

The Contemplative Scholar:

Report and Findings of the Survey of Contemplative Practice Fellowship Recipients

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In more than seventy Colleges and Universities across the United States, students and teachers have welcomed silence into the classroom. In more than half of these Institutions, courses using contemplative methods have become part of the permanent curriculum. These courses have been developed under the Contemplative Practice Fellowships, sponsored for the last six years by the American Council of Learned Societies in collaboration with the Center for the Contemplative Mind in Society (The Center). These Fellowships developed from the basic premise that contemplative methods can enhance the very processes essential to the life of the mind. The question of what pedagogical and intellectual gains might be discovered by bringing contemplative practice into the academy is thus at the heart of the program.

The ACLS Fellowships are “the Crown Jewels” of The Center's multi-faceted Academic Program. The grants were the starting point for a larger Fellowship Program, a network of activities intended to support community learning among the Fellows. The Coordinator of the Fellowship Program, Sunanda Markus, was responsible for networking with the Fellows and the Steering Committee of The Center’s Academic Program. Together with The Center’s Director, Mirabai Bush, she organized the annual Fellows’ meetings (a New York lunch and the Fetzer Institute's annual summer meeting). Thus, over the years an active community of “contemplative scholars” has emerged.

The process that encouraged this community evolved from The Center’s experience facilitating contemplative discourse and contemplative meetings. During the annual meetings hosted by The Center, the Fellows were introduced to methods that encouraged a shared dialogue, blending silence, deep listening, and mindful speech. Subsequently, the Fellows were able to integrate these methods into their Contemplative Practice courses.

The Academic Steering Committee engaged in an ongoing evaluation of the program at their annual meetings. This “unprecedented new program in North American education” (Brian Stock, inaugural chairman of the Academic Committee) resulted from the

work of this Committee, one of several convened by The Center to explore the possible role of contemplation in society. The members of the Steering Committee are distinguished academics from a wide range of disciplines and national and international institutions. Their common ground was the shared conviction that contemplative methods could make a positive contribution to addressing the generally acknowledged crisis in higher education. In *“The Academic Calling: Changing Commitments and Complexities,”* 22 January, 1999, Diana Chapman Walsh, President of Wellesley College, asked, “I know that many in the academy are yearning to reconnect with the meaning dimension of the work that is consuming us, to find a greater sense of coherence in our work... What can we do, then, to foster the expression and expansion of spirit in the academy -- in teaching, scholarship, and service?” The opportunity to address these problems through programs aimed at nourishing the goals of contemplative education was a continuing source of deep personal satisfaction to committee members. As Francesco Varela wrote in his letter to the Committee of 25 March 1997,

I wish to say that the entire exercise [of reading the applications] proved to be a very interesting, illuminating and finally very moving experience for me. I was amazed to encounter the breath and depth of responses from all kinds of people that are out there incognito, waiting to be mobilized further in making contemplation and meditation a daily nourishment for everybody.

The Fellowships

The Fellowships were designed to facilitate the exploration of the historical role of contemplation and to encourage the innovative adaptation of contemplative methods to teaching, learning and research. The Fellows were required, by the terms of the grant, to submit to The Center an end-year report including a syllabus and reading list for distribution to other Fellows. From these reports, the comments at the annuals meetings, and the Fetzer Institute survey of the Fellows it was clear that the Contemplative Practice Fellowship were considered an overwhelming success. In order to evaluate more precisely the accomplishments of the Program and the areas of success and weakness, The Center commissioned me to conduct a second survey of the Fellows. This Survey attempts to evaluate the effect of the Fellowship Program on personal growth, teacher-student and

teacher-faculty interpersonal relationships, teaching, scholarship, and the future of contemplative methods in the academic community (Appendix: The Survey and Analysis).

The high rate of response to the survey (72%) and a comparison of the respondents with the total number of successful grant applicants suggest, at a statistical level, that the responses may be considered relatively valid for the Fellows as a whole.

The Fellows

The Fellowships were awarded to university teachers at a broad cross-section of institutions – liberal arts colleges, research universities, professional schools – in rural and urban settings. The fellows were almost equally men and women. Of those who responded to the survey, 89% were over forty and 77% were tenured in a wide variety of disciplines. The majority of the Fellows were in the humanities, and 66% came from 3 disciplines, but a wide range of professions were also represented - from architecture and business to philosophy and religion. The one common component was the expressed intention to transform the pedagogical experience through the introduction of contemplative practice.

The fact that statistically fewer younger scholars were represented was, in part, because the grant procedures required that the Department Chair certify that the course would be taught. In addition however, the older, tenured university teacher may be more willing to experiment with pedagogic innovation. The longer one is in the profession, the more critical one may be (perhaps having tried more alternatives?) of one's own success in the classroom.

Personal and Interpersonal Development

For many, the very existence of the Fellowship conferred legitimacy on their desire to integrate into their professional lives, the contemplative or meditative practices important (to some even central) to their private lives: "I am grateful to you for your support of this process of transformation in my life and work" (Mark Wallace).

Trapped between the pressures of publishing (or perishing), fulfilling their administrative responsibilities and teaching, university professors often suffer from stress and anxiety. But these problems are simply the academic variant of a national syndrome.

As a response to this problem, The Center, an innovative presence in the global contemplative movement, has helped to introduce contemplative practices and methods into a wide variety of programs dealing with law, philanthropy, environment and youth

leadership. Recent studies documenting these programs demonstrate that contemplative practices achieve similar results among all social groups and institutions, including the academic. The success of the contemplative practice courses, as demonstrated by a recent survey, is consistent with the success of other programs teaching contemplative techniques to patients, athletes, prisoners, performing artists, and green berets, among others.

The Fellows' comments mirrored the experiences of their peers in The Center's Law Program, for instance (e.g. Leonard L. Riskin et al, *Harvard Negotiation Law Review*, Spring 2002), as well as general findings of The Center's Contemplative Net Project mapping survey. Group meditation bonded the group so that a sense of community and teamwork emerged (p.25). There was also an increased awareness of the needs and rights of others, which lead to "deep listening," supportive collaboration and compassionate compromise. An important result of the empathy developed in this way is an increased interest in ethics. The loss of ethical systems is often lamented in the modern academic community.

In the classroom, group meditation resulted in greatly improved communication between teacher and student. Many commented that the open space created by the contemplative activity completely transformed the learning process. Most teachers reported a marked improvement in the class work.

The Life of the Mind

What is of interest here is the unique relevance of contemplative techniques to teaching, learning, and scholarship. An astonishing 84% of the Fellows designed new courses as a result of the Fellowship. Considering the difficulties attending any new course, it is significant that 63% of those who responded have already taught the course again and 58% of those who responded have had their course accepted already in the permanent curriculum (this number will rise, as 20% were unsure).

Improved communication with students was reported by 67% of the respondents; the same percentile said they did not increase their one-on-one contact (i.e., office hours, etc.) with the students. This improvement would seem to be a result of, not only the contemplative methods, but also the generally increased (58%) student involvement in these classes. Although 88% of the classes were evaluated by grades, and participation and attendance were also factored, the evaluation processes, as seen from the final reports, were very varied: "...I think it is very important as a sacred act of teaching to allow each student to find a comfort level" (Ashok Gangadean).

The person-centered methods involved in the contemplative practice courses appear to have worked best with small classes. The 94% of the Fellows responding to the survey intend to remain with that format, although one Fellow said he is looking forward to attempting the contemplative methods in a lecture class. Journaling was the most popular form of activity (73%). “Journals could be kept in any form most meaningful or accessible for the student,” noted Dan Holland.

The most frequently noted change was a movement towards simplicity in the design of the course and course materials. Many mentioned rethinking the emphasis on qualitative learning, “the right to do less – better” (Georgia Frank). A particular challenge was the need for verbal precision arising out of the “transitions from silence to words” (Ashok Gangadean). It is therefore not surprising that the great majority of the Fellows are struggling to adapt their traditional class materials to this new reality. The majority said they would change the reading list, and 34% said they would change the frequency of the contemplative sessions.

53% reported that they noted increased concentration and greater capacity for synthetic thinking on the part of the students. The idea of productive silence is well known to those who meditate regularly. It will therefore be of great interest to compare the experiences of these Fellows with the subjects interviewed in other studies.

The Fellows’ observations regarding the creative value of silence confirmed studies in neuropsychology that have identified the important function of “gaps.” It is the “gaps” that allow for the possibility of conceptual flexibility and multiplicity (Spolsky 1993:191ff.). These studies point to an appreciation of a different type of intellectual process, distinct from the linear, analytical and product oriented processes so often valued in contemporary education.

Reading these final reports, one has the impression that the possibilities regarding the contemplative in education are endless: “What is simply originality to some may be subversive in other contexts” (Marilyn Nelson).

Courses Integrating Contemplative Practice

Although most Fellows indicated that the most frequently used contemplative technique in the classroom was short periods (5 to 10 minutes) of silence at different points in the class period, a number of contemplative techniques including contemplative movement were also used. This great variety of contemplative activities seems to be an attempt to break

up habitual patterns by inserting a moment of mindfulness in the otherwise routine classroom activity.

Based on the final reports, it seems that these techniques are as varied as the courses, the teachers' experience, the location of the institution, and the classroom. One Fellow reported that "a number of woodwind and percussion instruments and things like that were kept in the room they were using as a classroom, so we used them" (Ed Sarath). Sun Hee Gertz said the class was held in a particularly beautiful room that invited contemplation. Other Fellows said they had great difficulty finding a room where the students could sit comfortably in silence.

The availability of grant money for field trips often created exceptional experiences otherwise unavailable on academic campuses: "Dwelling in contemplative spaces, whether churches, monasteries, or labyrinths, was a particularly effective component of the course" (Georgia Frank).

It seems to me particularly significant that 91% of those who responded to the survey said they intend to teach their course again, *and* they intend to make significant changes in the course structure or course materials. I think this indicates both how rewarding these courses were for the Fellows, but also how difficult the task is.

There was a great diversity in how, when, and where contemplative methods may be applied to the teaching/learning process. This is particularly evident if one compares some of the courses taught in the History of Religion. I choose this example because the largest number of Fellowships was given for History of Religion, Philosophy and Literature. One would imagine that adapting contemplative techniques to the teaching of the history or literature of contemplative traditions (east or west) would be a simple matter. The final reports and the survey tell us the opposite. Every single Fellow teaching the history of contemplative religious practices and literature chose a different method and focus. They were usually critical of available materials: "... most of the secondary sources approach the topic in a rather uncritical manner and will not be too useful for my approach...I intend to place more emphasis on the study and analysis of original text passage" (Gudrun Buhneman); "Mindful walking and dwelling, breathing disciplines, strategies for nonviolent relationships with plants and animals...may all be employed in order to enable self-discovery and green compassion in a world of ever-widening interdependence"(Mark Wallace). In studying the Bhagavad-Gita, Ashok Gangadean noted, "To understand Krishna's voice and what is going on in the texts from an academic point of view, they [the student] need to

experience mindfulness meditation.” For another Fellow, chanting provided access to the essence of a Buddhist meditation text: “The melody lines of the chant powerfully contribute to the contemplative experience” (Anne Klein). In order to approximate the experience for which the text was written, Klein translated the text into English so that the students could chant it. For students of Fellow Georgia Frank, the connection to Christian contemplative texts became more immediate and personal when she introduced a form a meditative reading – reading the text carefully twice within five-day period. Another fellow, Susan Wegner, “explores the role of images in contemplative spiritual experience in the Christian West.” And that is only a small sampling. One also notes from these examples the impact the Fellowships had on scholarship. Many scholars needed to produce their own materials (the teaching materials being only one final product of rigorous and original scholarship) for the unique classroom experience they designed.

Reading the final reports and course descriptions one is astonished at the variety of possibilities--contemplative methods that permit a greater precision in the understanding of texts and at the same time give access to a transformative personal experiences in the classroom. We were all inspired by Marilyn Nelson’s description of teaching poetry to cadets at West Point, and Andre Delbecq’s efforts to find methods that encourage the recognition of ethics in the business world were no less moving.

The Future of the Contemplative Practice Courses

According to the survey, the Fellowships can be seen as having accomplished the following interlocking benefits:

- 1) A community of contemplative scholars has emerged: university teachers across North America who are interested in integrating contemplative methods into their teaching and research.
- 2) A corpus of course materials documents innovative pedagogies centered on contemplative methods in a wide range of disciplines.
- 3) Among the Fellows there is a serious commitment to assist in producing materials that would contribute to establishing these courses and/or pedagogies in other places in the academy.
- 4) The Fellows and the Contemplative Practice courses provide a statistical mass that could contribute to an understanding of how contemplative methods can address the special needs of the scholar/teacher in the contemporary world

Although the Contemplative Practice Fellowships are only in their sixth year, there is already a considerable impact on the campuses where the courses were taught. According to the survey, 52% of the Fellows found that their courses influenced colleagues and courses on their campuses. At some institutions these course have been expanded into majors. It would be interesting to evaluate the same group of Fellows some years in the future to try to determine more precisely the relationship between the contemplative and the improvement in academic skills.

As noted at the beginning of this discussion, the Center has been instrumental in encouraging and/or financing a number of initiatives that explore the impact of contemplative methods on creative and intellectual activity. We should explore how the findings from these different programs relate to each other and what more we can learn about the possible uses of contemplative practices for the academic community.

Bibilography

Spolsky, Ellen, Gaps in Nature: Literary Interpretation and the Modular Mind, State Univ. of New York, Albany, 1993

“The Contemplative Net Project: Contemplative Practice and Transforming the Heart of Social Change,” May 17, 2002
(Preliminary Report)

Riskin, Leonard, “The Contemplative Lawyer” in the Harvard Negotiation Law Review, Spring 2002:1-66.

Fellows Research Study: Summary

Rate of response: 72% (67 of 93)

The Responses

- Fellows are almost equally men (47) and women (46).
- 32 men and 35 women responded to the Survey
- 48% of those who responded taught in a University
- 35% were from the Northeast
- 89% were over 40!
- 2% had taught less than 5 years.
- 77% of those who answered were tenured
- 60% of our Fellows come from 3 disciplines in the Humanities.
- 98% now have some form of contemplative practice compared with 91% before
- 71% say they have a sitting practice; only 50% had a sitting practice before
- Improved concentration was reported by 53%,
- An improved facility for creative synthesis 59%. Only 9% reported increased memory

The courses taught:

- 87%, undergraduate
- 64% were small classes, less than 20 people
- 19% said that there was no contemplative practice in the classroom
- 8% said there was contemplative practice in less than half the class meetings.
- 50% had some form of contemplative practice in every class session.
- 30% of these contemplative periods were less than 15 minutes
- 40% of the contemplative practice sessions in the classroom were primarily meditative movement,,

- 73%, listed keeping a Journal both as a contemplative practice and a pedagogic technique
- 91% intend to teach the course again.
- 58% of the courses will be introduced into the regular curriculum
- More than 100% (multiple answers) used the grant money to supplement the classroom experience (additional speakers, field trips, retreats).
- 52% felt that they had had an impact on the academic community

Comments

There was a high rate of response 72% (67 of 93). A comparison with the successful grant applications suggests, at a statistical level, that the responses may be considered relatively valid for the grantees as a whole. There was a surprising consistency in percentage of responses in each year: 70%, 66%, 77%, 79%. The exception is the last year, which was 50% (3 out of 6). The lower percent of response for the last year probably reflects the fact that this group had only been teaching for 3 months and some had no conclusions yet.

Who are the Fellows?

Of those who received Fellowships, 35% were from the Northeast, 18% from the West Coast/Northwest and the rest equally divided across the country.

59% of the Fellows taught in Universities. In this respect the survey was slightly less representative as only 48% of those who responded taught in a University, 58% are urban based. The distribution of disciplines was roughly similar among those who responded and the total number of Fellows. The Fellows are almost equally men (47) and women (46). Roughly the same distribution responded, but slightly more women – 32 men, 35 women.

Who are the Fellows who responded to the Survey?

The majority of the responding Fellows are older and established in their careers; 55% were 50 years or older and 89% were over 40! Only 2% had taught less than 5 years. And 62% had

been in their present institution for more than 10 years, while 82% had taught more than 10 years.

77% of those who answered were tenured. Of these, only 15% had received tenure after their application for the Fellowship. My impression is that most of the 5% who did not have tenure, but have taught more than 10 years had exotic career trajectories (lived in a number of countries, radical change of discipline). Only 10% were between 30 and 40, and no one younger than 30.

Disciplines

Note: We have three different summaries, and the information does not completely coincide: our three sources are Sunanda Markus's information (Sunanda is The Center's Academic Program Coordinator), the "Information Schedule of the Fellowship Grants" which lists academic departments, and the survey, which asked for academic discipline. Therefore, for example, in the survey, 11% listed Religious Studies, which does not appear on the Information Schedule; similarly International Relations (survey), I presume is in the Department of Political Science. 11% of the grants went to Fellows in Departments that Sunanda categorized as Fine Arts, but I could not always correlate this with the subjects taught. But since I generalized the disciplines into three broad categories, I did not find that the differences in nomenclature were important.

There was only a slight difference between the "home" discipline (#2) of the Fellows and the discipline of the course taught, so I used the responses to the former. A comparison yields a slight statistical difference between the total Fellows and those who responded to the survey. Of the total grantees, 14% belonged to professional schools, and the same percent taught Social Science disciplines. 60% are in the humanities, 1% in Physical Science.

The distribution of the Fellows responding to the survey: An overwhelming 67% of the Fellows taught in the humanities. Of these, 41% are in Philosophy and Religion, and 19% are in Literature, which means that 60% of our Fellows come from 3 disciplines in the Humanities. Our one Fellow in Physics did not respond to the survey. 1.5% of the Fellows list themselves as inter-disciplinary. Bringing very diverse disciplines together (Medicine,

Law, Architecture, Business, Education), 13% taught courses in professional schools; 18% in Social Sciences.

Contemplative practice

Only 8% said that they had not had a contemplative practice at the time that they applied for the fellowship; of these, only one remained unconverted. 67% said that they had had a regular contemplative practice; that increased to 73%. Likewise 29% practiced occasionally before while 25% now practice contemplation occasionally. Thus, after the fellowship experience, 98% had adopted some form of contemplative practice compared with 91% before. This may not mean what we think it means. Listed among the contemplative practices were choir singing, horseback riding, and jaculatory prayer. Nonetheless, today 71% say they have a sitting practice (but we don't know how that is distributed between regular and occasional) while before the Fellowship only 50% had a sitting practice. Since several persons listed more than one, a statistical count with regard to actual meditation practice is impossible.

48% said that they practiced more after offering the course, and 52% said that they did not devote more time to contemplative practice after teaching the CM course.

On the other hand, the roughly half who said they did increase the time spent on contemplative practice also reported improvement in a number of related academic skill. The most significant change was in improved concentration, 53%, and the facility for creative synthesis, 59%. Only 9% reported increased memory capacity, although this is usually considered to be one of the benefits associated with regular meditation practice. Again, here I feel that the statistics are not quite reliable since we did not provide a definition of contemplative practice. Likewise, the students' increase in capacity for perceptive analysis, 61%, cannot be directly correlated to the introduction of contemplative practice since there were other significant differences in the structures of the courses offered.

The Fellowship Courses: The Contemplative Component

The course that was taught as a result of the Fellowship was primarily (87%) undergraduate, and 64% were small classes, less than 20 people. The seminar format was preferred by 78%.

However, even the 19% who said they used a lecture format had small classes; only 10% of the classes offered had more than 30 students, and only 4% of the classes had more than 40 students. Almost all Fellows, 94%, felt the class size was appropriate. 11% would change the size of the classes if the course were to be offered again.

The statistics regarding contemplative practice – what, how and when - need to be cross-indexed in order to be meaningfully evaluated. First, because there were multiple answers, but also because cause and effect could not be evaluated in this simple form.

A surprising 19% said that there was no contemplative practice in the classroom and 8% said there was contemplative practice in less than half the class meetings. In any case, only 50% had some form of contemplative practice in every class session. In 30% of these classes the contemplative periods were less than 15 minutes. (When a session is less than 15 minutes there may be a meaningful difference between contemplation and meditation). 61% listed “silent individual meditation” (I probably should have written contemplation) as the contemplative practice taking place in the classroom. The majority (70%) scheduled a contemplative session at the beginning of the class, but in addition there were sessions in the middle and at the end, obviously in some classes there were multiple contemplative “moments”. Based on the Final Reports, I believe that a number of classes practiced 5 minutes of silence at the beginning and/or middle/or end of the session. In any case, I formulated the question so generally that it is difficult to know exactly what contemplative practice took place.

Of the courses that included contemplative practice in the classroom, only 10% of these sessions were, on average, more than 30 minutes. When one considers that 40% of the contemplative practice sessions in the classroom were primarily meditative movement, my impression from the Reports is that the longer sessions were Yoga, Tai chi, etc.

On the other hand, 34% said they would change the frequency of contemplative practice session, but we cannot be sure that this indicates a desire to increase the sessions. The Fellows have earlier reported practical problems in conducting contemplative practice in or associated with their classes. Thus, 22% said they would like to change the location of the contemplative practice sessions.

Of the 43% Fellows who held contemplative practice sessions outside of the classroom, 56% did not require these sessions.

A fieldtrip was scheduled by 20% of the Fellows. Of these, 64% required participation. Therefore, a fieldtrip (usually to a meditation center) played an integral part in only 13% of the classes surveyed.

52% of the Fellows answered yes to the question, “Did you integrate meditation into a methodology for study or research?”

The Fellowship Courses: Structure and Pedagogy

84% of the Fellows designed completely new courses as a result of the Fellowship, and 63% surveyed have already taught the course more than once. 91% intend to teach the course again. A significant 58% of the courses will be introduced into the regular curriculum. This number may increase since 20% seem to be uncertain. Nonetheless, appropriate reading materials remain the single greatest problem. As written materials are the traditional medium for learning in the Academy, it is not surprising that this aspect received the most attention and produced the most difficulty, perhaps particularly because 63% of the classes taught were seminars. The statistics are particularly high when one considers that 11% taught subjects (Dance, Music, Architecture) where reading materials may not have played a central role.

In addition to salary replacement, grant money was used for a variety of purposes. Only 28% of the Fellows used the money to hire assistance in teaching or research. 60% of the teachers used the money to supplement bibliographic materials, and the aspect of their class that these teachers most wanted to change (70%) the next time the course is taught, was the required reading list. And 60% experimented with different methods for handling written texts. 2% listed *Lectio Divina* as a contemplative practice used in the class.

Writing also figured prominently both as class assignments (88%) and as a contemplative practice. 73% assigned Journaling as a contemplative practice (poetry and play writing were also listed as contemplative practices included in the course).

100% (multiple answers) used the money to supplement the classroom experience (additional speakers, field trips, retreats).

Since most of these classes were new and most adjusted the traditional classroom format by introducing some form of contemplative activity, it is not surprising that many Fellows (67%) encouraged more student participation. 70% required some form of classroom presentation. Thus, 58% reported greater student involvement in the course. Given the above, it is surprising that most Fellows, 67%, did not increase their one-on-one student contact hours. But a very significant 67% reported better communication with the students. The range of types of activities and assignments is enormous. This diversity in part reflects the wide range of subjects taught, but more the fact that professional schools with community or social orientation (Service Learning) are not differentiated from traditional academic subjects such as philosophy. Nonetheless, diversity does seem to characterize the courses taught. The design of these courses is still in flux.

45 % of the Fellows would like to change the type of classroom assignments.

Probably because the classes were so small, few teachers, 25%, used exams as a form of evaluation. Again probably because the classes were small many teachers listed participation and attendance as evaluation criteria. A large number of Fellows who were surveyed, 73%, listed keeping a journal both as a contemplative practice and as a pedagogic technique. If one compares the list of activities that serve as a basis for student evaluation and contemplative pedagogic techniques, there is a great similarity. Does this mean that the contemplative activity is evaluated? The potential implications are disturbing – contemplation becomes another competitive activity?

88% of the courses were evaluated by a grade. Since the need to grade students is probably a given, the question is rather how one grades the academic product which results, in part,

from the contemplative activity, without including the contemplative activity as an object of evaluation. (Student “X” meditates better than student “Y”?)

Impact of the Fellowships on the Academic Community

I asked this question in a variety of ways, and the sum total is positive on the community level, 52%, although apparently most Fellows, 70%, did not report increased interest on the part of administrators. 13% reported that other faculty also will be introducing contemplative practice into their courses. A variety of initiatives were reported as a result of the Fellows’ activity.