

Contemplative Practice and the Education of the Whole Person

by Deborah J. Haynes

On the surface, this column may be read as a series of musings about a conference I attended recently on contemplative education at Columbia University.ⁱ But my intention extends beyond simple reportage: it concerns why I now integrate contemplative practices into courses on art and religion in a secular state university. For readers within seminaries and other religious institutions, I also discuss briefly the relationship of religious and theological education to contemplative inquiry. What follows is focused around three major questions. First, what is contemplative practice? Second, how are these practices integrated into contemplative pedagogy? Third, what is contemplative inquiry or contemplation as a way of knowing?

Since 1997 the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, in collaboration with the American Council of Learned Societies, has awarded approximately 100 fellowships to professors in 79 institutions in order to develop curricula that integrate contemplative practices into classroom teaching.ⁱⁱ From small private colleges such as Bowdoin, Bryn Mawr, and Holy Cross to larger universities such as the University of Arkansas, University of Colorado, and University of Michigan, faculty in the arts and humanities, sciences, and social sciences have been offered support to develop courses that integrate traditional disciplinary methodologies with newer contemplative pedagogies. I received one of these fellowships in 2002, and my teaching has subsequently been transformed through ongoing experiments with contemplative practice.

Contemplative Practice. There is no single way to describe or engage in contemplative practice. The Latin *contemplari* means to observe, consider, or gaze attentively. This definition gives clues about the varied forms of contemplative practice, which include sitting, standing, walking, and lying down; using attitudes of not doing; deep listening, pondering, and radical questioning; guided imagery and active imagination; exercises with the body; focusing techniques such as those developed by Eugene Gendlin; concentrated language experiments with freewriting, poetry, and journals; beholding; and creation of visual images to represent such experiences.ⁱⁱⁱ The word mindfulness is often used to describe contemplative practice. In its most basic form, it means moment-by-moment present awareness, which is available to everyone, regardless of religious or spiritual orientation.

Broadly understood as methods to develop concentration, deepen understanding and insight, and to cultivate awareness and compassion, these practices can have a profound impact on a student's experience both in college and beyond. Specifically, teaching students techniques of awareness, concentration, and means of disciplining their attention is absolutely essential in our era of fragmentation, ever-increasing speed, multi-tasking, and continuously interrupted attention. While contemplative practices are rooted in the world's religious traditions, I often tell parents and students that the application of these practices in a secular educational context can enhance the educational experience in unique ways. Students develop new techniques of awareness; they learn to refine their perceptual and observational skills; and they are encouraged to take chances and to foster attitudes such as curiosity and wonder rather than cynicism about the world in which we

live. Some students have also reported closer connections to their professors and less anxiety about their studies.

Contemplative Pedagogy. Introducing contemplative practices into the classroom results in new educational practices and pedagogy. The root of education is *educare*, to draw forth, both in the sense of drawing forth from the student what is already present, and bringing forth new awareness and fostering new knowledge.

For example, in a class titled “The Dialogue of Art and Religion” students learn about Russian Orthodox icons, Himalayan Buddhist thangka, and Navaho sandpaintings through studying cultural and social history, religion, formal visual analysis, and creative processes. I define this interdisciplinary teaching as a form of comparative visual studies. Students also learn about the practices of prayer and meditation that are central to such traditions through sustained reading and discussion. They read accessible books about contemplative practice such as Thich Nhat Hanh’s *The Miracle of Mindfulness*. In each class, we practice simple techniques such as bowing, sitting in silence, breath awareness, and daily writing exercises.

My students over the past two years have talked about the way these mindfulness exercises help to foster an atmosphere of respect. They often note how these practices have effectively brought the class together as a whole. When courses actively create a respectful environment, students learn to listen, write, and argue persuasively from a position of civility, which helps them to become principled citizens. Perhaps most significantly, contemplative practice fosters development of what Martin Buber called “I-Thou” relationships, where other people, events, and things are treated as subjects and not merely

as objects for use or enjoyment. Jon Kabat-Zinn remarked during the conference that most of us live, most of the time, in a narrow band of being where we are surrounded by “I,” “me,” and “mine.” We suffer from this narrow focus. How, he asked, can we get more real? As teachers, how can we ignite passion in our students for this kind of presence, this “being” in their own lives? This is precisely the work of contemplative pedagogy: it is about waking up and being present to our lives—here and now.

In an often-quoted excerpt from *Principles of Psychology*, William James wrote that “The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will. . . . An education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence. But it is easier to define this ideal than to give practical instructions for bringing it about.”^v Yet this is precisely what contemplative pedagogies seek to do: to describe how to improve the faculty of bringing the wandering attention back to the moment, again and again. Mirabai Bush, Director of the Center for Contemplative Mind, identified the goal of such practices and pedagogies as creating “noble woke-up big-heart beings.”^v Such persons become capable of greater compassion and kindness. They learn how to listen to themselves and others and to observe the world.

Contemplative Inquiry. Contemplation can also be described as a way of knowing, an epistemology that is distinct from rationalist-empiricist thought. Psychologist Tobin Hart has written that an epistemology of contemplation “includes the natural human capacity for knowing through silence, looking inward, pondering deeply, beholding, witnessing the contents of our consciousness, and so forth.”^{vi} With other art historians I have begun to practice and teach “beholding,” experiencing works of art “face-to-face,” as

Susan Wegner put it. “You stand in front of [artworks], hold them in your hands, look them in the eye, awed by the scale of them, or drawn in by the intimacy of their tiny-ness.”^{vii} Beholding is a counter both to the usual two-second walk-by experience that characterizes much museum looking and to the analytical dissection of a work of art. I suggest to students that these other methods of viewing art are not intrinsically wrong, but that thoughtful beholding often leads to another kind of encounter. My own love of Islamic manuscripts and calligraphy, for example, has grown from this kind of sustained beholding.

Given the challenges of our world, including pervasive violence, suffering, and serious ecological disasters or problems on every continent and in virtually every community, the idea of inviting students to bear witness, to leave words and to be in silence, can be a salve, as Arthur Zajonc observed.^{viii} In a world beset by conflict, to cultivate only critical thinking and analysis leads to partial knowing. Contemplation is a common human activity that, when brought into academic contexts, offers students a new relationship with themselves, others, and the world. It offers an epistemology based not on data, information, and the separation of subject and object, but on knowledge, wisdom, and insight about the interconnectedness of all things. Such contemplative inquiry can lead to an education that transforms the student.

Though I continue to work in a secular university context, I believe that these ideals and values of respect, participation, and interconnectedness are relevant to theological education as well. Contemplative inquiry is itself respectful. Through contemplative practices, students learn to recognize the individuality of others, yet to resist

the distancing that characterizes so much of our lives. Such inquiry is participatory, as the characteristics of the world invite us to come closer to one another and the physical world. Like the best of theological and ministerial education, it is not about losing one's own consciousness and identity, but about entering into the experience of the other, insofar as this is possible. The roots of this kind of education lie not only in Asian philosophies and Christian mysticism, but also in the Greek aspiration toward insight. Contemplation is at the heart of knowledge, for to contemplate deeply is to see.ⁱ

Finally, can we become “comfortable with uncertainty,” to paraphrase Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron,^x comfortable with *not* knowing? Can we learn to see dissimilar things and processes as linked? A contemplative epistemology is based on developing this ability to live with uncertainty and to sustain contradictory views. Such education is what artist and teacher M. C. Richards called an education of the whole person.^{xi} I would suggest that this approach is sorely needed at our historical moment.

ⁱ Titled “Contemplative Practices and Education: Making Peace in Ourselves and in the World,” the conference took place at Teachers College in mid-February 2005. Keynote speakers included author and medical researcher Jon Kabat-Zinn, poet laureate of Connecticut Marilyn Nelson, and physicist Arthur Zajonc, among others. Participatory workshops dealt with pedagogical practices in a variety of school settings, peace studies and peace education; and poster sessions introduced and described programs in the United States and Canada. I am especially indebted to the comments of Mirabai Bush, Barbara Dilley, Tobin Hart, Jon Kabat-Zinn, Marilyn Nelson, Susan Wegner, and Arthur Zajonc for helping to shape my reflections here.

ⁱⁱ See www.contemplativemind.org/ for more information on the programs of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society.

ⁱⁱⁱ An outline of many of these techniques can be found in Tobin Hart, “Opening the Contemplative Mind in the Classroom,” *Journal of Transformative Education* 2 (January

2004): 28-46. See also www.contemplativemind.org/practices/tree.html for a compelling visualization of the interrelationships of various forms of contemplative practice.

^{iv} William James, *Principles of Psychology* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1890).

^v This phrase comes from Gary Snyder's latest book *Danger On Peaks* (Washington, DC: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004).

^{vi} Hart, "Opening the Contemplative Mind," pp. 29-30.

^{vii} Susan Wegner, on page 4 of www.contemplativemind.org/resources/pubs/case_studies.pdf.

^{viii} These comments on contemplative epistemology owe much to Arthur Zajonc's keynote during the Contemplative Practices and Education conference. He has also published other articles on ways of knowing. See, for instance, his "Spirituality in Higher Education," available online at http://www.amherst.edu/magazine/issues/04spring/eros_insight/.

^{ix} This understanding of the relationship of Asian and Greek philosophies to Christian mysticism was articulated by Arthur Zajonc during his conference keynote address.

^x See Pema Chodron, *Comfortable with Uncertainty: 108 Teachings* (Boston: Shambhala, 2002).

^{xi} M. C. Richards, "The Public School and the Education of the Whole Person," in *Opening Our Moral Eye*, ed. Deborah J. Haynes (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne, 1996).