

The Third Annual ACMHE Conference: The Contemplative Campus November 11-13, 2011, at Amherst College

Beth Wadham



Over 175 participants, primarily from across the US and Canada, gathered for the Third Annual ACMHE Conference. Each year has brought a rising number of higher education professionals together to share research, questions and practice. From just under 100 at the first, to 130 last year, the group this year grew to fill the Red Room, our lecture hall at Amherst College, to capacity.

The conference theme, "The Contemplative Campus," stimulated a number of panel presentations which featured representatives from faculty networks at a range of institutions. Educators from New Hampshire Technical Institute, Bridgewater State and Lehigh Universities explored how to surface interest, support one another and promote mindfulness and contemplative approaches across their campuses. A panel of undergraduate students who had participated in contemplative courses was organized and moderated by Karen Cardozo, which presented their valuable perspectives. The students expressed great appreciation and a longing for more courses with this kind of integrative orientation and relevance for their lives.

There were 10 panel presentations in total, on topics from the "Contemplating Theory, Theorizing Contemplation" to "Silence, Wholeness, Mindfulness," which honored the pedagogical influence of Jody Ziegler, art historian and long-time Contemplative Mind contributor who passed away in November 2010. Over 40 presenters shared their research and experience during concurrent sessions, and 9 colleagues contributed to a lively poster session on Saturday afternoon.



Mirabai Bush welcomed the group with her keynote address, "Contemplation Nation," which situated contemplative higher education within a broader contemplative movement that includes health and healing, law, business, and activism.

Catherine Kerr, newly appointed by the Brown Contemplative Studies Initiative and the Warren Alpert School of Medicine, began the program Saturday with "Starting with the body: The neuroscience of somatosensory attention in contemplative mind-body practices," presenting evidence for somatosensory attention training as a critical entry point for mindfulness, tai chi and other contemplative mind-body practices, and exploring how the neurobiological results of mindfulness are achieved.

Arthur Zajonc led a plenary session on "Contemplation and the Future of Higher Education" that included a contemplative inquiry exercise designed to explore "what this enterprise we're engaged in is really about." Drawing from the teachings of the Buddha, ancient thinkers in Athens, and Aung San Suu Kyi, Zajonc characterized the "high purpose" of education as the cessation of ignorance and the suffering that follows in its wake.

An education equal to this high purpose, he observed, reaches beyond preparing an informed citizenry and a well-trained workforce. An education capable of dispelling ignorance acknowledges a need for deeper, more comprehensive change. It asks educators to pledge themselves to practice contemplative engagement toward the development of new capacities and an integrated form of knowing.

Saturday evening featured, "Compassionate Mind in Music," a musical performance by **Evan Chambers**, composer and professor of composition at the University of Michigan, his wife **Suzanne Camino**, and **Tim Eriksen**, a local friend and balladeer.



Arthur Zajonc and Evan Chambers at the Compassionate Mind in Music performance at Johnson Chapel at Amherst College

The program included his "Lindisfarne Hymn," dedicated William Irwin Thompson, founder of the Lindisfarne fellows (of which both Evan and Arthur Zajonc are members); and songs from "Mapping the River" and selections from "The Old Burying Ground," in which he has set the epitaphs of New England gravestones to a variety of musical languages, including Irish traditional, American folk, and Sacred Harp traditions.

At Sunday morning's plenary session, **David Levy**, Professor at the Information School at the University of Washington convened the discussion, "Always On: Exploring Undergraduate Attitudes toward Information Technology."

Over the past six years, Levy has been opening conversations with students about the use of information technology. With scholars Daryl L. Nardick and Leanne McWatters at the Center for New Designs in Learning & Scholarship, and Jeanine W. Turner from the Communication, Culture and Technology program at Georgetown, he conduct these conversations more widely. In May 2011, their article, "[No Cellphone, No Internet, So Much Less Stress](#)," presented the preliminary results in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

At the conference closing, Arthur Zajonc invited those gathered to reflect on the time together for a few moments, allowing recollected images, impressions, and conversations to arise. Then he asked each person to select one image or picture from their reflected experience and "offer it into the room," to create a kind of bouquet to represent the weekend conference. The images held in array included the shout of "Aikido" from Jonathan Miller Lane's workshop, a hallelujah from Evan Chambers with his arms upraised, the frequent sound of laughter from the classrooms, the full moon overhead, and the red carpet beneath.

As the arrayed images hovered in the room, Poet Christian McEwen read "Learning to Pause," a passage from her recent publication *World Enough & Time: On Creativity and Slowing Down*. Then Arthur Zajonc, on folk guitar, and Ed Sarath, Professor of Music in the Department in Jazz and Contemporary Improvisation at the University of Michigan, on flugelhorn, brought all to completion with a rendition of "Let it Be."