

The Contemplative Academy: The 2010 ACMHE Conference at Amherst College

The Contemplative Academy, the second conference of the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education (ACMHE), filled Amherst College's Converse Hall for the weekend of September 24-26, 2010. 130 educators from the US, Canada, Mexico, England, Italy and Dubai attended two and a half days of lectures and presentations exploring the integration of contemplative approaches in higher education. This year's conference offered 68 presentations, as well as poster sessions and plenary and keynote addresses—an increase over the previous year and one more indicator of how the contemplative education movement continues to grow.

In the conference's opening address, Arthur Zajonc, Professor of Physics at Amherst College and Director of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society and the ACMHE, recalled a conversation with Jerome Murphy, a longtime Dean of the School of Education at Harvard. Murphy stated that his experience with contemplative education began when a TA—a longtime meditator—had, with his permission, introduced contemplation into their leadership seminar with an intriguing result. In previous years, Murphy's students had always complimented the course, finding it very stimulating and well-presented; but once meditation practice was incorporated, the feedback shifted. Now the students were telling him, "This course has changed my life." But what exactly had contemplative practice contributed to their experience?

As Zajonc observed, a contemplative approach to education integrates intellectual enterprises with students' daily lives. It is a form of experiential learning: we find new ways of discovering the "answers" traditionally sought through study and research, and our lives become a response to the questions that we carry with us. Contemplative inquiry is an invitation to growth, change, and transformation. But what ongoing responsibility do educators and institutions have to the students they encourage to undertake a serious contemplative practice? And how can we more clearly articulate contemplative modes of inquiry and the benefits of such methods?



Conference participants expressed that the field of contemplative pedagogy is now ready to be clearly articulated in order to achieve greater legitimacy, as many have faced skeptical or antagonistic colleagues and administrators who question the inclusion of contemplative methods in the classroom on the grounds that they are not sufficiently rigorous—a perception that, it was clear at this conference, requires correction. The relationship of traditional academic approaches to inquiry to the more indirect, exploratory methods of contemplative practice was a recurring theme of

discussion. Stephen Prothero, Professor of Religion at Boston University, used the metaphor of wandering in his keynote address, "The Art of Doing Nothing: Wandering as Contemplative Practice." Wandering, he noted, is an expression of openness and receptivity: a willingness to respond to unexpected circumstances and spontaneous changes. Although it plays a valuable role in many of the world's great religious and philosophical traditions—perhaps a founding teacher or mystic acquired wisdom while wandering through the wilderness—it also holds many negative connotations; in many Western stories, it is the result of a punishment. "There is a hint of malfeasance in wandering...settled folk have often considered unsettled folk dangerous," Prothero noted. He hopes to rescue wandering from these negative associations; studies show that brain activity increases after walking, and that scientific insight is more likely to occur after the mind reaches an impasse and a scientist goes out for a stroll. But Prothero praises wandering not only for its potential usefulness in achieving desired goals, but for its very existence as directionless exploration, a form of playful contemplative practice: "wandering as an antidote to our purpose-driven culture." It can "liberate us from the tyranny of voices of authority who tell us who to be, how to think, and how to live." As a suggestion to how this might apply to scholarship and research, Prothero suggested sometimes allowing the mind to wander between topics without first worrying about the connections between them.



The value of exploration, openness and meandering in experiencing and articulating the contemplative was echoed in parallel sessions such as "Wondering and Wandering: Getting Lost as a Narrative Encounter with Contemplative Knowing" by Linda-Susan Beard, Professor of English at Bryn Mawr College; "The Contemplative Moment: An Artistic Presentation" by Cynthia Huntington, Professor of English at Dartmouth College; and by Patricia Wallace, Professor

of English at Vassar College, in her presentation "On Lightness." Wallace identified several forms of contemplative knowing—wonder, intimation and intuition—and asked: how can we cultivate these in our classrooms? She suggests that we promote a "lightness of thoughtfulness" in our students --a playful and exploratory attitude, an open responsiveness to the world, a state of receptivity necessary for "contemplative knowing." This mindfulness allows us to overcome creative blocks and obstacles to understanding, overcoming the heavy, opaque mindset that comes from resisting the present moment. Wallace related the story of Perseus, able to defeat Medusa—who could turn people to stone with only a glance—while looking at her reflection in his shield. In this allegory, Perseus, with his winged sandals, represents lightness and ingenuity, and Medusa is the heavy obstacle to learning and discovery who cannot be overcome with a direct approach. The indirect approach, despite its apparent illogic or

inefficiency, achieves the victory. In this way, contemplative practices—though they may seem circuitous, even irrational—help us contend with difficult information and circumstances.

In the Saturday morning plenary presentation, Amishi Jha, director of the Jha Lab at the University of Miami, noted that research on the effects of contemplative practice provides a more conventional rationale for the integration of contemplative practices in the classroom. Jha described several studies designed to test various faculties of attention and working memory. Results indicate that meditative practices help students integrate information; promote



personal wellness and balance; develop improved attention and retention; and expand their understanding of the information taught in their courses. The studies associated improved test performance with mindfulness training, but also suggested that the effect is more pronounced and sustained with additional practice.

But is there a way to quantify practice or tell how much is “enough”? In many classrooms which are integrating contemplative practices, students may sit silently for a few minutes each class period, or spend time in private practice outside of class. Could there be any lasting effects from these short exposures, or should educators expect to plan retreats and extended practice sessions in order to see results? Jha mentioned a study on Marines, who showed improvement after just 12 minutes of practice per week. Though, she reiterated, more experience with practice does seem to equal more benefit. But the question remains: would a contemplative academy—encompassing institutional changes beyond the scope of an individual’s personal contemplative practice—actually promote more effective learning?

A plenary panel on Sunday morning, “Contemplative Pedagogy and the Academic Disciplines: Value Added or Changes Everything?” continued the conversation on the relationship between academic and contemplative modes of inquiry. Do contemplative approaches simply add value to courses by enhancing learning and creativity, or do they transform the academic disciplines themselves? Panelists discussed their personal paths in contemplative pedagogy and their current “edge issues.” Susan Burggraf, a developmental psychologist, Associate Dean of Undergraduate Education and Associate Professor of Contemplative Psychology at Naropa University, borrowed the language of child development to ask, “Is it parallel play or cooperative play? Can they share their toys?” Can contemplative methods integrate with the academic disciplines and support their modes of discovery? For example, with experimental design in her field of psychology, could a self-awareness introspection condition be added to the standard testing design?



Barry Kroll, Rodale Professor in Writing and Chair of English at Lehigh University, has developed a course called *Arguing Differently* which includes challenges to traditional argument models. It has been very successful; the contemplative component has enabled students to understand that “strategies for resolving conflict are really about conflict within.” Kroll’s students understand that techniques for handling external adversaries can also work for their own internal issues. Yet Kroll is wrestling with a deep responsibility to clearly and succinctly explain to administrators, colleagues, students and their parents exactly why contemplative learning is relevant to conflict resolution now that contemplative practice feels instrumental to his course. “On the other hand,” he says, “there’s a tension between the necessity of instrumentalizing this approach, to say ‘it’s good because it helps me do this other thing,’ and another impulse I have to say, it’s really good in itself. It doesn’t ultimately need that instrumental argument.”

He also feels a responsibility to his students after they leave his classroom. What happens to a student’s personal development after an intense and personal course such as this one concludes? “Do I have any responsibility after opening this box?” Kroll is taking seriously the idea that he does have a responsibility to keep in touch with his students more, in person and via email, is organizing events and reunions incorporating contemplative practices, and is considering ways for them to stay connected online. Similarly, Judith Simmer-Brown, Professor of Religious Studies at Naropa University, asked,

Am I prepared to be the kind of educator who can really hold the situation properly for my students? When we do this kind of work, we are getting much more than we bargained for as professors. Are we prepared to be there for our students? Are our universities

prepared...to provide support and mentorship in an ongoing way? And are we prepared to meet them where they are, rather than where we want them to be?

Tom Coburn, Visiting Scholar at Brown University and President Emeritus of Naropa University, remarked that any subject can be taught contemplatively or non-contemplatively. Therefore, the contemplative component of any course is a function of the teacher, not the subject matter, and to bring contemplative practice into the classroom successfully, the teacher must have a committed personal practice. An additional challenge is that we have inherited an assumption of contemplation and meditation as private, solitary, reclusive activities. But this is just one end of the spectrum; at the other end, we find activists such as Martin Luther King, Thich Nhat Hanh and Dorothy Day. "My sense," says Coburn,

is what we are about is redeeming the concept of what meditation and contemplation mean, from the idiosyncrasies that have led the modern West to think of meditation as a private activity. There are implications here for the way we conduct our contemplative educating. Self-knowledge certainly comes from sitting on the cushion, but it also comes from engaging others...I'm pressing the case here for reclaiming the activist end of the contemplative spectrum.

To conclude the conference, Ed Sarath (University of Michigan) and Patricia Wallace (Vassar College) led a session of mindfulness, poetry and improvised music, trading back and forth, moving the audience through thoughts and emotions with a beautiful variety of word and sound. Remarking on the performance, Arthur Zajonc observed,

It seems to me a form of engagement that brings these kinds of experiences to us, so vividly and fully, that we come to know them in a way that we otherwise would have missed. In this direct and immediate sense, I feel that the contemplative is a very deep and profound way of knowing. We can argue intellectually for different worldviews, but when you live inside a contemplative experience fully, it's not a question of argumentation, it's a question of lived experience, and that has its own reality. Your worldview grows of its own accord. It's a kind of epistemological leverage point where your whole idea of yourself, in your discipline, in your family, with your colleagues, the world in which we inhabit, begins to shift and grow.

The 3rd annual ACMHE conference will be held October 7-10, 2011, at Amherst College.