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Contemplative Pedagogy in Religious Education

Abstract

This paper highlights contemplative pedagogy as an educational approach with a demonstrated capacity to facilitate unification within the individual and among different people. The early parts of the paper present a biblically-rooted analysis of the human dynamics that impede peaceful coexistence and a discussion of the ways educators can exacerbate learners' alienation from the transcendent, themselves, and others. The latter part of the paper discusses scientific research and the author's own experiences that suggest possibilities for promoting unity through contemplative pedagogy, specifically through practices of transcendence, depth, and relatedness.

Introduction

The present historical moment is one of great cultural, political, and religious division. I need not devote precious words to piling up examples, for this reality is widely recognized. Although almost everyone laments this state of affairs and longs for a way out, overcoming current divisions is proving difficult to say the least.

It is my hope and my belief that our work as religious educators can help to overcome the things that divide us, and it is my aim in this paper to propose one kind of teaching that has proven effective in doing so, namely, contemplative pedagogy. Recognizing the diversity of teaching practices that fall under the descriptor of "contemplative," Daniel Barbezat and Mirabai Bush synthesize that they all have "an inward or first-person focus that creates opportunities for greater connection and insight."¹ To this inward focus, Oren Ergas adds "a different engagement with time" and "an intention to be aware and attend to experience in a different way" as common features of contemplative teaching practices.² Such practices have become so popular that Ergas argues a "contemplative turn" has occurred in the world of education. One benefit of the popularity of contemplative practices in education is that they have been well studied from a number of disciplinary perspectives, yielding insights into the effectiveness of contemplative pedagogy for enhancing students' academic achievement, general well-being, and capacity for relationship and social relating.³ This last outcome makes contemplative pedagogy a particularly appealing realm of inquiry for educators seeking to heal current social divisions.

Before diving into pedagogical considerations, I will offer a theological analysis of the internal human dynamics that impede peaceful coexistence. I will argue that, if we encounter

¹ Daniel P. Barbezat and Mirabai Bush, *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education: Powerful Methods to Transform Teaching and Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014), 5.

² Oren Ergas, "A Contemplative Turn in Education: Charting a Curricular-pedagogical Countermovement," *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* 27.2 (2019): 255-56.

³ Barbezat's and Bush's book presents an overview of this body of research.

divisions in the world “out there,” it is because our societies reflect a prior division “in here,” that is, within the human heart. In the following section, I will analyze the ways in which education and educators can, intentionally or unintentionally, exacerbate the divisions among us. In the final part of the paper, I will explore the possibilities for promoting unity and openness generated by practices of contemplative teaching.

The Divisions Within

The political and social events of recent years have brought out into plain sight many of the things that divide us—political affiliation, citizenship status, religious and moral convictions, and others. However, it would be too facile an explanation to leave our social analysis at the level of these highly visible differences. Sociologist Arlie Hochschild’s research suggests that underlying highly visible political differences are the unspoken “deep stories” that give meaning to people’s experiences and the world in which they live.⁴ Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt offers compelling evolutionary and psychological evidence that the differences we see in people’s political and religious views are largely due to innate intuitions or gut feelings.⁵ Scripture pushes the analysis even deeper, offering valuable theological insights into the interplay of the human need for communion and freedom at the root of our felt responses to others and of the stories we tell ourselves to make sense of our experiences.

At the heart of the Christian faith and of Jesus’ teaching is a drive toward unity. Jesus prayed that we all “might be one” (Jn 17:21) and instructed his disciples, “love your neighbor as yourself” (Mk 12:31; cf. Mt 22:39). Pursuant to uniting all God’s children, he challenged his followers to root out the causes of division and antipathy from within: “For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come” (Mk 7:18–21). Although talk about the heart can strike the modern person’s ear as mere sentimentality, Jesus’ words reflect a profound insight into human psychology. The heart is the key.⁶ Whatever we set our hearts upon determines where our lives lead and who we become.⁷ If we fuel our desires for material goods and social success, we become materialistic, self-absorbed people. If we allow our desires for created things to run unchecked, our desires multiply and our lives become fragmented. Like Saint Paul, we become conflicted within ourselves, doing what we know we ought not and failing to do what we know we should (Rom 7:15). And so, if we experience divisions in our societies and relationships and fragmentation in our lives, that is first and foremost because our hearts are divided. These external divisions have their origin in the divisions within.

The text of Genesis 3 reflects the Judeo-Christian understanding of whence these internal divisions arose. The story of Adam and Eve taking the fruit from the forbidden tree dramatizes the

⁴ Arlie Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: The New Press, 2018).

⁵ Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012).

⁶ For Jesus and his Jewish contemporaries, the heart (*leb* in Hebrew, *kardia* in Greek) represented the center of the human person, the source of the human’s intellectual powers as well as the emotions.

⁷ This anthropological insight is a central theme of Augustine’s *Confessions* and, more recently, James K. A. Smith’s *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016).

tension human beings experience between their desire for communion and their desire for autonomy. We want to belong, to experience intimacy and love, but we also want to be in control of our own lives.⁸ The Genesis account suggests the first humans were unable to balance these competing desires and so broke communion with God, grasping at what God had reserved for Godself. This would prove a fatal mistake. It is in God that human beings find their center and their wholeness. To turn away from God is, in the words of Saint Augustine, to turn from unity to be lost in multiplicity.⁹ The curses of Genesis 3:14-19 record the consequences of this break in communion. Having cut themselves off from God, human beings would henceforth experience alienation from themselves, one another, and the created world.

Fallen humanity's alienation from God has been experienced in different ways in different times. Much of Scripture and a certain strand of Christian preaching expresses this alienation in terms of being "enemies" to God (Rom 5:8) or of suffering God's wrath in punishment for sin.¹⁰ In more recent history, many have experienced this alienation as God's absence. This feeling was perhaps most poignant in the wake of the atrocities of the 20th century, especially the Holocaust. In the face of so much suffering and human brutality, many wondered, "Where is God? How could God let this happen?" Even more recently, many have questioned God's existence, not because of some great tragedy, but rather because they do not feel God's presence and they feel they have no need for God as an explanation for the world as they encounter it.¹¹ In the words of Ronald Rolheiser, they have no "vital sense of God within the bread and butter of life."¹² As Rolheiser points out, many practicing Christians experience this sense of absence today, not only secularized persons.

If the Christian tradition is right that in God we "move and live and have our being" (Acts 17:28), alienation from God unavoidably leads to alienation from ourselves. When we do not recognize our true identity as beloved children of God, we are compelled to reinforce our own egos by means of titles, achievements, and possessions in order to compensate for this lack of sense of self.¹³ Because the ego is a shoddy construction, we find ourselves constantly defending it by ignoring our faults, vulnerabilities, and insecurities or by scapegoating and projecting them onto others.¹⁴ We deny our embodiedness and our mortality. And because we human beings are ultimately incapable of bearing the burden of creating ourselves and a meaning for life *ex nihilo*,

⁸ See Raj Raghunathan, *If You're So Smart, Why Aren't You Happy?* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2016), 239.

⁹ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), II.i(1).

¹⁰ A classic example of the latter is Jonathan Edward's famous sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

¹¹ For a historical account of how secularization occurred, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007).

¹² See Ronald Rolheiser, *The Shattered Lantern: Rediscovering a Felt Presence of God* (New York: Crossroad, 2004), 17.

¹³ See Ronald Rolheiser, *The Shattered Lantern*, 37-38.

¹⁴ See Bernard Lonergan's *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992) on the dynamics of bias and Rene Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephan Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987) on the scapegoat mechanism.

many today are crumbling under the weight of it, succumbing to forms of mental illness including anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and substance abuse.¹⁵

Alienation from God and alienation from ourselves both contribute to our alienation from one another. When God confronts Adam about disobeying God's command, Adam's immediate response is to blame Eve (Gen 3:12). Adam's response exemplifies the sort of defensiveness and violence with which humans often respond to perceived threats, whether to bodily or psychological integrity. When we feel that our well-being is threatened, we tend to project outward the tension created by the perceived threat. Understanding this psychological proclivity helps to make sense of some of people's more regrettable social behaviors. The poor white man's self-disdain has often been redirected into boasts of racial superiority.¹⁶ Fears stoked by economic instability have recently given rise to anti-immigrant sentiments around the world.¹⁷ Fearfulness for national and personal security have fueled the demonizing of people from certain countries and geographical regions. Such are the roots of racism, nativism, and every form of hate and discrimination.

The Genesis account thus illuminates how internal divisions—namely, alienation from God and from ourselves—leads to divisions in our societies. Because God created us for Himself, who is love (1 Jn 4:8), our wholeness and fulfillment as human beings lies in receiving God's love. However, receiving God's love can be difficult because it requires acknowledging our dependence upon something outside of ourselves. It means accepting our fundamental insufficiency. This is essentially the same decision that the first human beings faced. Like them, we often fail to balance our needs for communion and autonomy. Because it is difficult for us to accept our dependence upon another, we pursue many lesser substitutes for love like honor, popularity, a sense of superiority, and power. But because none of these substitutes is sufficient in itself, we are always seeking more and end up pulled in many different directions. Being at war with ourselves, we project our inner conflict out into the world.

The primary battleground for world unity, therefore, is not in the streets or at negotiation tables but rather in the depths of the human heart. We will never heal the divisions we see in society until we heal the prior divisions in our own hearts. This is why Jesus enjoins his followers to be "pure of heart" (Mt 5:8). If we educators aspire to promote healing in the world, we do well to seek methods of educating that encourage learners to turn to their own inner depths. However, as we will see presently, the unfortunate reality is that modern education often does just the opposite.

When Education Contributes to Alienation

Education has tremendous potential to promote unity and connectedness in the world. However, the sad truth is that education has sometimes had the opposite effect, contributing to the

¹⁵ For research on the connection between lack of meaning and mental illness, see Aaron Antonovsky, *Unraveling the Mystery of Health: How People Manage Stress and Stay Well* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987). For an psychological analysis of how modern life overwhelms many people's meaning-making, see Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

¹⁶ See Jonathan M. Metzler, *Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment Is Killing America's Heartland* (New York: Basic Books, 2019).

¹⁷ Beets, Gijss, and Frans Willekens. "The Global Economic Crisis and International Migration: An Uncertain Outlook." *Vienna Yearbook of Population Research* 2009 (2009): 19-38.

alienation of students from the transcendent, themselves, and each other. Such alienation can and has occurred in religious and secular educational context alike.

Most obvious are the ways that secular institutions have sometimes contributed to students' alienation from the transcendent by marginalizing the spiritual dimension of the human person in educational settings. This marginalizing of spirituality commonly derives from a prioritizing of a positivistic outlook and instrumental reasoning to the exclusion of what Michael Polanyi calls "tacit knowing."¹⁸ In their book *Cultivating the Spirit*, Astin, Astin, and Lindholm criticize this modern assumption, pointing out that what secular institutions and educators often present as a neutral position is in fact nothing of the sort. By marginalizing the spiritual, secular institutions are effectively promote a positivistic, materialistic, agnostic/atheistic perspective. Furthermore, Astin, Astin, and Lindholm point out that, contrary to what they might profess, secular institutions are actually very much involved in students' spirituality insofar as activities like orientation, advising, and residential life often bear upon students' purposes, hopes, values, and beliefs, which are commonly religious and spiritual in nature.¹⁹ The main purpose of their book is to present their findings from a seven-year national study that highlights the many positive outcomes of supporting students' spiritual growth during their time at college.

Ironically, religious educational institutions can sometimes also contribute to students' alienation from the transcendent. The most glaring instances are those pertaining to scandals, such as the Catholic clergy sex abuse scandal that has driven many from the Catholic Church and, in some cases, undermined people's faith in God. What many people have found most repellent about the abuse scandal is the apparently greater concern of bishops for protecting the reputation of the institutional Church than for protecting and tending to the victims. A more subtle problem are failures of religious communities and religious education to communicate the relevance and meaningfulness of religion.²⁰ Perceiving their religious community or tradition to be overly concerned with the details of ritual and doctrine, some conclude that there is nothing of real substance or value in their faith tradition.

Education has at times also contributed to students' alienation from themselves. Many would argue that this problem is particularly acute in modern education. Parker Palmer suggests that part of the problem is that "objectivism" is the primary paradigm of knowing operative in the educational world today. This is problematic because this mode of knowing "portrays something we can achieve only by disconnecting ourselves, physically and emotionally, from the thing we want to know."²¹ It is easy to recognize this paradigm at work in secular educational institutions,

¹⁸ Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 4.

¹⁹ Astin, Astin, and Lindholm clarify that they employ the term "spirituality" to refer to "our inner, subjective life," "our affective experiences," "the values we hold most dear," and "aspects of our experience that are not easy to define or talk about, such things as intuition, inspiration, the mysterious, and the mystical" (*Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students' Inner Lives* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 4).

²⁰ For a discussion of some reasons why young people fail to find meaning or relevance in the Catholic faith, see Saint Mary's Press, *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2017).

²¹ Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*, 10th Anniversary Edition (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 52.

especially in those that elevate the “hard” sciences above other areas of study. However, this approach to education infiltrates religious institutions as well. It manifests in an intellectualist approach to religious education that focuses relentlessly on doctrine while ignoring learners’ embodiedness, affectivity, personal history, relationships, and spirituality.²² Such was one critique of the high school religion curriculum framework developed by the U.S. bishops some years ago.²³ To treat students as such truncated subjects—and bracketing their spirituality in particular—is, in the words of Astin, Astin, and Lindholm, “to encourage a kind of fragmentation and a lack of authenticity.”²⁴

Finally, education can further alienate people from one another. Palmer criticizes that the objectivist approach to education divides the teacher (i.e., the one who controls the knowledge) from the students (i.e., the ones who receive the knowledge). This occurs when teachers hide behind their advanced degrees, titles, and lecture notes and refuse to engage with the deep questions and lives of their students or to reveal their own humanity to them. Palmer compares this development in education to developments in modern warfare, wherein it has become possible to kill our enemies from ever greater distances and therefore avoid acknowledging their humanity. While such objectivism might be the more common bias of secular education, sectarian education can lead to similar outcomes for different reasons. Our faith community sometimes devolve into insular “tribes,” and our religious convictions sometimes close us off from listening to the stories and perspectives of others. One symptom of such distorted religion is the deployment of labels like “heretics,” “bad Christians,” “liberals,” “conservatives,” etc.—all synonyms for the “other” with whom we refuse to enter into relationship.

I believe that Palmer accurately diagnoses an underlying cause of these three forms of alienation—whether in secular or sectarian settings—when he writes, “The external structures of education would not have the power to divide us as deeply as they do if they were not rooted in one of the most compelling features of our inner landscape—fear.”²⁵ He continues, “We fear encounters in which the other is free to be itself, to speak its own truth, to tell us what we may not wish to hear. We want those encounters on our own terms, so that we can control their outcomes, so that they will not threaten our view of world and self.”²⁶ In other words, many if not all of these alienating forces within modern education trace back to tensions within the inner lives of educators, educators who desire certainty, clarity, and control and who fear the chaos they might encounter in themselves or in genuine encounter with others. We are alienated from ourselves, and, failing to acknowledge and address our inner fragmentation, we alienate ourselves from others.

²² The problem in such an approach to religious education is not the instruction in doctrine (which is salutary) but rather the imbalance in the formation of learners’ minds and these other aspects of their being.

²³ See, for example, William J. O’Malley, “Faulty Guidance: A New Framework for High School Catechesis Fails to Persuade,” *America* (September 14, 2009), <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/707/article/faulty-guidance>

²⁴ Astin, Astin, and Lindholm, *Cultivating the Spirit*, 7.

²⁵ Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*, 36.

²⁶ Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*, 37-38.

Contemplative Teaching as a Resource for Healing Alienation

Palmer's writing is one sample of a body of work that seeks to analyze and address the causes of alienation within our educational systems and institutions, to return us to ourselves and to one another.²⁷ There is much of value in these previous works. My aim in this latter part of the paper is to raise up contemplative pedagogy as another resources for healing division. In so doing, I am not presenting a merely theoretical framework. One reason for raising up contemplative teaching practices is that these methods have been rigorously studied and found to produce reliably a variety of desirable outcomes.

Maria Lichtmann's book wonderful *The Teacher's Way* offers a helpful framework for examining the methods and benefits of contemplative pedagogy. Lichtmann describes her contemplative approach to teaching in terms of the four-fold design of the ancient Christian practice of *lectio divina*. She explains:

Corresponding to *lectio* (reading) is **attention**, an abiding energy of the mind that is a just and loving gaze upon reality; corresponding to *meditatio* is **reflection**, the turning over and mirroring from different angles of the subjects that we attend to; corresponding to *oratio* is prayer's **receptivity** and relatedness, that inner openness allowing us to be moved and changed by what we attend to and reflect upon, making transformation possible; and finally *contemplatio*, which meant seeing God, leads to that **transformative vision** that can see "that of God" in the other and in creation.²⁸

Lichtmann describes contemplative teaching as a practice that embodies three spiritual practices that "all serious practitioners exemplify"—namely, depth, relatedness, and transcendence—that prove to be powerful resources for healing the three-fold alienation described above.²⁹ While there are many aspects of Lichtmann's that merit reflection, I will focus my analysis below on these three spiritual practices as they take shape in the practice of contemplative teaching.

Transcendence

Above we discussed how human beings' alienation from themselves and others is a consequence of our alienation from God. According to the Genesis account, the first humans sought to seize control of their own being rather than gratefully receiving it from God. Their desire for autonomy at the expense of communion was the beginning of humanity's alienation from God.

²⁷ Another notable work is bell hooks's *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

²⁸ Maria Lichtmann, *The Teacher's Way: Teaching and the Contemplative Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 12. Bolding original.

²⁹ Lichtmann, *The Teacher's Way*, 30.

We also discussed how the “objectivism” ensconced in modern education reinforces this alienation by bracketing and diminishing the spiritual dimension of people’s lives.

Lichtmann’s writing offers profound insights into how contemplative teaching can help to heal such alienation from the transcendent. When Lichtmann writes about transcendence as a pedagogical and spiritual practice, she means the practice of relinquishing control and opening up to something outside of ourselves. The contemplative approach stands in stark contrast with modern methods of education that, in the words of Palmer, aim to “shore up our self-aggrandizing myth that knowledge is power and that with it we can run the world.”³⁰ We saw this mentality exemplified above in narrowly scientific and doctrinal educational approaches and in those educators and religious officials who exercise a tight-fisted control of the classroom or potentially scandalous situations in order to keep chaos at bay. Attentive to the dangers of an overly-controlling approach to education, Lichtmann offers that “in contemplative teaching what we are teaching for is not freedom alone... but this deep communion.”³¹ Our need for communion is inescapable, and we are only happy and at peace when we are in communion with God. As it says in 1 John 4:18, “perfect love drives out fear” and as such is the only cure for the divisions we experience within ourselves and in the world.

One way contemplative teaching reestablishes this balance of freedom and communion (indeed, freedom in communion) is by utilizing the resources of poetry and story. There is always more to reality than we can fully cognize. As Michael Polanyi puts it, “we know more than we can tell.”³² Our language is particularly limited when we restrict ourselves to analytical, scientific, and conceptual modes of discourse. Nevertheless, we are attracted to these forms of language because they appeal to our desire for clarity and control. Poetry, by contrast, does not attempt to domesticate reality or pin down the transcendent aspects of our experience. Rather it evokes them using the language of simile and metaphor. It utilizes the concrete to point us to the transcendent. Breaking us out of an “immanent frame,” such language enables us to recover a sense of the wonder and expansiveness of reality.³³ In this way, writes Lichtmann, “metaphor carries us across from the known to the unknown.”³⁴ Entering into the realm of the poetic, we leave some security behind, but we are compensated by rediscovering “a pattern of interconnectedness among the things of this life and their inherent mystery.”³⁵

As an instructor in my university’s Core Curriculum, every fall I read through one of the Gospels, including the parables, with a class of first-year students. The parables of Jesus are a classic example of poetic language that ushers us from the realm of the familiar into the that of mystery. Jesus’ parables always relate to something that would have been familiar to his audience—casting nets in the sea, laboring in the vineyard, baking bread, shepherding sheep. However, equally characteristic of the parables is an unexpected twist that upends the audience’s

³⁰ Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*, 57.

³¹ Lichtmann, *The Teacher’s Way*, 90.

³² Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, 4.

³³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 542.

³⁴ Lichtmann, *The Teacher’s Way*, 98.

³⁵ Lichtmann, *The Teacher’s Way*, 98.

accustomed way of thinking about things: The vineyard owner gives equal pay to the last to arrive and to the first. The disrespected father runs out to embrace his profligate son. The master commends the dishonest steward. Walter Conn describes the parables' effect eloquently: "Having robbed us of the certainties of our given world, they would leave us at the brink of relativity, naked and totally vulnerable before the divine mystery that is God."³⁶

More often than not, the god that people reject is not the God of Abraham, Jacob, and Jesus Christ but rather an idol, an image of god that is too small. They are right to reject a god that is so insignificant. Reopening someone to the transcendent God requires an encounter with something bigger than themselves and bigger than the productions of their limited imaginings and concepts. In this regard, the confusion the parables produce is not a pedagogical shortcoming but rather their intended effect. Jesus' intention is to disrupt complacent thinking and open us up to the utter mystery of God.

Contemplative pedagogy serves a similar purpose. Lichtmann suggests that "there is a something 'more' in encounters between teachers and students and students and subjects that we cannot wholly receive and assimilate... a mysterious third enters this encounter... We could call it 'truth' or simply acknowledge our being called by it."³⁷ By utilizing the language of poetry and story, creating space for silence, and dwelling upon the texts, contemplative teaching draws students' attention to this "mysterious third." It frees us from the concepts and categories that make us feel secure but at the same time cage us in. Such encounters and expansions of our awareness are the necessary means of overcoming our alienation from the transcendent.

Depth

When Lichtmann writes about "depth," she means "the recessive 'ground'" behind our decisions and actions, what psychotherapists call the unconscious and what the Bible calls the "heart."³⁸ We have seen the problems caused when we become alienated from this dimension of our lives. Lacking awareness of ourselves, we live in a state of dis-integration and self-deception, and sometimes inflict on others that pain that we feel within ourselves. Furthermore, when alienated from ourselves, we are cut off from God because our "psychological and spiritual depths... is where God meets us."³⁹

Lichtmann proposes silence and reflection as two tools for re-establishing the connection with our inner depths. Silence is powerful, particularly today when there is so little silence in our lives.⁴⁰ From the omnipresent screens and advertisements to the chattering of their professors to

³⁶ Walter Conn, *Christian Conversion: A Developmental Interpretation of Autonomy and Surrender* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1986), 214.

³⁷ Lichtman, *The Teacher's Way*, 103.

³⁸ Lichtmann, *The Teacher's Way*, 31.

³⁹ Lichtmann, *The Teacher's Way*, 31

⁴⁰ However, silence can also be frightening to certain students. See David A. Treleaven, *Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness: Practices for Safe and Transformative Healing* (New York: Norton and Company, 2018).

the earbuds attached to their ears, our students are immersed in noise almost constantly. Taking a contemplative approach to teaching transforms the classroom into an oasis of calm in a busy world. Teachers can carve out a space for silence in a number of ways: asking students to turn off and put away their electronic devices, allowing a meaningful pause (e.g., ten seconds) for reflection when asking questions, inserting writing pauses into class discussions, and sitting quietly with the text before diving into discussion and commentary. Silence makes deep reflection possible.

Time is another requisite. Teachers can give their students the gift of time in the form of in-class writing, at-home journaling, and assignments of a length that makes real reflection possible. Students should have opportunities to reflect on themselves as well as on the texts. Teachers can encourage them to pay attention to their own thinking, their emotional reactions to different events and ideas, and to their values.⁴¹ Studies suggest that creating opportunities for self-reflection that give students space to process their experiences and deepen their self-understanding promotes equanimity and assists them in finding meaning in life.⁴²

Another way that modern education often alienates students from themselves is by treating them as disembodied minds—by requiring them to bracket their values and feelings and by privileging rational, empirical modes of knowing over experiential, intuitive, and imaginative modes. Scholar-practitioners like Jerome Barryman and Courtney Goto have advocated for the importance of play and embodied learning.⁴³ Attention to the body is also characteristic of contemplative pedagogy. Practices like walking meditations, yoga, and labyrinth walking have all made their way into the educational context.⁴⁴

One contemplative practice that incorporates both silence and the body is meditation. It has become my own practice to begin each class with a period of silent meditation (a breathing meditation for my undergraduate students and contemplative prayer for my seminary students). In both cases the meditation involves assuming an upright, stable position, breathing deeply, and focusing attention on our breathing, either the sensation of the chest rising and falling or the air flowing in and then out. I remind students that, as any noises or thoughts distract them, they should gently bring their attention back to their breathing. This practice is a valuable one for today's young people. Besides having their attention constantly divided by the hyper-sensory environment in which they live, they face constant demands from parents, friends, employers, and general social expectations to be this or that. Contemplative practices return learners to their bodies and generally help them to center themselves. As a result, they feel less anxious and more comfortable in their own skin.⁴⁵

⁴¹ For guidance see Mark D. Morelli, *Self-Possession: Being at Home in Conscious Performance* (Chestnut Hill, MA: Loneragan Institute, 2015) and Alexander W. Astin, *Mindworks: Becoming More Conscious in an Unconscious World* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2007).

⁴² Astin, Astin, and Lindholm, *Cultivating the Spirit*, 54.

⁴³ Jerome Barryman, *Godly Play: A Way of Religious Education*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991; Courtney Goto, *The Grace of Playing: Pedagogies for Leaning into God's New Creation* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016).

⁴⁴ See Barbezat and Bush, *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education*, Ch.8

⁴⁵ See Barbezat and Bush, *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education*, 27-29 for research on meditation's capacity to decrease anxiety and enhance health in other ways.

Relatedness

When Lichtmann writes of contemplative teaching as a spiritual practice of relatedness she means that it nurtures awareness of our interconnectedness. Despite its claims to superior knowledge, purely objectivist approaches to education yield only a limited sort of understanding because they require us to bracket certain aspects of our experience and our humanity. Lichtmann suggests that a contemplative is likewise committed to understanding things clearly, but that a contemplative approach pursues understanding by seeking connection rather than “objective” distance: “If contemplation is seeing what is really there, then it more deeply relates us to the world, not to our own fancies and projections.”⁴⁶ Likewise, where sectarian approaches sometimes put the emphasis on differences and boundaries, contemplative practices help us to approach others in a spirit of openness and hospitality.

This has been my own experience in taking a contemplative approach to teaching. In my first-year Core course, I make of point of cultivating attentiveness in my students in the early weeks of the semester. Building upon our daily practice of attending to our breathing during meditation, I coach them in attending carefully to the readings and to the comments of their peers during class discussion. I warn them of the ways our assumptions and pre-conceived notions can distort what we read and hear, and encourage them to make the effort to hear what the other person is actually saying. These practices of attentive reading and listening dispose learners to receive their classmates’ views with greater compassion and understanding.

The contemplative practices of transcendence, depth, and relatedness are mutually reinforcing. As Lichtmann explains, “in seeing ourselves in our depths, we see the other in relation; in seeing the other, we see God.”⁴⁷ When learners receive the opportunity and support to enter into their own inner depths and grow more comfortable with what they find there, they create a space within themselves that is hospitable to others. Research on contemplative pedagogy gives us an insight into how this occurs in practice. Because meditation puts the mind and body in a relaxed state, it deactivates the body’s natural alarm systems and thereby helps students to engage in class activities and discussions in a spirit of openness rather than defensiveness.⁴⁸ Engaging in meditation over an extended period of time instills in practitioners an ability to regulate their emotional responses, which in turn enables them to respond less impulsively or defensively when confronted with the unfamiliar.⁴⁹ The ability to return to baseline more quickly increases the likelihood that students will respond to another person calmly rather than reacting to them as a threat. This is precisely what those of us who employ contemplative pedagogy have seen at Seton Hall. Our students who engage in contemplative practices typically become more patient listeners,

⁴⁶ Lichtmann, *The Teacher’s Way*, 32.

⁴⁷ Lichtmann, *The Teacher’s Way*, 80.

⁴⁸ For research findings, see Barbezat and Bush, *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education*, 24-32.

⁴⁹ Barbezat and Bush, *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education*, 30.

disagree with one another more respectfully, are less inclined to escalate an argument, and exhibit greater sensitivity and empathy toward one another.

One contemplative practice in particular, the loving-kindness meditation, seems to be especially efficacious in terms of promoting healthy relating. This meditation involves first thinking about all the good things one desires for oneself such as health, peace, and happiness and then extending those same wishes to another person (a classmate, for example). Studies have found that engaging in this meditation over time rewires the brain's neural circuitry associated with emotion, increasing the meditator's empathy and other positive emotions when interacting with others.⁵⁰ In their national study, Astin, Astin, and Lindholm found that students who engaged in meditation practices like this one showed more growth in measures of caring and connectedness than their peers.⁵¹

Conclusion

I have argued above that the external things that divide us—race, politics, religion, nationality—are not the real problems. This is not to say that racism, nativism, and the like are not highly problematic. Nor is this to dismiss the value of efforts to address these problems by means of activism, dialogue, conflict mediation, and political mechanisms. Rather my point is that underlying these external divisions are pre-existing divisions within each of us. Our struggle since the beginning of human history has been to balance our desires for autonomy and communion. We have failed consistently to strike the balance, preferring control over community. We seek to seize what can only be received. We seek security on our own terms rather than entrusting ourselves to God and one another. Ever grasping for more, our desires and insecurities multiply and our inner lives become fragmented. At war with ourselves, we inevitably find ourselves at war with one another.

If the root of our social divisions indeed lies within each individual, pedagogies that attend to learners' interior lives will be an indispensable resource for religious educators seeking to heal these divisions. Drawing upon the work of Maria Lichtmann and current research, I have presented examples of how contemplative pedagogy serves this aim and evidence that it serves it well. Each of us "lives and moves and has our being" in an ecosystem constituted by self, other, and God. The contemplative practices of depth, relatedness, and transcendence promote the habits and learning conditions needed to attend to and restore balance to this ecosystem.

Of course, as with any educational approach, there are potential pitfalls associated with contemplative pedagogy.⁵² Practitioner Anita Houck explains that contemplative practices can be utilized out of context in a way that disrespects their native religious traditions.⁵³ Furthermore, teachers who engage their students with contemplative practices run the risk of exacerbating the anxiety of students who have experienced trauma or who already feel silenced due to their

⁵⁰ Barbezat and Bush, *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education*, 30.

⁵¹ Astin, Astin, and Lindholm, *Cultivating the Spirit*, 82.

⁵² For some critiques of contemplative pedagogy, see Oren Ergas, "A Contemplative Turn in Education: Charting a Curricular-pedagogical Countermovement," *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* 27 (2): 255-56.

⁵³ Anita Houck, "Contemplative Pedagogy: Experiments and Reflections," *Horizons* 46(1) (2019): 113-139.

membership in a marginalized group.⁵⁴ Given all that we have discussed above, it comes as no surprise that contemplative teachers routinely encounter resistance or difficulty when inviting students to enter their own inner depths. Often there are things hidden in the depths that we would rather not confront. Notwithstanding, challenging ourselves and our students (respectfully and responsibly) to confront the demons within is a necessary risk because, unless we do, will continue to project those demons outward and to sow the seeds of division in our communities.

⁵⁴ For a scholarly effort to address these issues in practice, see Treleaven, *Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness*.

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