

A Brief Report on the Regional Symposium on Contemplative Practice in Higher Education

Amherst College, Amherst, Massachusetts, May 9 - 11, 2003

Sponsored by the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, The Center for Integrative Learning in Action and The Five College Faculty Seminar on Contemplation and New Epistemologies
Hosted by Arthur Zajonc, Professor of Physics at Amherst College and Harold Roth, Professor of Religious Studies, Brown University.

Friday Evening

After welcoming the group and giving a brief overview, **Arthur Zajonc** introduced David Rothenberg, Associate Professor of Philosophy and Music at New Jersey Institute of Technology. David, a clarinetist, performed a jazz improvisation that Diana Chapman Walsh later called a "secular benediction."

In her introductory remarks, **Diana Chapman Walsh**, President of Wellesley College, stated, "I am here to take a stand for what really matters in higher education-especially now." Mentioning the conference on Education as Transformation that took place on the Wellesley campus in 1998, she suggested that these gatherings are "part of a movement to bring back the question of how to guide students to find a reflective stance to unite their inner and outer lives-contemplation, in short. Such experiences engage the whole student, transform teachers and learners, and, over time, will transform institutions." Referring to what writer James Fallows calls "the great college hustle" of pressure to succeed beginning in the early years, she challenged the assembled academics to create new practices and structures within their institutions that would transform the academy and transform the student culture through a different kind of leadership.

The opening presentation, "In Search of a Secular Spirituality" was by **Brian Stock**, Professor of History and Comparative Literature at the University of Toronto and the Collège de France. He is a specialist on European culture from the 13th to 16th Centuries and the development of the university. He has also a scholar of Augustine and has thought and written about contemplation and education. Brian is a founder of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society. Brian led us on an enlightening tour of the history of contemplation in Western thought. He began with its roots in Christian monasteries where contemplation was at the very heart of knowing, through the emergence of the university, the discovery of the scientific method and the subsequent division between the sciences and the humanities. Along the way he briefly summarized the thinking of Augustine, Seneca and Montaigne on contemplation, meditation, and reading and writing as transformative experience, and leading finally to the scholastic method of achieving knowledge through logical comparison.

In reconstituting this history of ways of knowing, Stock identified a problem of two cultures. Whereas, in the ancient world science and the humanities were intimately connected with spiritual practice, today they are separate even as mathematics, physics and astronomy uncover mysteries that point to consciousness itself as the creator of phenomenon.

Saturday Morning

Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of the [Stress Reduction Program](#) at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, gave the keynote presentation on "Paradoxes, Strategies, and Unique Challenges in Researching Contemplative Practice and Its Potential Effects within the Post-Modern Academy: The Model of Mindfulness in Medicine."

Jon briefly and entertainingly described how he came to bring an awakening of awareness into the medical environment by talking about stress and pain, and how he created the stress reduction clinic where physicians could send patients they didn't know what else to do with. He discussed strategies for teaching contemplative practice that ignite a passion for non-doing and the importance of being able to hold in the mind paradoxes such as concurrent form-and-emptiness. Lastly, he discussed both the importance and the challenges of researching states of mind and their effect on the body and described the psoriasis study undertaken by the Mind-Body Stress Reduction clinic.

A Roundtable Discussion on Contemplative Practice and Research followed, with **Jon Kabat-Zinn**, **Carolyn Jacobs**, Acting Dean of the School of Social Work at Smith College and **Jeremy Hunter**, faculty member at the Drucker School of Management, moderated by **Arthur Zajonc** and **Hal Roth**.

Carolyn Jacobs began by describing how she came to be Acting Dean, and said "I tend to be the soul of the school." This means that the art of practice has an impact on the school when she brings her attention to an issue of pedagogy, administration and her course in Spirituality and Social Work. She explained that contemporary practice is at the heart of dealing with change and uncertainty. As a leader she sees the vision coming from the people and guided by the people. Her job is to draw out this sense of vision and values from those who practice in the academy and to provide guidance for effective leadership.

Jeremy Hunter briefly described the Drucker School and the vision of its founder, Peter Drucker, saying that management holds modern society together as the tool that makes organizations-all organizations-work. Jeremy teaches meditation as a management strategy at the school and researches mindfulness practice at the Quality of Life Research Center. He emphasized the importance of finding the right language with which to introduce mindfulness practice-language from within the context of the student.

Saturday Afternoon

Daniel Goleman, author of Emotional Intelligence, presented "The Lama in the Lab: The Emerging Collaboration between Modern Science and Classical Contemplative Traditions." Dan positioned meditation as a standard topic in psychology, medicine and psychotherapy today. His most recent book, *Destructive Emotions*, describes the [2000 Mind Life Conference](#) with the Dalai Lama and the paradigm difference between the Buddhist and modern scientific views of the mind. In the Eastern view, destructive states of mind are those that disturb equilibrium and distort perception. These include delusion, envy, greed, worry, perplexity and so forth. The countervailing positive states are insight, buoyancy, adaptability, plasticity, among others. With the use of Functional MRI, which produces a video of moment-to-moment brain activity, science is beginning to document growth in the brain. This neuroplasticity, brought about by the repetition of practice, is cultivated in the Buddhist tradition through meditation. Richard Davidson, cognitive researcher at the University of Wisconsin, made fMRIs of an adept monk that showed remarkable coherence in brain activity. Dan went on to point out that emotions are contagious: there are neurons in the brain whose function is to register the emotions of the other. Therefore, every human interaction has an emotional subtext, and we make others feel

better or worse no matter what else we do.

Following Dan's presentation, contemplative practice workshops were led by **Jon Kabat-Zinn**, **Mirabai Bush**, Director of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, **Larry Fine**, Professor of Jewish Studies at Mount Holyoke College, and **Anne Klein**, Professor of Religious Studies at Rice University and Founding Director of the Dawn Mountain Tibetan Temple, Community Center and Research Institute.

After dinner, **David Rothenberg** performed a jazz improvisation and **Yin Mei**, dancer and professor of dance at Queens College, City University of New York gave a stunning performance.

Sunday Morning

Arthur Zajonc and **Anne Klein** gave presentations on "Transformative Education: Contemplative Practice as a Pedagogical Method."

In an elegantly lucid way, **Arthur Zajonc** talked about becoming contemplative educators. A recent survey done by the Center shows that in 152 institutions of higher education in 33 states there exist transformative and spiritual dimensions to courses and campus life. He pointed out the need for research on the value and efficacy of these methods in the academy leading to a theory of pedagogy. He also pointed out the importance of faculty renewal and retreats to work seriously in the context of bringing practice to the educational enterprise, and finally the value of networks such as the one currently taking place. He said that without practice as an essential component of learning and knowing, we've denied half our potential. Arthur then described *Eros and Insight*, a course that he teaches with Joel Upton, Professor of Fine Arts at Amherst College, which emphasizes the cultivation of attention and bringing it to the present moment. Students are given concentration exercises and then asked to fully engage with an object of attention, to enter into the world of the art object, to sustain and then release attention and then to hold the space after the moment of concentration.

Anne Klein brings contemplation into her classroom as a way to "make the familiar strange," to stand against convention and rationalism. She finds that students often have trouble distinguishing between thinking and experience. In order to counteract this, Anne assigns three practices: attention, compassion and body awareness. To develop attention, she asks students to eat three meals without distraction—no conversation, no reading, no television, no music. She introduces mantra practice by explaining to students that compassion has a sound, which is Om Mani Padme Hum. Finally, she emphasizes that meditation is a full-body experience, not divided by mind-body dualisms, and she teaches the movement of light through the body.

Mid-morning workshop sessions allowed participants to share their experiences of integrating contemplation into courses. Sessions were divided into areas of interest and facilitated by **Anne Klein** and **Hal Roth** (Humanities), **Arthur Zajonc** and **David Scott**, former Chancellor of the University of Massachusetts and Professor of Physics (Sciences), and **Marilyn Nelson**, Professor of English Literature at the University of Connecticut (Creative Arts)

Sunday Afternoon

Hal Roth and **Marilyn Nelson**, who is the Poet Laureate of Connecticut (<http://www.ctarts.org/NelsonPoems2.htm>), gave presentations on "Transformative Education: Contemplative Practice as a

Pedagogical Method." **Hal** led the participants through his syllabus for his Religious Studies course, Theory and Practice of Buddhist Meditation, which he teaches at Brown University. In the course he discusses Original Buddhism, the Mahayana tradition and Zen Buddhism examining the question of whether meditation works if you take it out of the monastery and out of the national culture in which it developed. Pedagogically, he draws a distinction between what he calls "third person" learning, or Western observation and analysis, and "critical first person" learning in which students observe how their minds and bodies work while practicing simple meditation techniques during lab sessions.

Marilyn described her course, Poetry and Meditation, which she designed and taught to cadets at the United States Military Academy at West Point. Her syllabus was in the form of a poem, and each italicized, underlined item was linked to a website with meditation instructions.

The Symposium ended with a discussion on moving this work further. **Arthur Zajonc**, **Mirabai Bush** and **Hal Roth** made closing remarks.