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Preface

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Preface

We are witnessing the increasing use of contemplative practices by university faculty, administrators, staff, and students: a quick glance at the table of contents in this issue shows the wide range of applications, disciplines, and cultural contexts. Since its inception in 2014, the *Journal of Contemplative Inquiry* has been fortunate to have received five years of research and personal reflections on the impacts of contemplative practices in higher education. The *Journal* has documented impacts on the personal and professional lives of faculty and staff, student learning and well-being, community-building, and intercultural dialogues.

This issue highlights—though not always explicitly—efforts to “decolonize” the university and bring different cultural lenses to contemplative practices. As Shelly Harrell states in her well-researched article “Soulfulness as an Orientation to Contemplative Practice: Culture, Liberation, and Mindful Awareness”: “As contemplative practices are increasingly utilized as pedagogical and wellness tools within university...settings, it is critical that they be constructed in ways that resonate with people in their particular cultural contexts.” She warns that “it is important to be mindful of the manner in which contemplative concepts such as equanimity are conveyed to avoid pathologizing emotional experience and expression.” Her point is further underscored in Valin Jordan’s personal reflection “‘Can You See Me?’ Eye-Gazing: A Meditation Practice for Understanding.” Through a one-on-one experience of eye-gazing in a yoga class, Jordan situates themes including breaking illusions, releasing existential separation, and softening to find compassion, “to uncover how transformation and social change can be achieved through seeing, understanding, and connecting with the Other.”

In this issue we also highlight James Madison University’s campus-wide initiative to establish a collaborative culture of contemplative study and practice. Deborah Kipps-Vaughan, Jared Featherstone, Edward Brantmeier, Marsha Mays-Bernard, Kimberly DuVall, and Shari Scofield helped gather faculty, staff, and students to find common ground and common language to articulate “the connection between contemplative practice and the James Madison University mission.” Their report, “Many Rivers, One Ocean: An Initiative for Contemplative Study and Practice,” focuses on their strategic planning process and identifies one of their agreed-upon priorities going forward as the measurement of student and faculty outcomes, assessing the role of contemplative practices in the areas of reducing student stress, increasing inner engagement, enhancing outer engagement, and deepening learning. Here we see the balance of connections between contemplative practice and community engagement.

Over the past five years the use of qualitative and quantitative research methods in measuring outcomes such as those in the James Madison University initiative has gradually become more sophisticated. However, LeeRay Costa, raising the standards of what can happen on sabbatical in her article “Sabbatical as Sacred Time: Contemplative Practice and Meaning in the Neoliberal Academy,” questions mainstream research and assessment frameworks:

The impact of our teaching and mentorship on students—which I, and many of my colleagues, find especially meaningful—may be outside the currently privileged assessment frame and thus impossible to quantify, understand, and celebrate. How does one adequately measure student learning? Do our tools themselves limit what we can measure, know, and therefore find meaningful? (p. 69)

It may seem at first that an article about the sacredness of sabbatical time is for the privileged few. Yet Costa also explores the impact of contemplation on her pedagogical methods, including deep listening, listening with raw openness, and ways to “extend inner transformation to the transformation of oppressive structures.”

Such challenges to assessment frameworks are complemented by radical experiments with new pedagogical methods in physics, mathematics, and environmental-ethics education. In Zosia Krusberg and Meredith Ward’s article “Classical Physics and Human Embodiment: The Role of Contemplative Practice in Integrating Formal Theory and Personal Experience in the Undergraduate Physics Curriculum,” students write reflections on their experiences with contemplative and somatic practices, describing “suddenly becoming aware of countless manifestations of formal physics principles in their surroundings, in an important step toward establishing firm connections between the abstract and the experiential.”

In “Applying Contemplative Practices to the Educational Design of Mathematics Content: Report from a Pioneering Workshop,” authors Dor Abrahamson and Patricia Fay Morgan apply the “subjective cognition of mathematical concepts as grounded in reflective physical action on or with cultural forms, which may be material, virtual, or imaginary.” Their report elaborates on participants’ experiences of whether and how bringing focused attention to somatic experience through a wide variety of contemplative–somatic practices (e.g., yoga, Feldenkrais, body-mind centering, and attending to bodily sensations in meditation) may support student learning of specific mathematical content.

In her article “Mind and Muscle: Considering Weightlifting as a Contemplative Practice,” Laura Vernon explores conceptualizations of contemplative practices with a focus on contemplative movement practices (CMPs), proposing the inclusion of weightlifting among these practices. After a review of theoretical frameworks that relate CMPs to mindfulness, the author finds their specific expression in her own reflection on weightlifting, exhibiting a kind of iconoclastic humor, honesty, and kindness to oneself:

At the same time that weightlifting may be a goal-driven practice more broadly, the moment-to-moment experience of the practice can be contemplative. Weightlifting can also be an interesting social experiment, as it may challenge cultural norms about gender roles, strength and weakness, and masculinity and femininity. (p. 122)

From the research conducted by Aaron John Godlaski in “Exploring Intentions and Outcomes in a Contemplative Classroom: A Qualitative Study,” we learn that intentions at the outset of the course play a key role in

deciding how students subsequently approach and experience practice....Intention thus stands to color all subsequent outcomes and results in the promotion of either well-being or suffering....Those who approached the class out of curiosity were more likely to express acceptance of their experiences, both positive and negative. An attitude of curiosity and acceptance appeared to moderate students’ outcomes, with those who expressed a greater degree of acceptance of difficulties more likely to still be engaged in meditative practice at the end of the course, have positive reflections about their experiences, and note an increase in meta-awareness. (p. 147)

This issue also includes a paper by Paul Wapner based on the first annual Arthur Zajonc Lecture on Contemplative Education, which Wapner originally delivered during the 2017 Summer Session on Contemplative Learning in Higher Education. Wapner writes:

For me, coming alive involves relaxing the borders between our interior self and the world. This allows us to deploy contemplative practice in all our efforts and enjoy the benefits as they course through our professional lives. It also invites us to right social wrongs and otherwise improve social conditions, *and* allow that effort to penetrate our souls. It makes clear that spiritual work doesn’t begin and end on the cushion, yoga mat, pew, or dance studio. Rather, it includes reaching out—delving into the messiness of public affairs—and using such experience to grow our souls. It involves using everything as a means of coming alive. (p. 169)

His lecture goes beyond honoring Arthur Zajonc, former director of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, to include a potent classroom exercise from his own course on environmental ethics:

In my class, we do an exercise where we try to get inside and inhabit environmental displacement....Rather than throw trash in a receptacle or even a recycling bin, we place our refuse in bags and carry them around with us for an entire week.... Along with this, we discuss the fact that receiving communities rarely know the people who generate the trash and thus find themselves accepting anonymous refuse, as well as the social dynamics—including, importantly, the racial and class dimensions—of who produces and who is left dealing with garbage.... The end of the exercise involves [writing a letter to] an imagined person

who handles the refuse at some point along the disposal chain—a janitor, waste hauler, recycling separator, incinerator feeder....After writing such letters, we undertake a deep listening exercise where partners read their letters and others respond as if they are the receivers. We then sit quietly. (p. 165)

Finally, in this issue we offer a new feature: a book review. *The Contemplative Mind in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* by Patricia Owen-Smith is reviewed by Oren Ergas. Owen-Smith brings extensive experience in contemplative education and the scholarship of teaching and learning, informed by her own background in developmental psychology:

In this concise book she explores the encounter between two discourses that have been developing separately in the past decades: contemplative education (CE) and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)....Owen-Smith elaborates on this idea by showing how the term “scholarship” in SoTL has mostly remained situated within an interpretation of consensual, intersubjective, scientific knowing. However, she makes a point of presenting SoTL’s awareness of the limits of this approach, as prominent figures in the SoTL discourse have acknowledged the need for “a new paradigm of research methods...that legitimizes multiple ways of knowing, examines new approaches to learning, and offers a wide range of methodological methods”....In her nuanced account, Owen-Smith clearly establishes that her intention is not to merge [CE and SoTL] but rather to articulate how they can learn from each other. (p. 173)

All ten of the offerings in this issue speak in some way to nontraditional ways of knowing, not in an effort to displace what has been built over centuries in Western academe but to expand and reintroduce what has been missing for a long time: contemplative practice.

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