• Social movements constantly seek tools for metabolizing unconscious behaviors such as implicit biases and reactions caused by triggers and trauma. Contemplative education can help them do this, because it offers a unique access to wisdom that is informed by view, practice and conduct that can, through contemplative pedagogical efforts, exist apart from the wisdom traditions that birthed them.

• Transformational movements have embraced contemplative practice as methods to a point, for self care, but contemplative resistance is so much more than self care. A contemplative view illuminates a lot in activism.

• “Darshan is Sanskrit and means- to view. However, this is not an ordinary kind of viewing, though that is included in it. Darshan, is to view into the uttermost depth of the thing. It is a seeing into to very heart of the matter. It is to look with your “wisdom eye.” (Michele Blumberg, Naropa University) In simpler terms, the view is our understanding of contemplative teachings.

• What is missing when contemplative practices get divorced from their traditions, is the VIEW or spiritual teachings are not transmitted along with the practice.

• Contemplative education is uniquely equipped to offer a kind of access to wisdom that is informed by view, practice and conduct. Contemplative pedagogies can bring a lot to our
As a participant observer in social justice movements, I would like to put forth some observations. A very basic understanding of living systems theory is apparent in popular social movement theories of change. I am going to show you some of those theories. A contemplative view of living systems can aid us in helping students perceive social movements as complex and dynamic organisms of which each activist is one cell.

**What are we talking about when we say Living Systems?**

Living systems are "open self-organizing systems that have the special characteristics of life and interact with their environment. This takes place by means of information and material-energy exchanges. Living systems can be as simple as a single cell or as complex as a supranational organization such as the European Union.” (Dr. Elaine R. Parent, 1996) Dr. Parent is actually my aunt on my father’s side, all of whom have passed on. I came across her work as I was researching Living Systems Theory developed by Dr. James Grier. It turned out that she was a student of his and applied living systems to her own work in grad. student retention.

Social movements are living systems and movements are waking up to this.

But don’t take my word for it.

**Social Movement Influencer: adrienne marie brown**

- Movements are becoming very influenced by emerging awareness of biomimicry (an approach to innovation that seeks sustainable solutions to human challenges by emulating nature’s patterns and strategies) and living systems theories from a book called Emergent Strategy by adrienne maree brown.
• Application of biomimicry: “Here’s how it works in murmuration/shoals/swarm: each creature is tuned in to his neighbors, the creatures right around it in the formation. This might be the birds on either side, or the six fish in each direction. There is a right relationship, a right distance between—to close and they crash, too far away and they can’t feel the micro-adaptions of the other bodies. Each creature is shifting direction, speed, and activity based on the information of the other creatures’ bodies.” (adrienne maree brown)

• What if protests are akin to a swarm in the animal kingdom. What is that Climate Justice movement slogan? “We are the Earth defending itself!”
Contemporary Theories of Change Understand that Movements Are Pluralistic

- Holding actions to stop deportations
- Mutual Aid Networks
- Getting inside the system - get elected

Mi Gente’s Theory of Change Inspired by Chilean Trabajadores’ T.O.C.

- Changing Dominant Institutions
- Creating Alternative Institutions
- Personal Transformation

AYNI Institute and Momentum Training

Contemporary Theories of Change Understand that Movements Are Pluralistic

- BLOCK
- BUILD
- BE

Buddhist Peace Fellowship’s Theory of Change
What are the challenges and obstacles to our beautiful pluralistic people powered movements from flourishing and winning?

1- Silos - reactions to plurality (ego)
- movements are pluralistic, there are many roles and traditions of social change and transformation and so there are many possible orientations to oppression and thus many views, tactics and strategies. We have to condition our egos to accept the pluralities we encounter in organizing.
2- Correct line thinking (Maoism’s direct line from the people)

- In the 60’s and 70’s Maoism became a prevalent radical political organizing tradition in the US. My purpose here is not to talk about Mao but rather about a kind of logic that infiltrated social movements that we can trace back to Mao’s idea of having a “correct line from the people.” Back then having a correct line meant that you were connected to the needs of the people (the most impacted and directly affected) and the political platform was defined and the agenda was set by that direct line to the people. People argued intensely about what constituted the most “correct line” and eventually the most impacted people were lost in the process and what was left was this idea that we all have to agree on everything to move forward with anything.

3- Trauma - movements need healing justice because oppression is trauma

Quote 5: bell hooks writes in Sisters of the Yams, “We cannot fully create effective movements for social change if individuals struggling for that change are not also self-actualized or working towards that end. When wounded individuals come together in groups to make change our collective struggle is often undermined say all that has not been dealt with emotionally.”

Quote 6: “While discomfort is a given when we enter many group settings, our movements should not be spaces where the same systemic harms we work to transform are allowed to persist. The movement should allow and create spaces for healing, with the recognition that we cannot do it all.” -Charlene A. Carruthers in Unapologetic: A black, queer, and feminist mandate for radical movements

4-White Silence on anti-blackness and structural racism

In Parker Palmer’s latest book entitled On the Brink of Everything: Grace, gravity and getting old, he writes, “I’m not on a guilt trip here, just acknowledging the inner roots of a social pathology that, if it goes unconfessed and unaddressed, will make people like me a continuing part of the problem. No disease in the United States is more in need of a cure than racism—which breeds irrational fears that, in turn, breed the worst of political evils. As long as I draw breath, I want to be part of the solution. That requires a close examination of my own heart and dealing with whatever pathogens I find there. If I want to help heal the world, I must heal myself.” This requires the practice of self observation which is a particular strength of contemplative pedagogies.
5- Lack of awareness of POWER. Mandala Principle

If we use the mandala principle as a lens to view social change movements as systems of evolutionary change, we can map the components of our systems and begin to see ourselves more clearly and in a greater context.

• “Mandalas are the general patterns, whether pleasant or unpleasant, that link us to the rest of the world, which is our world or our creation in any case. When we begin to work with reality properly, an enormous relationship, a rapport, takes place between us and the external world. (Chogyama Trungpa Rinpoche, p. 32)

• The middle of the mandala is always the place where power is most concentrated and this center of focus can shift as the component of the mandalas shift. A differential of power and focus is inherent to the relationship between the center and the edges of the mandala.

• “Conventionally, naturally existing mandalas cannot acknowledge that they are mandalas or systems with their own dynamics and parameters. It is especially difficult for mandalas to acknowledge the power radiated between the center and the perimeter boundary. The center would like to manipulate its boundary, or the perimeter would like to overthrow the center… Conversely, perhaps the perimeter does not acknowledge or respect the central power, and so it undermines and overthrows the center, creating rebellion, chaos, or anarchy.” (Judith Simmer-Brown at Naropa University)

MAKING FRIENDS WITH PLURALITY

So to help activists build their capacity to accept pluralism we use training modules designed to help them tease out the tensions of difference between silos and to explore their mutual interest.

- Be OK with non-closure
- Stop & give space for disagreement before moving on - community not conformity
- Trust intent, acknowledge impact
- Don’t fix others
- Engage in brave space, not safe space
- Move at the speed of trust
- Embrace paradox

• Making agreements that address plurality is something we can do in our classrooms - this is a way to expose students to the idea of embracing paradox, navigating complexity with spaciousness, and getting comfortable with pause practices.
Conditioning/Training for Embracing Plurality

- I run a couple exercises in activist trainings that helps them to explore the inherent plurality of social movements. These exercises came from Training for Change to help people understand and appreciate the various basic approaches to addressing oppression as outlined by George Lakey and Bill Moyer. It's a spectrogram exercise which creates an embodied mandala of potential organizing in the class in response to a scenario that is read aloud where community members respond to a crisis.

We ask students to share about why they identify with the role they chose and ask them to talk about the strengths and challenges of their role. It starts to get interesting when I ask people to talk about what's frustrating to them about how other roles organize. Airing these frustrations brings up tensions between the roles. Then we look at historical examples of how the roles actually coordinated across difference in strategic ways, example: MLK and Malcolm X.

The Five Traditions

Alongside the four roles are different traditions of social change. Most activists aren’t aware that they operate in one of these realms unless they come from a tradition that has trained them in a particular model. Again we have participants arrange themselves in a spectrogram of identification by tradition, and again we talk about why we identify with the tradition(s) we chose, the differences, and how they could work together out of mutual interest. We ask ourselves, what would need to present for us to be able to work across lines of difference and behave as if our liberation were interconnected. Personal transformation is where contemplative education often begins in movements, but it can be utilized as a lens in other realms as well.
**Essential Lesson:** Social movements are messy and pluralistic and with this awareness we can prevent unconscious reactions to pluralism that undermine solidarity across lines of difference in organizing. Contemplative practices build awareness to better navigate tensions in movements that otherwise cause internal conflict and effectively get in the way of social change.

**Contemplative Theory of Change:**
We are part of an ecosystem of social change. To practice contemplative resistance is to know this and to do this consciously.

Social change is an active process of weaving our awareness in and out of external conditions which we are far more interconnected with than we think, with the internal climate of the activist. Her old wounds of the past, her ways of responding when fearful, her relationship to herself and her emotions, are all as relevant to the process as the language in the call to action on the outreach flier. Much like implicit bias the internal filter of the activist very much shapes the activist’s experience of the movement and very much shapes the activist’s response to oppression, trauma and internal conflict in social justice.

**Teaching Tool: Contemplative Observation**
Contemplative observation practices are a profound way to help students observe their environment while building awareness of their own lens and biases. It is a way of observing the world while also observing the self, thus bridging into self observation, a critical contemplative skill. It also helps students build awareness of their senses and to utilize them as data collecting tool for gathering “present-moment information.”

“Mindfulness, a prominent component of many contemplative pedagogies, involves the commitment of attention to occurrence in the present moment, which can thereby cultivate awareness of present-moment information. Mindfulness emphasizes observation while de-emphasizing the interpretation of observations. This foregrounded role of observer offers a vantage point well suited for witnessing the arising and passing of moment-to-moment phenomena, whether they appear internally, e.g., bodily sensations, or externally, e.g., sights and sounds. Observation thus plays a central role in making any sort of present-moment information available for use, either in the moment or subsequently. From this perspective, observation plays a foundational role in taking a contemplative approach to experience.” (Peter G. Grossenbacher from Naropa University)

The “softening of the boundaries between self and other” is a critical skill to build to be able to see oneself as a cell in the organism that is a social movement.

“Contemplative observation practice cultivates the awareness of sacred world within the context of learning environments. It awakens our personal presence and softens the boundaries between self and other, and between the teacher and the learning environment. In contemplative observation practice we could begin by observing the
space of the classroom mandala - the chairs, the carpeting, the books, and the learning materials. When we look outward, notice the infusion of our inner mandala, various thoughts, judgments, and commentary, as they become superimposed on the outer mandala.” (Richard Brown from Naropa University)

In movements, folks are trying to figure out how to:

- share power equitably
- to be aware of our habitual roles and reactions
- to collaborate embracing paradox and plurality
- to communicate intentionally
- to respond, not to react
- physical embodiment and healing
- be able to stay in difficult emotions
- have courageous conversations

Do any of these things sound like contemplative endeavors?
Reading List for Contemplative Justice

• Charlene A. Carruthers - Unapologetic: A black, queer, and feminist mandate for radical movements

• adrienne marie brown - Emergent Strategy

• Dr. Loretta Pyle - Healing Justice: Holistic Self-care for Change Makers

• Kate Werning’s Healing Justice Podcast


• Beth Berilla - Integrating Mindfulness into Anti-Oppression Pedagogy: Social Justice in Higher Education

• Opening Space for Democracy by Daniel Hunter and George Lakey

• Barmen Today: A Contemporary Contemplative Declaration
Be in touch!!

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Join the Contemplative Justice Community FaceBook Group