but not addressed, and on the last day an open space session allowed for self-organization around topics, to be “hosted” by participants. Each host described and represented his or her interest and groups self-selected on topics such as evaluation and assessment; research models (what kind of evidence and what can and can’t be measured when considering contemplative experience?); and how to address resistance to contemplative practices by students and colleagues. At the closing circle, many educators found themselves more able to “behold, breathe, stay grounded and pay attention,” and more ready to “lead their students on inward journeys.” Arthur Zajonc suggested that “this is really a faculty meeting for the future,” and left us with an image of what a blessing that would be, for the students and ourselves.