

2017

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### Recommended Citation

Biagi, Laura (2017) "In Paradise with Contemplative Pedagogy: A Journey," *Journal of Contemplative Inquiry*. Vol. 4: No. 1, Article 4.

Available at: <https://digscholarship.unco.edu/joci/vol4/iss1/4>

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# In Paradise with Contemplative Pedagogy: A Journey

**Laura Biagi**  
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*With Dante in Heaven: A Contemplative Journey is a course that I devised and taught in the Italian Studies Department at Vassar College in the spring of 2016. The course focused on Paradise, the third canticle of The Divine Comedy by Dante Alighieri; it was cross-listed with the Department of Religion, and taught in English. Thirty students (freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors) with different backgrounds and majors, enrolled in this course. During this course, I introduced the students to free-writing, deep listening exercises, yoga-based deep breathing exercises, and vocal improvisation. Students felt that the practices contributed to a feeling of relaxation, focus, and overall ease in the classroom, and that some of the exercises allowed them to overcome personal and academic obstacles in subjects other than the humanities. This reflective paper describes the course design, the uses and outcomes of classroom exercises, and the relationship between the study of the primary text (referred to as the Comedy in the rest of this paper) and the development of the class's learning environment. The students' self-reported experiences demonstrate how contemplative pedagogy can model a new way of teaching and learning that honors students' personal experiences and backgrounds when approaching a classic piece of literature.*

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## PEDAGOGY AND METHOD

**M**y goals for developing this course were to: introduce the concept of inner and outer soundscapes; explore forms of learning through sound and listening; share deep listening practices in the classroom to support students' capacity to communicate with one another in ways that are personal, respectful, and reciprocal; create an opportunity for inner exploration; and experiment with new teaching and learning methods. My goals were supported by evaluations and assignments that were partially traditional (a mid-term and a final paper), and more experimental, both non-graded and graded. The non-graded assignments consisted of bi-weekly forum entries on the online course page. These entries did not have to be limited to writing. Students could also draw or take pictures and post them on the forum. The graded assignments consisted of three free-writing assignments in which the students could explore their relationship to the poem outside of an academic writing style, and a final "contemplative group project." Finally, each class included a slide presentation, reading from the poem in English for meaning and in Italian for sound, and small and large group discussions.

With this course, as with all my courses, I make sure I elucidate the pedagogical approach in my syllabus and take a good amount of time to share my goals with the students on the first day of class; students need to be able to opt out from this form of pedagogy if they are not comfortable with it. Once the course starts, I have regular office hours and ask students to come visit. I have a list of resources ready, including counseling services on campus, as well as the names and addresses of offices whose work focuses on various forms of diversity based on gender choice, ethnicity, religion, physical and mental ability and wellness, and class and poverty.

The research for this course originated in my training in yoga and sound healing in India and the United States, and the approaches to contemplative pedagogy by Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, and the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education. “Contemplation,” from the Latin *contemplari*, meant to create a sacred space for observation (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p. 21). Today, in secular academia, contemplative pedagogy explores how emotions, intuitions, and sensory-based exercises enhance students’ mental health; support students’ capacity to learn, retain, and express information while maintaining a sense of well-being during stressful periods; and encourage students to find their own voices and apply their learning to everyday life (pp. 3-9).

Contemplative teaching and learning share many points, including “seeing things as they are, being open to new ideas, appreciating the contribution of silence to learning, valuing each human voice, honoring the constantly changing nature of ideas” (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p. 91). Activities that allow students to experience unity out of diversity are not only refreshing and stimulating, but also essential to the survival of our communities. I call the opposite of inclusive learning, “exclusive learning,” which means that only a few thrive at the expense of others. The concepts of learning together, listening to one another, and equality in the production of knowledge are rare in the model of exclusive learning in higher education, which seems to favor individualized goals and outcomes: individual essays read alone on paper or online, individual papers handed in, individualized course of studies, and individual grades given by individual teachers. This model has become the norm, but through contemplative pedagogy we can re-imagine a process of learning and teaching that is based on listening, on sharing, on respecting students as teachers and teachers as students.

### **Contemplating Sound**

Because of my interests and research in sound studies, nada yoga (the yoga of sound), and sound healing, I decided to use sound as the medium through which we could explore language, poetry, communication, and awareness in the *Comedy*. The poem is filled with imagery, too, and often I introduced images to support the

exploration of sounds. Many artists, from Botticelli to Dalì, have made drawings inspired by the *Comedy*. However, for this course, the contemplation of sound was my main focus.

Among the practices that I share with my students are “exercises on inner and outer listening.” Learning how to listen to the voices in our heads, such as the voices of our inner critics, can teach us so much about how to be free of internal distractions. Listening exercises help us become aware of this sonic presence in our minds, and to slowly widen the silent spaces between thoughts. I hear a thought, I become aware, I breathe and let the thought go, until another thought “is thinking me.” Listening is about being open to all sounds and, at the same time, to allow silence to exist. In yoga, silence is not the absence of physical sound, which is actually impossible for our human body.<sup>1</sup> It has more to do with quieting the breath and the mind, with simply *being* in the present moment. It will be very difficult to quiet the mind without calming the breath. Shallow and fast breathing are, in fact, often the result of unruly thoughts.<sup>2</sup>

One exercise that I use often at the beginning of my classes is a contemplative practice that starts with listening to one’s breath and heartbeat. Students are encouraged to “sit up,” and to be at ease and relaxed while maintaining a good sitting position. We control the breath by using numbers of counts: for example, we breathe in on counts of six, and we breathe out on counts of six.<sup>3</sup> Gently, I guide students to expand their listening to the sounds immediately around them, then to the sounds of the room, of the building, and finally to the furthest sound they can perceive. We dwell in this moment that I call “ear stretching.” Then, we withdraw (*pratyahara*) our listening awareness all the way back to us, traveling from the outer sounds to the inner sounds of our heartbeat and breathing. Finally, we try to listen to every sonic element arising in each moment.

As Mirabai Bush and Daniel Barbezat explain, “Deep listening is a way of hearing in which we are fully present with what is happening in the moment without trying to control it or judge it. We let go of our inner clamoring and our usual assumptions and listen with respect for precisely what is being said. Very few stu-

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1 There is never a moment, except than in sleep, when we can experience complete silence. Even in an anechoic chamber, we would still hear our heartbeat, the flush of our blood in veins and arteries, and our breaths.

2 My exposure to listening exercises, however, preceded my studies in India and goes back to 1998, when I started training with composer and educator Pauline Oliveros in New York. Pauline spent a lifetime researching, performing, and teaching listening, resonance, improvisation, and collaboration as social tools for community building (Oliveros, 2005).

3 Counting the in- and out-take of breath is a simple technique that allows most students to learn how to control one’s breathing patterns. When thinking arises and takes over, we lose the count. It’s inevitable. This is a non-invasive and non-aggressive way to become aware of how much power our unruly thoughts have.

dents have developed this capacity for listening” (2014, p. 137). Listening does not require particular skills, but it demands a fairly good capacity to concentrate, and it requires that individuals are comfortable with their own solitude. Listening, like other contemplative practices, while it put us in communication with others and the environment, is ultimately done alone.

Arthur Zajonc, in his book *Meditation as Contemplative Inquiry*, points out that solitude is the “central characteristic of modern human consciousness” (2009, p. 22). In a Platonic journey from the world of the senses to the perfection of Ideas, Dante’s journey in *Paradiso* is also a solitary one. He is accompanied by guides and souls but, ultimately, he is alone in his journey. In the same way, contemplative pedagogy won’t provide a “beaten path” for practitioners. Zajonc writes, “Going forward, solitude and love will be inseparable” (2009, p. 23). The journey is personal, intimate, and filled with unexpected discoveries. The capacity to comfortably dwell in the silence of inner solitude is a skill that requires practice and, as Zajonc explains, humility and reverence. Humility and reverence are two qualities that are difficult to cultivate in materialistic societies: we want everything, now, and fast! The process of listening without expectation or a specific result is helpful for the development of a part of ourselves that, in yoga, is called “the witness,” and that Zajonc calls “the silent self” (2009, pp. 30-34).

It is certainly difficult to talk about the silent self because it is above words and definitions; it belongs to everyone and everything, and all is part of it. It is the part of ourselves that is beyond our personality, free of social distinctions, the mind that is thinking itself. It is called the witness in yoga because it is silent, and it while it is in us, it can see us from within and from the outside. In the presence of the witness, our chatting mind quiets down and, by the same token, it is only when the whirlpools of thoughts calm down that the witness can be perceived. With sound, be it a prayer, a mantra, a chant, humming or improvising, it is possible to *entrain* thoughts.<sup>4</sup>

Building on listening with vocal exercises allows participants to continue cultivating a taste for inner solitude while connecting with others. I prompt students to start with a sigh or a yawn, just to get over the self-imposed criticism that often accompanies the idea of singing. We progress from sighing and yawning, to the experience bodily vibration through humming, and then we finally open our sounds to vowels and extended vocal techniques such as whistling, laughing, coughing, bits and pieces of words, etc. We never lose our connection with listening while we make sounds. Listening becomes porous; we hear close and far, we detect per-

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4     Entraining is not a typo for entertaining. Entraining, in sound healing theory and practice, is the act of “catching” by rhythm. When I listen to music and my foot starts beating the tempo on the carpet, that’s entrainment. When I listen to music and become one with music, that’s entrainment. In this context, when I am able to catch my thoughts and make them one with the vibration of a chant or prayer, that’s entrainment.

sonality traits through the tones, the colors, the tempo of breathing. Eventually, groups starting with various notes end up gathering on basic chords, creating a sonic community.

When I was living in New York City for my graduate studies at NYU, I studied “extended vocal techniques” with composer and performance artist Meredith Monk.<sup>5</sup> Monk’s career spans over five decades of experimental solo and ensemble work. Her work on the human voice is at the same time very simple and very complex. As a trained singer, Monk’s vocal skills are excellent. However, the way she teaches voice composition starts from a very basic premise: the voice is a body, it has its own movement, its own habitual signatures, and its own unique qualities. Every voice has a unique personality, like an actor on stage. “The voice,” writes Monk, is “as a tool for discovering, activating, remembering, uncovering, demonstrating primordial/prelogical consciousness” (Jowitt, 1997, p. 56). This “primordial/prelogical consciousness” is the source of our creative principle. It takes some courage to improvise with one’s voice in front of other people. Our voice is as unique as our fingerprints. Once we get over the fear of embarrassing ourselves, however, expressing vocal sounds creates an openness that allows for intellectual breakthroughs, on an emotional and intellectual level.

Connections happen inside and outside the participants. In my exercises with students over the years, I consistently noticed that, as soon as participants close their eyes, they tend to cluster together, as if wanting to experience each other’s presence more. In the exercise I devised, called “Knowing by Sound,” I prompt students to “get to know each other” by listening to each other’s voices while improvising. The improvisations are always based on the breath and not on musical skills. I asked the students to get to know each other through sound while moving gently around the room with eyes closed. We started the class with some stretches, and body and voice warm-ups. We then gathered in the center of the classroom and looked at each other, opening our senses to the presence of our own bodies and the bodies of others. I then prompted students to start moving slowly around the room while completing revolutions around their own center. Finally, we added sound to the movement and, because our eyes were closed, vocal sounds became a tool to sense each other, to detect each other’s presence. I asked the students to close their eyes or keep a soft gaze, and to hold their hands in front of them, to create a sense of protection in case they came into contact with other students or objects in the room. We had agreed that I would record this improvisation, [which you can listen to here](https://soundcloud.com/laura-biagi-321096202/knowning-by-sound)<sup>6</sup>. You can hear the students’ voices, and the shuffling of their feet as they pivot around themselves and walk around.

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5 [www.meredithmonk.org](http://www.meredithmonk.org)

6 <https://soundcloud.com/laura-biagi-321096202/knowning-by-sound>

All of the thirty course students participated in this exercise. That day, I invited the students to share their experience on our online forum. Most students seemed to find the practice helpful as a process of self-awareness and discovery. However, one particular theme emerged from the majority of the entries: students were able to find a point of connection between self and others, a place of connectivity and inclusion that did not feel threatening or intrusive. One student commented:

This resonance was not necessarily harmonious, and each voice didn't match in tone, however somehow the sound waves bounced off each other in a respectful and observant way. The owner of each voice understood its connection to the larger system while genuinely flowing from a place of uniqueness and free will. (Student, unpublished course forum post, 2016)

When you are able to connect with yourself, you will also learn how to connect with others and vice-versa. This exercise is a good tool to make students aware of any discomfort with connection. "I think when I grow more confident in my sound expression I will be able to connect with more people in not only our class but in life." (Student, unpublished course forum post, 2016).

### **The Comedy**

To attempt to cover the extensive and authoritative scholarly interpretations of Dante's work built up over the centuries was beyond the scope and goal of my research. My scholarly training and background is in Performance Studies, and not in Italian Studies. A Dante specialist would have approached the *Comedy* differently, with more depth and cross-references, but I was more interested in using this poem as a vehicle to explore the impact of contemplative pedagogy in higher education. This choice is reflected in the simple way in which I presented the *Comedy* to the students, most of whom were not majoring in Italian Studies. I used Durling's translation, which was recommended to me by my esteemed mentor at Vassar College, a Dante specialist, John Ahern.

*The Divine Comedy* is a poem bringing together theology, astronomy, astrology, politics, history, geography, aesthetics, and more. In three canticles, *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*, the poet narrates his descent through Hell, his ascension of Mount Purgatory, and his flight through the Heavenly Spheres of Paradise. The journey is the goal, a process of inner transformation through purification of the senses. During his journey, the poet/pilgrim is accompanied by three main guides: Virgil (Hell and Purgatory) Beatrice (Paradise), and St. Bernard (Paradise). *Paradise* is perhaps the hardest canticle of the three, filled with symbols, cultural references and nuances. I took a risk, and I am grateful to my colleagues in the Italian

Department at Vassar College for allowing me to teach this masterpiece with an innovative approach.

In *Paradise*, Dante ascends through ten spheres, ten being a sacred number of completion in the Platonic/Neoplatonic system of thought: Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Fixed Stars, *Primum Mobile* and Empyrean. The Empyrean is where Divine Love (God, even though Dante does not use this word in this final sphere) resides, beyond time and space, emanating its Light and Virtues to the outer spheres. Beatrice is Dante's guide for most of this canticle. She helps the pilgrim rise through the spheres and in consciousness. Each passage from a lower to a higher sphere can be understood as an intellectual and spiritual breakthrough. In the Fixed Stars, Dante sees "a point that was radiating light" (*un punto vidi che raggiava lume*) (*Par. 28.16*).<sup>7</sup> Dante's capacity to sustain this vision has been strengthened during the journey. In the final canto of *Paradise*, Dante is hit by a flash of lightning, finally realizing the Unity of all that is: "my mind was struck by a flash" (*la mia mente fu percossa / da un fulgor*) (*Par. 33.139*). He invokes the "highest Light" to help him find the words to write down his experience:

O highest Light that rise so far beyond our  
 mortal thought, lend again to my memory a little  
 of how you appeared,  
 and make my tongue so powerful that it may  
 leave a single spark of your glory to the people  
 yet to be,  
 for, if it comes back somewhat to my memory  
 and resounds a little in these verses, more will be  
 conceived of your victory. (*Par. 33.67-75*)<sup>8</sup>

Finally, Dante becomes one with "the Love that moves the sun and the other stars" (*Par. 33.145*).

7 For my course, I used Robert H. Durling's translation of *Paradise*. Durling translates Dante's poetry into prose. I chose Durling's version for two reasons. First, it was recommended to me by retired professor of Italian John Ahern. Professor Ahern taught Dante's *Comedy* at Vassar College for many years and I trusted his advice. Second, because of the quality of this course, I was more interested in working with meaning than with rhyme. I wanted the students to be able to understand the poem through prose, and then study Dante's poetry directly on the Italian text.

8 *O somma luce che tanto ti levi / da' concetti mortali, a la mia mente / ripresta un poco di quel che parevi, / e fa la lingua mia tanto possente / ch' una favilla sol de la tua gloria / possa lasciare a la futura gente, / ché, per tornare alquanto a mia memoria / e per sonare un poco in questi versi, / più si conceperà di tua vittoria.*



In this system, the microcosm and the macrocosm are one and different, separate and united. Spiritual ascension is marked by paradoxes, leaps of faith, sudden realizations, and inner reflection. While the system on which Dante builds his intricate journey is original, *The Divine Comedy* can be read as a poem in relation to other works of art, such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, as well as philosophical essays and religious texts from the Old and New Testament, Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy*, and St. Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*. The *Comedy* weaves together neo-platonic thought with Christian esotericism, Arabic alchemy and Aristotelian theories of emanation, astronomy, and astrology.

What Dante did was revolutionary for his time. He wrote this journey in the first person, becoming at once poet, pilgrim, and prophet. It was unusual for lay people to write an epic poem narrating one's ascension to heaven and an ultimate vision of angels and saints, the Madonna, Christ, and God. Moreover, despite being fluent in Latin, Dante chose to write in the Florentine vernacular of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, the "vulgar" language of the people. While not many unschooled people could read, they could listen to *The Divine Comedy* being read in public spaces, including the church of Santa Reparata, which would later become the cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence.

### Heavenly Sounds

Marshall McLuhan (1960) wrote that "writing is the visualization of acoustic space" (p. 207) and that a "pure acoustic space is spherical" (p. 70). Beatrice and the blessed souls dominate the acoustic space. Dante is hesitant, like a child, a shy lover, a beginner on the path. Depending on which sphere he is in, the pilgrim's voice is strong, restrained, or muted. He periodically apologizes for not being able to express with words what he has experienced in the Heavens. Dante refers to a leap that the pen needs to take, attesting that words can't convey the strength of his vision. The incapacity to describe God as simultaneity and unity is also due to what Teolinda Barolini (1992) calls the "temporal status of language" (p. 168). She writes: "When caused by God to sound in time, [...] his speech is like human speech. Otherwise, God's word is silent and eternal [...]" (p. 168). Dante actually coined a neologism for this incapacity to express what is beyond human senses: *trasumanar*, transhumanizing, understood in the *Comedy* as "being able to go beyond one's human sensorial limitations." He writes, "To signify transhumanizing *per verba* is / impossible; therefore let the comparison / suffice for those to whom grace reserves the experience"<sup>9</sup> (*Par.* 1.70-72).

Soundscapes in *Paradise* include the poet's narration in the first person; dialogues between Dante and his guides, Beatrice and St. Bernard; Dante and the

<sup>9</sup> *Trasumanar significa per verba / no si poria; però l'esempio basti / a cui esperienza grazia serba*

souls he meets; Dante's inner thoughts (always heard by the souls and the angelic intelligences); angelic chants, invocations, condemnations, whispers and one loud cry; and silence. Vocalizations are human and angelic, elegantly alternating between narration and dialogue. Sound also marks certain steps of the journey. In the sphere of Saturn, for example, Beatrice is no longer smiling, and the souls and angels are not chanting. Beatrice explains to Dante that the reason why she doesn't smile and he hears silence is that his limited senses would not be able to sustain the high intensity of sound and image. In order for Dante to refine his senses, the souls gather in front of him and produce a "strong cry"<sup>10</sup> (*Par.* 21.140-142). Dante is overwhelmed, and the cry "wins" him. He surrenders to a necessary transformation of his sense of hearing.

Dante also used repetitive sounds of certain consonants in the various heavenly spheres: "r" in Mars (*roggio, riso, rilevarsi, riprese*), or "v" in the *Primum Mobile* (*vien, vista, vinse, vedere, viso vinto, viva, velo, virtute*). When he reaches the *Primum Mobile*, Dante meets St. Peter, St. James, St. John and Adam, who test the pilgrim on faith, hope, and charity. All of them breathe their words. In Cantos 24, 25, 26: *spiro, spirava, spirò, respiri a te, il suon del trino spiro*. This strategy creates a physical reaction to sound together with an intellectual stimulation through meaning.

After developing listening exercises and vocal improvisations with the students during the first month and a half of our course, I decided to read a full canto in Italian during a class. Of the thirty students in the class, about ten knew Italian at various levels, from beginning to advanced. We had been reading excerpts of the cantos aloud in English during class, switching to the Italian original when I wanted students to notice certain choices by the translator, or to listen to the use of alliterations and assonances. I chose Canto 14, in which Dante and Beatrice ascend from the sphere of the Sun to the sphere of Mars because I enjoy listening to the words chosen by the poet in which the letter "r" has a certain strength, i.e., *virtute, translato, robbi, Marte, Cristo*.

I led the students through a simple physical warm-up, a vocal warm-up and improvisation, and a listening exercise while moving about the classroom. Then I asked the students to go back to their chairs, sit up, and listen to the sounds of the poem. I was interested in exploring how the sonic aspect of the poem impacted students' listening, so I decided to read parts of the poems in Italian that contained assonances and alliterations. Since only a third of the class spoke Italian, this experiment was, for most, a purely sound-based experience. This is what a student wrote on the forum that same day:

When you [the professor] read the cantos in Italian, I could really feel the impact of the text. Sometimes it's easy to forget how the

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<sup>10</sup> *Fero un grido di sì alto suono / che non potrebbe qui assomigliarsi, / né io lo 'ntesi, sì mi vinse il tuono.*

writer's decisions in terms of style can really influence the meaning they are trying to relay. Dante forces the reader to see the connections between text and metaphor. Only by vocalizing the text could this be communicated. I think the class highlighted the importance and lack of real "reading" in education and college. (Student, unpublished course forum post, 2016)

Reading and writing as a contemplative practice date back to ancient times. Daniel P. Barbezat and Mirabai Bush introduce contemplative approaches to reading and writing, tracing back the "sacred roots of reading" to "all traditions with written scriptures" (2014, p. 111). The authors share that approaching academic reading assignments in a contemplative mode supports students in slowing down and truly become immersed in the text (p. 113). In the case of this course, reading the passage next to the vernacular Florentine of Dante's allowed the resonance of the language to deliver a layer of meaning that goes beyond the literal one. Dorothe Bach and John Alexander, in their article "Contemplative Approaches to Reading and Writing: Cultivating Choice, Connectedness, and Wholeheartedness in the Critical Humanities" (2015), write about using reading and writing as "a means to help students connect to their minds as objects of contemplation, experience alternative ways of being and relating, and consider how they make meaning from experience" (p. 17). The authors insist on the importance of cultivating choice for the readers/students to write with a more sensory focus (p. 25) and how finding joy in reading results in better learning skills (p. 17). I would add that the pure resonance of reading out loud creates a vibration in the listener that supports the embodiment of learning, and connection between bodies in the classroom. In the forum, one student wrote, "I've felt incredibly aware and in tune with myself as a result of hearing one of the Cantos read aloud"; and another, "At moments when I tried focusing solely on the sound aspect, I felt a type of vibrational connection within me. I felt as if I was being connected with the class by one voice and one origin."

### **Final Projects**

I wanted to bring all these elements together in the students' final projects: contemplation, analysis and understanding of the poem, embodiment of learning, creative expression, listening, awareness of self and others, and teamwork/intrapersonal connection. I organized students into six groups of five people, and gave them some parameters: projects should include a specific teaching from *Paradise*; they could be made of multiple media; they should allow each person in the group to contribute equally with their own vision and specific interests; they could be presented in any style, from a traditional lecture, all the way to an art installation; and they should not exceed fifteen minutes in length.

I made the decision of which students would work together. At the beginning of the course, I had asked the students to fill in a questionnaire in which I asked them questions such as: What is your major? What is your passion? What are you very good at? After studying the answers, I created the groups. I wanted the groups to be as varied as possible, so that an effort had to be made to communicate, to bridge differences, and to listen to each other. The five projects included one live performance installation; three short films, one of which included an art collage; an interactive performance; and a “pasta primavera” with ingredients corresponding to planetary qualities and colors. All the groups succeeded in creating a conversation around their interpretation of the text. Some pieces were soothing, some provoking, others jarring. Feedback came in two ways: a group discussion right after each presentation, and a personal reflection that each student submitted as their final paper.

Overall, despite many students first feeling challenged by working in groups, they expressed in their final papers that they enjoyed having the opportunity to work creatively in a team. Most of the times, students are asked to write a final paper rather than being asked to get to know each other. Oftentimes students who are in the same course barely know each other by the end of the semester or quarter. Contemplative practices such as the ones we shared helped bridging distances and differences, and were a good preparation for teamwork and respectful dialogue.

## **OUTCOMES**

In this section, I would like to let the students’ voices highlight some of the outcomes of the course. These quotes were taken from their unpublished forum entries, mid-terms, and final papers.

The impact of contemplative practices carried over to how students learned about themselves:

The teaching of *Paradise* as a contemplative work was so different from any other course I have taken, because I was forced to center my thoughts and questions on myself, and on my personal spiritual journey and beliefs, rather than what I thought a professor would want or expect to hear.

Students appreciated being offered a variety of learning approaches, and having access to “spiritual forms of knowledge” that involved self-exploration as part of the course goals:

This comprehensive approach to education does not just meet the expectations of traditional academia, it also meets many other learning needs that conventional academia abysmally fails to ad-

dress. Such needs include: the necessity of leaving room to make mistakes in order to foster greater creativity; the necessity of valuing spiritual and other forms of knowledge as equal to empirical knowledge; and the necessity of expressing ideas and engaging in textual criticism through media beyond the tightly prescribed written prose and dialectics of the academy.

The impact of contemplative practices carried over to how students learned in other courses:

In fact, the contemplative approach to *Paradise* really affected my approach to other areas of learning in my life. In particular, it has helped me engage with mathematics on a more spiritual level, and as a result, it has helped to increase both my enjoyment and understanding of that particular subject. In fact, if I ever become a high school teacher or earn my Ph.D. and become a professor, I will strive bring what I have learned of contemplative learning to that arena of teaching, something that analytic subjects rarely if ever enjoy.

The sound-related practices facilitated students' problem solving:

The sound based contemplative practices are quite unlike anything I've done before. As someone new to the world of meditation in general, our soundscapes have been quite an interesting experience for me. Listening to the cascade of sounds created by our class is like experiencing a minor force of nature. I am not a person who generally experiences much anxiety in my day to day life, but when I partake in these meditations I experience a deep sense of calmness unlike anything that I find anywhere else. One of the most poignant things that has happened during a meditation happened the second class. I had been working on a difficult group theory proof for a math class that I'm in, and I had not been making much progress on it. It had been on my mind before class, but during the meditation I had set it aside and forgotten about it. When we took out the blue books after the soundscape, I instantly, without thinking about what I was doing, wrote down the solution. So that was pretty cool.

One of the students spoke about the transformation that had happened from the beginning of class:

I remember that the first day of class we were walking around, making eye contact, saying hello, shaking hands, and we were all

palpably awkward about it. Watching the video [of a group project] I could see, and remember from my own experiences in recent classes, that we have all settled into connecting in these ways. We no longer feel awkward touching each other's souls in this way; instead we open ourselves and connect freely. I am grateful that I was able to have this experience with this group of people. I feel that I have gained a great understanding of myself along the way, as well as a greater connection with the people around me. To me, this is paradise.

Midterms and finals can be a source of stress for students, and for faculty alike when faced with hours of grading papers, especially when students write them under pressure. Allowing students to work on group projects based on contemplative methods as part of their final project has proven to be a very good motivator for them to do good work, have fun with it and, therefore, learn better. For the faculty, it's less stress too, because the projects are performed in class, and the papers reflect on the student's participation rather than a set of facts they memorized for us. In the words of a student:

The process was effortless. My teammates were focused and efficient and respectful, and we completed our project with no stress and few disagreements, which we solved quickly and smoothly. It was the most harmonious group project I have ever been a part of. It boosted my confidence in the abilities of humans to work together toward a common goal in a peaceful and effective way.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Teaching a course based on contemplative pedagogy is, at the same time, easier and harder for the professor. It is easier because the material becomes alive and pertinent to one's life and the life of students. Emotions are explored, and creativity is supported. Overall, listening, improvising, drawing, and creative writing make classes more enjoyable. It is harder because the professor has to be involved in these same practices. We cannot hide our emotions, beliefs, assumptions, and quirks behind the material. We cannot speak using an author's voice only; our voice has to emerge. In other words, we teach by doing, and at an even deeper level, by being: being vulnerable, open to lead and follow, willing to change, both an expert and a participant.

As with all classes, we hit some bumps here and there. Differences came up, and we all wanted to hold on to the specific traits of our personalities. It is difficult to accept the failures of our own belief system and to acknowledge biases that we may have towards ourselves and others. However, by moving past judgment, we

could create an environment in which we did not need to agree with each other to support each other; we did not need to permanently change our point of view in order to be able to see from another's. Students and I allowed for the possibility to change and grow together, fully committed and engaged in taking this contemplative journey. In the words of a student:

Inside the classroom, the academic environment was truly unique. Right away it was clear that this course would require students to suspend social anxiety in order to fully give themselves over to the experiential aspect of the class. I came to cherish the exercises in which the entire group would be wholly invested in following the directions to create a joint experience. The classroom became a safe space.

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