



Meeting of the Contemplative Practice Fellows

Seasons, The Fetzer Institute

October 31 – November 2, 2008

By Beth Wadham

The annual meeting of the Fellows at Seasons, the retreat facility of the Fetzer Institute in Kalamazoo, Michigan, is a tradition going back to the first years of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society's Contemplative Practice Fellowship program.

The weekend-long gathering brings together this diverse group of scholars and educators to present their research and share their experience and resources. And, while the primary purpose of the meeting is for them to learn from one another, the shared practice, meals and evening of contributed music, poetry and other offerings also present many opportunities for the kinds of interactions that foster community or, in another sense of the word, their fellowship.

This year's fellowships were granted for the development of courses that employ contemplative practices to address issues of social conflict and injustice, the amelioration of suffering, and the promotion of peace. The courses span the academic disciplines, from Chemistry to Urban Design, and incorporate a range of practices, from Centering to Aikido.

Bringing Contemplative Practices into the Classroom

A panel discussion featuring three educators who have extensive experience using practice in their classrooms led off the weekend's explorations. These three vignettes offered a glimpse of the extraordinary depth and variety of what is going on in contemplative courses today, and raised questions that would generate discussion throughout the weekend and beyond.



Paul Wapner, Professor of International Relations at the American University has been bringing contemplation into the classroom for the past ten years, and finds his students at American University to be very motivated to change the world, but in need of connecting to a contemplative dimension that supports their sustainability as activists and change agents. His course, "The Practice of Environmentalism: Cultivating and Sustaining Meaningful Environmental Engagement" addresses this need by complimenting the technical and policy studies with the development of resources to "interface between the inner and the outer world" using yoga and a form of Vipassana meditation.

As the students wrestle with the challenge of addressing monumental environmental dilemmas, practice can offer them a way to "hold the pain of environmental degradation, and a path toward fashioning political engagement that is personally meaningful and politically effective." He reports that there have been extraordinary, breakthrough moments when students connect to their own particular entryways into environmental action.

But Wapner also recognizes the limitations of incorporating practice into this one-semester course. Establishing a daily practice and sustaining it is challenging under any circumstances, and that is why practice communities of support, such as the sangha, have developed. His students' classroom practice may be all they get, although he would like to believe that taste might become a point in the life of the student that becomes a node with connections later. Wapner finds that his difficulty with this limitation shows how the thematics of contemplative practice are congruent with the thematics of environmental action: in both, one has to continue to stay with it for the long view, work hard for change, be present and not get too fixated on the results.

Michelle Franci, Professor of Chemistry at Bryn Mawr, brings contemplative methods into her classes because she's interested in how to develop "intentional scientists, who can engage relationally, thoughtfully and reflectively for creating possibility." Bryn Mawr is a Jesuit institution, and Franci's teaching is well situated within a tradition that moves freely between contemplation and action. She finds the habit of sitting for an hour a day a practical commitment that supports focus, attentiveness and a degree of listening that allows her to bring what she can to the problems and issues at hand.

A faculty study group at Bryn Mawr met recently to explore contemplative pedagogy and assess a variety of practices. The Dean was supportive, and the group invited some students to help evaluate. Franci brought the two practices she selected, "Stilling" and "Beholding," to Physical Chemistry, a core required course that involves sustained mathematical arguments and troubling concepts such as particle instability.

"Stilling," as practiced in a noisy lab, challenges the idea that you need a quiet place to settle. Her instructions are simple: "Close your eyes for a minute. Begin to listen to the

sounds around you, to the person next to you, and extend your awareness out to the edges of the room. Listen outside the room, to the hallways, other rooms, outside the building. Listen outwards." Because it takes a different amount of time each day for the class to settle, there isn't a fixed duration for the exercise. But after they've completed it, she finds, they begin class together.

Francl has adapted the practice of "Beholding" from Jody Ziegler, Professor of Visual Arts at the College of the Holy Cross and Contemplative Practice Fellow 1999, for visual material in the sciences. After years of putting a diagram or an equation in front of students and saying, "see this," now she asks, "what do you see?" This simple reversal allows the teacher to be receptive to what the students bring, and to talk about what they see, even if it's out of sequence in the syllabus. It brings opportunities to focus on details that might have been missed and to look broadly at relationships.



Ed Sarath, Professor of Music and Chair of the Department of Jazz and Contemporary Improvisation Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, considers contemplative education a "grand experiment," and suggests that "jazz is to music education what contemplative pedagogy is to the standard model." Sarath began incorporating contemplative practice into his courses ten years ago with the "aspiration to change the whole academic world." Since then he's worked with hundreds of students and developed the Creativity and Consciousness Program at the University of Michigan, changing curriculum models and not just courses.

In his experience, the "teaching of practice is a paradoxical. Practice," he believes, "is a personal thing," and the idea of imposing it, particularly upon unwilling students, causes difficulties, ethical and otherwise. Sarath proposes that educators expose their students to a range of possible practices and accept that they have to find their own way. Sarath also asked his listeners to consider the delineations we make between "formal and non-formal practice," with traditional sitting practice being formal and jazz flugelhorn, for example, being non-formal. In contemplative pedagogy, he suggests, we haven't yet established standards and published the parameters in the *Teacher's College Record*. Many of his students, he finds, as "new practitioners," are able to engage in genuine, serious practice and may have no need to be "taught" in the conventional sense.

Practicing Love: Imagination in the Service of Others

A presentation from Arthur Zajonc, Professor of Physics at Amherst College and Director of the Academic Program of The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, considered the place of imagination in contemplative work.

In taking up meditative practice, he observed, we typically intend to cultivate attention and awareness, but rarely focus on the capacity we have for imagination. To move from attention to imagination, Zajonc introduced quotes from Emerson and Coleridge.

Imagination is a very high sort of seeing, which does not come by study, but by the intellect being where and what it sees...

Emerson, the Poet

Imagination is "the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and is a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation.

Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*

Imagination, in the words of Emerson, makes possible a kind of identification with the observed, "being where and what it sees," the kind of relationship that Zajonc believes can be cultivated through contemplative awareness. The process of "Contemplative Inquiry," which Zajonc describes as "a rhythm between focused attention (samadhi)



and an open awareness, that gradually reaches out and lets go as one extends," results in a high degree of absorption and engagement with the object of one's attention, and allows for "imaginative seeing."

When Coleridge writes that Imagination is a generative source and "the prime agent," he suggests that imagination governs our perceptions, and turns the primacy of perception on its head. In a simple way, this is illustrated by optical illusions, ambiguous images which can be viewed two distinct ways—as both vase and profile, or skull and woman before a mirror. As one moves from one retinal pattern to the other, we understand that some kind of initial construct is necessary to interpret visual information.

Zajonc finds that it's useful to recognize the degree to which "the mind has a body of its own" and is an active agent in constructing our experience of the world. If we begin to take ownership of these capacities, it then becomes possible to reimagine the world and live out of a reimagined ethics; for example, an imagination of a compassionate world that is connected through relationships.

Zajonc related the search for truth by Barbara McClintock, Nobel Prize winning scientist, and the response to hatred by Martin Luther King, Jr. on the aftermath of the bombing of his Montgomery home, as examples what is possible when action proceeds from this imaginative ethos. McClintock, in her research on corn, took the time to look closely and studied every plant. She sought to become intimate with what she observed, to develop a feeling for the organism, and to hear what it had to say to her.

Martin Luther King Jr. addressed the enraged crowd that had gathered in his support with a strong message of imaginative forgiveness, asking them to pull back from the urge to retaliate, hold the situation until action based on wisdom could be imagined, and, ultimately, to respond to the act of hatred with love.

The words of another poet provided the conclusion to Zajonc's remarks, and offered a point of connection for a range of questions and comments that followed.

I'm certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of the imagination. What the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth—whether it existed before or not.

John Keats, in a letter to Benjamin Baily, November 22, 1817

Themes and Open Space

Discussion among the fellows in response to the presentations generated a number of themes that Center staff used an "Open Space" process to address. An Open Space structure allows participants to create and manage their own agenda in parallel working sessions. Issues, which emerged from individuals, coalesced around a number of different themes, and small groups met to share ideas on the themes. After the discussions, the large group reconvened to share the small group findings.

The group divided to discuss six topics:

- Advocacy of Contemplative Pedagogy
- Confronting Injustice with Compassion and Integrity
- Intention of Contemplative Pedagogy
- Creative Means for Compassionate Connection
- Contemplation and Environmental Sanity

- Integrating Practice into Classes

The results of the interactions are posted on the Fellows Meeting 2009 community page of the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education website. All the topics deserve further investigation, and will serve to guide research and influence approaches in the future. An interest group on the topic of Contemplation and Environmentalism, for example, led by Paul Wapner and Anne Beffel, plans to convene a research team focusing on applying contemplative insights to the challenge of responding to environmental problems, specifically climate change.

Science of Meditation

Mirabai Bush introduced her review of the research on the effects of contemplative practice by observing that the eminent scientist, Arthur Zajonc, gave the talk on "Practicing Love," and she, named for the incarnation of "Eros bhatki," would give the talk on science. Her presentation began with images from the Guggenheim Museum's recent retrospective of the work of the Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang.

In "Head On," ninety-nine stuffed wolves stream toward the ceiling and hurl themselves at a glass wall; the work suggests mindless might aimed at an invisible enemy, such as terrorism. His "Borrowing Your Enemies Arrows," presents a found wooden fishing boat pierced with 3,000 Chinese arrows. Based on Chinese legend, the work refers to a third century general who faced his enemies with insufficient ammunition. He outfitted a boat with dummy figures and sent it across the Yangtze River under a cloud of thick, predawn fog. Deceived by this sudden attack, the opposition sent its arrows into the bodies of the dummies. The general then returned with the enemies' arrows and ultimately prevailed. This work suggests the kind of creative thinking that a contemplative approach can bring about (although a contemplative perspective might offer some alternative to warfare as a form of conflict resolution!)

The interest in using meditation to facilitate the achievement of traditional educational goals, support mental health and enhance the education of the whole person is growing, but the academic measures on meditation are limited. There are no studies with college students, and, although those using other adults have indicated that meditation may improve the ability to maintain preparedness and attention, these have to be used with caution when making assertions about younger subjects in campus settings.

Mirabai reviewed studies in neuroscience, which have established a degree of neural plasticity and suggest that the brain can be transformed through training, and studies on equanimity and compassion by Matthieu Ricard. She referred to Richie Davidson's studies on emotion and empathetic change, and longitudinal studies using Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction as an intervention. This well-documented and

respected research is now widely accepted by health professionals, and is a foundation for research in education.

The Center's plans to bring Stanford neuroscientists and researchers in psychophysiology together with military chaplains and medical caregivers to create a pilot program and study investigating resilience and relief of compassion fatigue is an example of how research develops along specific lines of inquiry.

More sophisticated studies are needed in higher education settings, especially using educational measures. Meanwhile, fellows and others can make use of self-reporting mindfulness measures, and share their results. Al Kazniak, Professor of Psychology at the University of Arizona, offered to post an instrument which is fairly easy to use so that others can contribute to gathering this type of qualitative data.

Although the time together was brief, the sense of looking together at the future of contemplative practice in the academy, and taking up the challenges with shared resources, extends the fellows' interactions beyond the weekend. They continue to consult one another and engage in planning initiatives using the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society and the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education as points of connection.



Center for Contemplative Mind in Society and Fetzer Institute Participants

1. **Arthur Zajonc**, Director, Academic Program, Center for Contemplative Mind in Society and Professor, Physics, Amherst College
2. **Philip Snyder**, Director, Center for Contemplative Mind in Society
3. **Mirabai Bush**, Senior Fellow, Center for Contemplative Mind in Society
4. **Sunanda Markus**, Academic Program Coordinator, Center for Contemplative Mind in Society
5. **Beth Wadham**, Academic Program Associate, Center for Contemplative Mind in Society
6. **Eric Nelson**, Program Officer, Fetzer Institute
7. **David Addiss**, Senior Program Officer in Science and Spirituality, Fetzer Institute

Fellowship Recipients

8. **Maria Arias** (2008 Fellow)
Adjunct Professor, Law, CUNY School of Law
LAW: Love in Action with Wisdom [a Wisdom that contains Compassion]
9. **Daniel Barbezat** (2008 Fellow)
Professor, Economics, Amherst College
Buddhist Economics: Skillful Means and the Marketplace
10. **Anne Beffel** (2008 Fellow)
Associate Professor, Art, Syracuse University
Contemplative Arts and Society
11. **Kathleen Biddick** (2007 Fellow)
Professor, History, Temple University.
Taking Refuge: Contemplating Asylum.
12. **JoAnn Carmin** (2008 Fellow)
Associate Professor, Environmental Policy and Planning, MIT
Urban Climate Vulnerability, Adaptation, and Justice
13. **Light Carruyo** (2008 Fellow)
Assistant Professor, Sociology, Vassar College
Contemplating Race, Knowledge and Power: Towards Healing Forms of Critical Inquiry
14. **Michelle Francl** (2008 Fellow)
Professor, Chemistry, Bryn Mawr College
Quantum States of Being: Incorporating Contemplative Practices into the Chemistry Curriculum
15. **Bradford Grant** (2000 Fellow)
Professor and Director, School of Architecture and Design, Howard University
Urban and community design and contemplative environmental design practice

16. **Rebecca Gould** (2007 Fellow)

Associate Professor, Religion and Environmental Studies, Middlebury College.
Practicing for Life: Nature, Spiritual Practice and Social Change.

17. **David Kahane** (2008 Fellow)

Associate Professor, Political Science, University of Alberta
Citizenship for Democracy: bringing contemplation and compassion into community service learning

18. **Alfred Kaszniak** (2008 Fellow)

Professor, Psychology, University of Arizona
The Psychology of Empathy and Compassion: Contemplative and Scientific Perspectives

19. **Linda Patrik** (2007 Fellow)

Professor, Philosophy, Union College (NY).
"Contemplative Social Ethics" course with field trips to social work projects that rely on contemplative methods.

20. **Ed Sarath** (1997 Fellow)

Professor of Music and Chair, Department of Jazz and Contemporary Improvisation Studies, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
Improvisation, temporality and consciousness

21. **Paul Wapner** (2008 Fellow)

Associate Professor, International Relations, American University
The Practice of Environmentalism: Cultivating and Sustaining Meaningful Environmental Engagement

22. **Rita Wong** (2008 Fellow)

Assistant Professor, Critical and Cultural Studies, Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design
Cultivating Ecological, Cross-Cultural, and Interdisciplinary Contemplations of Water: a Proposed Humanities Course

23. **David Zlotnick** (2008 Fellow)

Professor, Law, Roger Williams University School of Law
Integrating Mindfulness Theory & Practice into Trial Advocacy