

Seminar in Postmodernism: English 79.7
Literature and Contemplation
Tuesdays and Fridays, 9:25 – 10:40 am
Spring 2006

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This is a class that looks at (mostly) contemporary literature in the context of contemplative practices. The literature implicitly or explicitly explores existential themes: how do we make sense of our lives? How do we love? How do we find solace for loss? How do we express anger? We will explore ways to respond to that literature “contemplatively”—a notion we will develop together, but which in general means patiently and with compassionate attention to ourselves and others, without anxiety (wouldn’t that be nice?) about who’s the smartest, with curiosity. Etc!

Goals:

By the end of the course I hope you will have gained:

1. an overview of literature that implicitly or explicitly explores existential, ethical, and spiritual questions, considers what it cannot answer, and tries to arrive at some sense of possibility or resolution.
2. an awareness of the aesthetics of writers addressing and dramatizing spiritual longings, awakenings, confusions, imperfections, grief, betrayals, a sense of how their art gives form and beauty to the complexity of those explorations.
3. an opportunity to address the place of such questions in our own lives
4. an exploration of some basic contemplative practices and consideration of whether those practices can help us to do whatever we’re doing in a context of self-acceptance and curiosity. Pema Chodron writes, “Meditation practice isn’t about trying to throw ourselves away and become something better. It’s about befriending who we are already” (4).
5. an ability to think and write about literature in a context of contemplative approaches.

Reading list:

Herman Hesse, *Narcissus and Goldmund*. New York: Bantam reissue, 1984.

Natalie Goldberg, *Long Quiet Highway: Waking Up in America*. New York: Bantam, 1994.

Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Trans from the Czech my Michael Henry Heim. New York: HarperPerennial, 1985, 1999.

Mark Doty, *Heaven’s Coast*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1996.

Marilyn Sewell, ed. *Cries of the Spirit: a Celebration of Women’s Spirituality*. Boston: Beacon, 1991.
(Anthology of poems by contemporary women poets.)

Stephen Mitchell, ed. *The Enlightened Heart: An Anthology of Sacred Poetry*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1989. (Begins with excerpts from *The Upanishads*, moves from ancient poetry through poetry of the Middle Ages to Yeats, Lawrence, Stevens.)

Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Where You Go There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*. New York: Hyperion, 1994.

In packet:

June Jordan, “Many Rivers to Cross,” and “For the Sake of People’s Poetry: Walt Whitman and the Rest of Us” from *Some of Us Did Not Die*. New York: Basic Books, 2002.

James Baldwin, “Sonny’s Blues” from Beverly Lawn, ed. *The Short Story: 30 Masterpieces*, 2nd ed. New York: St. Martin’s, 1992(packet)

Lorrie Moore, “Terrific Mother,” from *Birds of America: Stories*. New York: Picador, 1999.

Poetry from *Speak Your Mind: Anthology of Youth Poetry*. New York: Urban Word NYC Publications, 2004.

Poetry by Blake, Wordsworth, Whitman, Ginsberg

Tobin Hart, “Opening the Contemplative Mind in the Classroom” from *Journal of Transformative Education*. 2.1 (January 2004): 28 – 46

Assignments

A reading journal, which you should bring to class, where you will respond to the works as we read them.

Some of this writing will be done in class.

15 pages of revised prose. This will be done in 3 separate assignments, with two drafts for each. If you decide that you want to write one large paper, you will still write it in segments.

If you decide that you want to write on three separate topics (or two, one short, one long), that’s fine too.

The main point is that this work will be done over the semester so that you have a lot of time to draft, rethink, revise, share this work with your peers.

Your grade will be based on your regular attendance, coming to class ON TIME (since we will be doing contemplative activities at the beginning of class) and being prepared to participate. You can’t control how proficient you are as a reader or writer at this point in your life—though I hope this class will help you to develop those skills—but you can control your attendance. So please come on time. I know that sometimes the trains and buses are late or the babysitter doesn’t show up. But please give yourself some leeway for such things to occur.

We will talk together about what we’re looking for in our own and each other’s work. As much as is possible in a grade-obsessed world, I don’t want you to worry about grades.

Just come and come on time!

Selected Bibliography

Barash, David, ed. *Approaches to Peace: a Reader in Peace Studies*. New York: Oxford UP, 2000.

Cope, Stephen. *Yoga and the Quest for the True Self*. New York: Bantam, 1999.

- DeLuca, Geraldine. "Headstands, Writing and the Rhetoric of Radical Self-Acceptance." *Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives in Learning (JAEPL)*. 11 (2005-2006): 27 – 41.
- Flinders, Carol Lee. *At the Root of This Longing: Reconciling a Spiritual Hunger and a Feminist Thirst*. New York: HarperCollins, 1998.
- Glazer, Steven, ed. *The Heart of Learning: Spirituality in Education*. New York: Jeremy Tarcher/Putnam, 1999.
- Goldstein, Joseph. *The Experience of Insight*. Boston: Shambhala, 1976.
- _____ and Jack Kornfield. *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom: The Path of Insight Meditation*. Boston: Shambhala, 1987.
- Goleman, Daniel. *Destructive Emotions: How Can We Overcome Them?* New York: Bantam, 2003.
- _____. *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ*. 10th anniversary ed. New York: Bantam, 2005.
- Honore, Carl. *In Praise of Slowness: How a Worldwide Movement Is Challenging the Cult of Speed*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004.
- Johnson, Willard. *Riding the Ox Home: A History of Meditation from Shamanism to Science*. Boston: Beacon, 1982.
- Kabat-Zinn, Jon. *Full-Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*. New York: Delta, 1990.
- Kornfield, Jack. *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry: How the Heart Grows Wise on the Spiritual Path*. New York: Bantam, 2001.
- Nhat Hanh, Thich. *The Miracle of Mindfulness*. Rev. ed. Trans Mobi Ho. Boston: Beacon, 1987.
- Olsen, Andrea. *Body and Earth: An Experiential Guide*. Hanover, NH and London: Middlebury College Press, 2002.
- Salzberg, Sharon. *A Heart as Wide as the World: Stories on the Path of Lovingkindness*. Boston and London: Shambhala, 1999.
- Schwartz, Jeffrey and Sharon Begley. *The Mind and the Brain: Neuroplasticity and the Power of Mental Force*. New York: HarperCollins, 2003.
- Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.
- Shunryu Suzuki. *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind: Informal Talks on Zen meditation and practice*. New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1970.
- Wallace, B. Alan. *The Taboo of Subjectivity: Toward a New Science of Consciousness*. New York: Oxford UP, 2000.