

**Conference on Contemplative Practices and Education:
Making Peace in Ourselves and in the World**
Teachers College, Columbia University
Feb 11-13, 2005

The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society
199 Main Street, Suite 3
Northampton, MA 01060
(413) 582-0071
info@contemplativemind.org
www.contemplativemind.org

** Please Note: This is not the final report. A full report is in preparation.*

The recent conference at Columbia affirms the work that has gone into the Academic Program over the past 8 years. It was one of those events where everything seems to work out perfectly – there was full attendance (it was sold out with a registration of approximately 180 people and a waiting list of 30 people), it was held in a beautiful space (the Milbank Chapel, an exquisite room of wood paneling and stained glass), and there was an extraordinary group of presenters, panelists, and performers.

Here are a few highlights from the conference.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, in his keynote address entitled *Education as if It Really Mattered: The Unification of Knowing through Contemplative Practice*, set the stage for the weekend program by inviting all present to view themselves as being both teacher and student, and to let go of the dichotomy that is ever present in our lives.

Part of the work of the Stress Reduction Program at the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society, founded by Jon at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, is teaching participants the practice of meditation. While a set curriculum is utilized at the Center to teach stress reduction, the most important goal of the educational experience is to ignite in participants a passion for the experience that is encountered in meditation; igniting a passion for learning, for leaping into the unknown. It is mining the resources that are present in learners, cultivating intimacy with them, and allowing them engage in their own learning, as opposed to having the arrogance of thinking we are the ones that make them learn.

Kabat-Zinn challenged participants to consider that while we may be highly educated, if we are without deep integration of thought and feeling, our lives are incomplete, contradictory, and torn with many fears. And as long as education does not cultivate an

integrated outlook on life, it will have little significance. As Isaac Newton noted “to arrive at the simplest truth requires years of contemplation - not activity, not reasoning, not busy behavior of any kind, not reading, not talking, not making effort, not thinking.”

Kabat-Zinn proposed that “maybe, the real foundation of education requires that we start looking at the nature of the mind. This can be done in a manner that is appropriate for any age. For example, children in kindergarten can be taught that the mind is like the surface of the ocean. It has waves, is deep like the whole of the ocean, and stillness underneath the waves can be found all the time, even when one is in pain.” This form of teaching becomes an act of love. It is energetic and has order as well as integrity.

Kabat-Zinn illustrated one method of how to teach about the nature of the mind by showing a slide presentation that focused the participants on perception and awareness. The presentation led to inquiries about what we perceive when we look at change that is occurring, and how we conduct internal communication about the information that enters the senses. These inquiries are relevant to problem-solving because they allow us to understand how, at times, we create problems when none exist. It allows for learning about problem dissolving rather than problem solving: “This is form of teaching is not only an act of love, it is wisdom in action.”

The morning plenary, *The Fruit of Silence*, was by **Marilyn Nelson**, Poet Laureate of Connecticut and Professor Emerita of English at the University of Connecticut.

In class, we had to pick a couple of verbs from poems that we wrote and make sentences. Kevin made one that I loved. “Swim through the heartbeat of clouds.” Anyway, while I meditated, I thought about swimming through clouds. It was incredible. And over & over in my head, I said the sentence. I don’t know if that was meditation or not, but I got up and felt so wonderfully relaxed. It was like I had been swimming in clouds.

- Journal Entry by West Point Cadet

Marilyn talked about her students from her original fellowship course at West Point. Many of those students are now or have been stationed in Iraq. She told us that, in preparation for her talk,

I contacted a couple of them and asked whether they continued to meditate during their deployment, and if they did, what meditation had meant to them. One of them said in an email that he had often used free-writing and clustering as a way of clearing his mind and seeing where and who he was. Another phoned; he said that both he and his wife (they were both at West Point, and now both are Black Hawk helicopter pilots) continued to meditate during their deployments. He said that, although military culture is in some ways the antithesis of the contemplative life, they had both found it an invaluable tool to use in a crisis, especially as officers who must

show composure before their soldiers, as, for instance, when one of their soldiers was killed or wounded. He said he camouflaged his meditating by sitting on his cot wearing headphones: Everyone thought he was listening to music, which is cool.

Marilyn shared her understanding of the term “contemplative pedagogy.” Contemplative pedagogy does not involve teaching a technique. Rather it is teaching an “attitude [of openness to explore] the several ways in which listening can occur and how one can listen *for* and *to* silence.” Prof. Nelson’s first experience with this form of pedagogy coincided with receipt of a Contemplative Practices Fellowship and an invitation to teach at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.

Part of Prof. Nelson’s interest in contemplative pedagogy arises from an interest in teaching young Americans to listen to silence. “The noise of our lives is –sometimes literally– deafening. Technology has given us the 24-hour soundtrack, our own background music, our ‘score’.” So the challenge is whether listening to and for silence is possible in the midst of all these sounds. The challenge is to show them that it can be done.

The writing strategies Prof. Nelson utilized in the course she taught at West Point included: “journaling, which focuses and complements the meditation experience; freewriting, which comes close to recording “inner speech”; and clustering, which taps into the creative, intuitive, right-brain function that lies at the core of meditation. A regular class session would include 5 minutes of meditation at the beginning of each class meeting; 15 minutes of daily meditation outside of class; journaling; and various writing exercises. In more recent courses, Prof. Nelson has also included the strategy of musing. “Musing follows no agenda and has no goal, no text, and no ground of reference except what we bring. The group agrees to be honest and non-judgmental; we will go out on the limb of communal pondering.” An example of the musing included: a 90-minute discussion where students pondered “Does Just War Theory depend on belief in a Supreme Being? Is it realistically possible to have a just war? Is pre-emptive war unjust? Do non-Christian religions subscribe to the definition of a just war?”

When instructing how to meditate, Prof. Nelson would only provide “rudimentary instructions on how to meditate. Sit straight, be comfortable, close your eyes, and either count your breath up to five, then start over again, or watch your breath go in and out, or think, here, now, here, now. If you’re distracted, just bring yourself gently back; think of your thoughts as clouds drifting across the blue sky of your attention.”

Peter Schneider (Professor of Architecture at the University of Colorado – Denver) spoke of the affinity between architecture and contemplation. “The class that I teach is founded on the idea that there is an imagination called the design imagination and that we have to literally change students’ minds so that they become designers by acquiring this imagination. The other part of it is saying well, if there's a design imagination, there must be an imagination called the contemplative imagination. My class layers those two one on top of the other.”

Prof. Schneider spoke about a class he teaches entitled Environmental Design. This course is a required course for students in architecture, and introduces them to the designed environment. Prof. Schneider defined building as “the activity by which human beings make their shelter and their mark upon the world. It is as closely associated with the celebration of the sacred as it is with humble, everyday use. So buildings themselves, our designed environment, are about shelter, the things that hold us and in which we can live our lives. But, the designed environment is also about those things that commemorate our lives in the world.

In the course, Prof. Schneider also teaches about mindfulness. Prof. Schneider pointed to the three exercises which Jon Kabat-Zinn utilized in his opening remarks as examples of how to teach others to recognize what mindlessness entails. By allowing students to experience mindlessness, Prof. Schneider provides the environment for students to experience how mindlessness can be an entrapment in established ways of thinking. The stage is now set for a discussion about mindfulness.

I engage students in practice first and then in theory...By asking students first to do things and then giving them the equipment and the lecture related to the practice, students can begin to understand what they have done. This methodology reverses the traditional manner of teaching theory first and then engaging in practice.

Prof. Schneider also requires students to do five design projects and to engage in journaling. The journals are based on his instructions and correspond to meditative practices, such as insight meditation, a breath meditation, a standing meditation and a walking meditation. The last journal each student is asked to write is a self-reflection on their position at the end of the class.

Linda-Susan Beard (Bryn Mawr College) described the course she developed with her Contemplative Practice Fellowship on the study of slavery, the holocaust and apartheid. “We were reading profoundly painful texts. And I kept thinking of the story of Moses and the burning bush, and realizing that I was asking very young people to stand next to a conflagration of a kind, and asking them to do that hopefully without being immolated by it. They themselves were being invited to bear witness, and to do that by being present.”

Daniel Holland (Professor of Psychology, University of Arkansas) talked about his course, *Contemplative Practice, Health Promotion, and Disability: An Experiential Seminar in Partnership with Disability Support Services*. He said of his students, “They still needed to understand, through direct experience, that, when it comes to practicing a greater awareness of one's mind and body, challenges and obstacles are similar regardless of personal differences. Whether one walks or uses a wheelchair, sees clearly or is blind, has free movement or is paralyzed, the process of mindfulness is very much the same.” One of Prof. Holland's main focus in being a student and teacher of contemplative education is to determine whether practices are accessible to people with physical,

cognitive or intellectual disabilities. More generally, Holland asked “How do we begin to make these practices in contemplative education more accessible for everyone?”

One part of the course is an adapted version of the curriculum taught by Jon Kabat-Zinn at the Center for Mindfulness. Holland also engages students through the use of discussion, reflection, poetry and other readings. Requirements for the course include attendance, participation and the maintenance of extensive journals which could be kept by writing, videotape or drawing.

Barbara Dilley’s (Professor of Dance, Naropa University) teaching emphasizes "embodied awareness" through dance and movement studies, the creative process, and the disciplines of meditation. She led participants in a mindful movement exercise: “I am committed to translating the traditional mindfulness and awareness practices into an embodied artistic creative process.”

On Saturday evening, we witnessed two contemplative performances. Academic Fellow and Queens College professor **Yin Mei** and three other dancers performed part of her newest piece, *Nomad: the River*, about the Ganges and the Yellow Rivers. Inhabitants of their banks have traditionally imbued the rivers with both healing and destructive powers. Yin applies this double edge to events in real life and her journey in and around inerasable memories.

Ed Sarath (Professor of Music, University of Michigan) and **the Creative Arts Orchestra** (15 musicians/students from the University of Michigan) shared their exploration of improvisational jazz. The orchestra reflects the eclectic and global trends which increasingly characterize our musical world. Ed explained to us how the improvisational musician has to listen for the spaces of silence between the notes so he knows when to enter, and that meditative practice is critical in developing this skill.

As one person commented, “Including both dance and music was crucial in such a conference where most of the focus was on pedagogy. I was reminded of how essential the creative arts are in my own teaching and in my creative life.”

In an evaluation form participants were asked what they had learned from the conference. Below are a few of the responses about what they received/learned:

- “A deeper way of thinking about contemplative practices and their value in higher education. I also enjoyed the overwhelming sense of validation; I don’t have many colleagues thinking in these terms, and it was important for me to be in contact with so many like-minded educators.”
- “A deepening sense of awareness, how education is really the awareness of what we already know.”
- “A sense of community. Of people working in the same direction.”

- “I will look to be more daring and multidisciplinary in my teaching after this conference.”
- “The position advanced by Arthur Zajonc of contemplative practice as an ethical, and therefore essential, approach to education. I received a sense of empowerment and mission from his talk.”

Teachers College Record

Teachers College Record, a major journal in educational research and practice, is planning a special issue on contemplative practices and education. Both presenters and participants at this conference were encouraged to contribute to such an issue. Anyone who is interested should send a manuscript (not exceeding 7500 words) to Clifford Hill at [cah34\(at\)columbia.edu](mailto:cah34(at)columbia.edu). Given its strong commitment to qualitative research on educational practice, Teachers College Record especially invites manuscripts that document how contemplative practices are integrated into various kinds of educational settings.

Clifford Hill reports that several papers have been submitted to date, but he is waiting for more submissions before making the final decision on which papers to publish. He said the issue would be published sometime in 2006.