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If the Beautiful See Themselves, They Will Love Themselves: Contemplative Practice and Cultural Healing

Veta Goler

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This essay, originally delivered as the 2nd annual Arthur Zajonc Lecture on Contemplative Education during CMind's 2018 Contemplative Pedagogy Seminar, emphasizes the importance of works by black women artists in, and beyond, the context of the American black liberation struggle. Through discussions of the work of Dianne McIntyre, Alice Coltrane, Alice Walker, and Minnie Evans, the author demonstrates how the contemplative practices of creative expression are a means of growth and learning, helping all people to see their own beauty, connect with the Divine within, and thrive.

WELCOME

In 1965, writer LeRoi Jones (later known as Amiri Baraka) wrote a poetic essay titled "The Revolutionary Theatre." Turn all their faces to the light, Jones wrote, and "if the beautiful see themselves, they will love themselves" (Jones). These words capture what has been for some the essence of the American black liberation struggle and the sentiment that has motivated multifaceted art forms used as tools in that struggle. There are two fundamental approaches to addressing the oppressive conditions African Americans have faced. One approach is to confront white people about individual and systemic racism. The other is to instill pride and hope in black people by "turning their faces to the light" of their own beauty. My approach is the latter. I've borrowed Jones' words for the title of this essay: "If the Beautiful See Themselves, They Will Love Themselves: Contemplative Practice and Cultural Healing." While based in thoughts about the black liberation struggle, the approach I will discuss is not just for black people, but for everyone.

My intention here is to offer my understanding and experience of how contemplative practices help people to see their own beauty, connect with the Divine within, and thrive—with an emphasis on black people and other people of color. This essay was originally given as a talk—the 2nd annual Arthur Zajonc Lecture on Contemplative Education—during the 2018 Contemplative Pedagogy Seminar that the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society holds at Smith College each August. Interspersed within the talk were several contemplative practices. I’ve included those here; you can access them via the included links. My hope is that you are able to have your own experience of the practices I offered in the talk.

An Initial Practice

Let’s begin with the first practice—an Alice Coltrane meditation. I invite you to listen to her piece, *Journey in Satchidananda*, as a way of becoming present. Alice Coltrane, like her husband John Coltrane, was a jazz musician who embraced eastern spirituality. This piece pays homage to her Guru, Satchidananda. *Sat*, *chit* and *ananda* mean existence, consciousness and bliss, respectively, and are a description of The Divine. Thus, the piece is an exploration of spiritual liberation.

Feel free to experience this music however you choose. Close your eyes, if you like, allow it to wash over you, focus on the musical elements in the piece or your breath—whatever you’re moved to do. Please listen to Alice Coltrane’s *Journey in Satchidananda* (<https://youtu.be/TQqEF-dyhgdE>).

INTRODUCTION

I believe it is safe to say that the people involved with the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society and the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education, and those reading the *Journal of Contemplative Inquiry*, know the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual value of contemplative practices for individuals. One benefit of engaging in contemplative practices is that a person with a higher vibration is likely to help raise the vibration of those around them. In other words, if an individual has a calm presence, an uplifting presence, others around them are like-

ly to feel more calm and uplifted. Studies have affirmed what our experiences have shown us, that engaging in meditation, journaling, yoga, etc., and spending time in nature all positively impact us. I maintain that experiencing the arts—whether creating or witnessing—can have a similar effect. And this is especially important for individuals who encounter mildly or intensely hostile environments on a regular basis. These practices and experiences serve as a balm for the soul, they help empower individuals by correcting misinformation and providing models to emulate, they help people connect with what is true for them, and enable people to live more authentically.

We are living in incredibly challenging times. I believe we are being asked to grow up. We are being asked to evolve human consciousness to a place where we honor all beings—sentient and insentient. We are being asked to honor all humans, animals, birds and fish, plants and trees, the water, the air, the mountains—everything. A way of looking at things that I find very helpful is that we are birthing a new world, and we are having a very difficult labor. But, just as in preparing for labor, women learn how to breathe through the pain, we must engage in the practices that will help us to move through the hard moments until our new world is born. Actually, I believe that, not only will these practices help us navigate the challenges, they will help mitigate the challenges, so that our labor is less painful.

And so, in this essay I want to focus on how practices and creativity help us to step up to the challenges we are facing so that we can grow up—evolve, if you like—and save ourselves. In my article, I offer some things that are recognized as contemplative practices. I also highlight works of art as forms of contemplative practice. Whether making or witnessing art, we can have transcendent experiences. Art takes us within, shows us new ways of thinking, and helps us see our own beauty. I am presenting examples mostly from African American culture, but the message I offer applies to other people of color and to white people, as well. In addition to the contemplative practices, I will also intersperse various arts experiences throughout this essay.

Ugliness Is Out in the Open

Let us consider for a moment why contemplative practices and cultural healing are so needed at this point in time. We are facing major problems that seem insurmountable—among them climate change, economic uncertainty, food insecurity, healthcare challenges, systemic racism (both internalized superiority and internalize inferiority), and a country that is more divided than ever.

The result of so many intractable problems is that virtually everyone is stressed—those who have the power to access more of the things they want and need and those who have a diminished ability to do so. The latter are often people of color.

Navigating the world with so much weighing so heavily on us is difficult. But when we also feel unable to be fully ourselves, when we feel unseen and when we feel isolated and alone, our suffering intensifies. And I would argue that oppressors and the oppressed, alike, feel unable to be fully themselves, unseen and isolated and alone.

In my essay I am focusing on the ways contemplative practices and the arts can help black people heal from internalized oppression by seeing the beauty within themselves. I also believe that these practices can help with internalized superiority by bringing about more authentic ways of being and seeing for white people.

A Beautiful Moment/The Need is Clear

In July 2015, with funding from a grant by The Association of Colleges of the South, I facilitated a three-day contemplative retreat for faculty of color at small liberal arts colleges in the south. I was surprised to learn just how much people of color are starved for opportunities to be away from the micro-aggressions and macro-aggressions they encounter in the workplace and the world on a daily basis. The power of the retreat was not so much about people having an opportunity to voice tensions and hurts they had experienced. It was really about not having to justify themselves or to prove their value. It was about simply being able to be—without explanation or justification—and to delight in their own beauty.

How Do We Address What Needs Changing?

Earlier, I used the metaphor of labor to talk about this time of huge change. So much is changing and so many previously hidden things are being revealed that, despite how things look on the surface, I don't see this as the end of humanity, but as the beginning of a new way of being. Realizing that we are a pretty young species gives me hope. Carl Sagan brilliantly imagined the history of the universe as one calendar year, with the big bang taking place at midnight on January 1st. In this scenario, humans arrive around 10:30 pm on December 31st, and all of recorded history takes place in the last few seconds of the year (Sagan et al., 2000). To mix metaphors a bit, we are birthing a new world and we are like toddlers who don't know how to get along.

I also said earlier, that I see two ways of addressing racism—counter the individual and systemic hate of white people and encourage self-love and an appreciation of their own beauty in black people and other people of color.

I also believe that it is up to each of us to take these steps, and as Gandhi reminds us, to be the change we wish to see. Indeed, Alice Walker borrowed the last line of the Hopi Elder's Statement (*A Hopi Elder Speaks*) to use as the title of one of her books—*We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For: Inner Light in a Time of Darkness* (Walker, 2006). The time has passed for one great leader to show the way. We each have to find our right work to do in our little corner of the world to contribute to the change we want. And people are doing a lot of things to counter racism. There are folks working on interracial and intercultural dialogue. Folks are working on truth and reconciliation processes similar to that used in South Africa after Apartheid. Folks are working on anti-racist training and development. A lot of people are doing a lot of wonderful things.

I have realized that my work is not to help white people move toward and into anti-racism. That's the work of other white people. My work is to help black people and other people of color to heal their internalized oppression, in part by healing my own. Contemplative practices are a huge part of this healing. Black women artists are part of this healing, as well.

A Second Practice

Let's experience a second practice. When I began to explore contemplative practices in depth, I realized that modern dance had been a spiritual practice for me. At the beginning of class, with the first movements, I let everything else go and focused on the present moment. No matter what was going on outside of the studio, I was able to focus on the space, my body, the music, the other dancers, whatever was relevant to what was happening in the moment. And I felt as if I were a vehicle for my inner Self to speak through my movements.

With this second practice, I am not going to ask you to do modern dance, *per se*. But I've developed a brief movement exercise based in modern dance movements. I invite you to do these simple movements. They are really gestures combined with the breath. You can do them sitting down or standing, whichever you prefer.

Please view the attached video of me (<https://youtu.be/6sH-PqIpsKeM?t=1102>) demonstrating the sequence. We will repeat the phrase three times as I call out directions. Let's begin.

Now notice your body and how it feels. Notice what you notice.

Thank you.

MY JOURNEY AT SPELMAN

Earlier, I wrote that contemplative practices and black women artists contribute to the healing of internalized oppression in African Americans. And I have been able to draw on contemplative and arts practices in my time as a faculty member at Spelman College, a liberal arts college for black women. I joined the faculty of Spelman in 1988 as a dancer and choreographer. Although I had an MFA, a terminal degree in performance, my chair thought I should get a PhD. I did, with a dance history dissertation. This initiated a natural movement from performance to dance history, and to contemplative practices. My first experience with contemplative practices was a Transcendental Meditation class in college. Although I did not develop a regular practice at that time, I discovered my spiritual path—and true meditation practice—in 1996. In 2003 on retreat at an ashram in India, I had a meditation message: *spiritualize your work life*. I have done this outside of Spelman by being active with

the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society since 2005 (in summer sessions, conferences, and meetings), with the Center for Courage & Renewal since 2007 (as a facilitator who helps retreat participants join soul and role), and for two years with the Courage of Care Coalition, (as a teacher and facilitator employing contemplative practices in service of social justice).

Within Spelman, my contemplative efforts have included College-wide initiatives, and those specific to my department or my classes. I was instrumental in the creation of a meditation room and a labyrinth on campus, I have been invited to other professor's classes and to student groups to talk about meditation, and I have facilitated retreats for faculty and staff members, and for specific departments.

I also include contemplative pedagogy and practices in my dance history classes and in the class I developed specifically for that purpose—Contemplative Practices and the Arts. I also incorporate these practices in the various leadership roles I have held at Spelman—department and division chair positions, head of faculty senate—and in efforts specifically for faculty. These include president-faculty dinners that I co-facilitated with former president Beverly Daniel Tatum, the contemplative faculty learning community that I've led over the years, retreats for faculty, and organizing contemplative pedagogy workshops for faculty led by Rhonda Magee and Renee Hill.

I have also included black women artists and arts creation activities in my classes, retreats and workshops—within and outside of Spelman.

HEALING AND CULTURE

I have been talking about healing—individual and cultural—but I have not said what I mean. In my view, health is not just the absence of disease. Although we each want our bodies and minds to be as strong and as flexible as possible, a healthy person has an overall sense of safety and well-being, and they feel that they can live authentically as who they are. In other words, a degree of freedom—self-definition, self-determination—is part of health. For these reasons, I see the healing of black people and other people of color as revolutionary. For people of color, thriving is a radical act! I imagine what would happen to racism and other

forms of oppression if people of color began walking around the world as free people. Just as oppression makes it difficult for oppressed peoples to be healthy, people who live freely and healthfully make it difficult for oppression to hold them down.

In her 1928 essay, “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” author and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston said “Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It’s beyond me” (Hurston). Hurston’s comments may seem arrogant to some people, but to me they say that she loves herself no matter what other people think of her. That seems very healthy to me.

And as I continue to think about what health is, I ask myself what healing looks like. In short, it looks like people thriving, not just surviving. It looks like people being fully who they are and how they are, without fear or apology. It looks like people embracing the bodies they have as fully as they are able in order to do what they are called to do to live lives of meaning and purpose.

Another quote I love is by African American theologian and mystic, Howard Thurman. In this well-known quote Thurman says, “Don’t ask what the world needs, ask what makes you come alive and then go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

Oppressed people are not fully alive. We are not encouraged to be fully alive. In fact, often, we’re not seen as fully human. We are considered animals without the same feelings, longings, experiences—even pain thresholds—as white people.

Ultimately, if individual people are able to be fully themselves, to live as freely as they can and to thrive, they are able to embrace and express their sense of culture. Cultural healing happens when the people of a particular culture heal.

One thing that enables healing and thriving to take place is for people of color to tell ourselves a different story than the one on which we were raised. Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie eloquently makes the case for this in her TED Talk, *The Danger of a Single Story*. She reminds us that the real issue is not just that a single story may be wrong, it is actually that the story is incomplete. And what is left out shapes our understanding of others as much as what is included (Adichie, 2009).

Another way to think about this is in terms of the well known African proverb: “Until the lions have their own historians, tales of hunting will always glorify the hunter.” I have seen different versions of this proverb, with different attributions. In any case, the sentiment is clear. Whoever is telling a story is presenting it from a particular perspective for a particular purpose. White people began telling stories of black and indigenous inferiority in order to justify colonization and other acts of oppression. Over time, everyone began to believe the story and to suffer. The way they suffered depended on which side of the equation they were on. Now, black people and other people of color must tell their own stories of their beauty and glory and accomplishments—along with their missteps and failings—for the purpose of healing and thriving.

Practice Number Three

Let’s pause for another practice. I invite you to allow Howard Thurman’s words to work within you. Take a breath and pause for a moment. Now read the Thurman quote and then sit in silence for a minute or so.

Howard Thurman says, “Don’t ask what the world needs, ask what makes you come alive and then go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

WHAT DOES THRIVING LOOK LIKE?

How do I bring black voices to those in my classes and retreats so that they hear different stories? For the next part of my essay, I want to lift up some artists and artistic works that present, encourage, and inspire black beauty. These artistic products foster healing by presenting beauty and connecting folks with the Divine within. This connection enables healing, inspiration, confidence, creativity and thriving. The following are some of the artists and works that I incorporate in my contemplative efforts.

Dianne McIntyre

Dianne McIntyre is a legendary and contemporary dance artist. She directed her company and school, Sounds in Motion, from 1972 to 1988. Since then, she has worked as an independent artist choreographing for dance, theatre, film and TV.

I include McIntyre in my classes and workshops because she has a personal and a professional relationship to contemplative practices. She has a long-standing meditation practice, she approaches dance as contemplative practice—in part by creating with improvisation, which happens in the present moment—and she creates dances with spiritual themes. Through her work, McIntyre enables her dancers and her audiences to experience transcendent moments—moments that shift their perceptions so that they become aware of the previously unseen greatness and beauty within themselves and others, and in which they have a deeper connection to All That Is.

I include here a short video from one of the American Dance Festival's *80 Faces* offerings. *80 Faces: Eighty Years. Eighty Stories* is a series of short statements by artists who have taught and performed at ADF, one of the most important dance festivals in the country. Each artist is invited to speak about a powerful experience of theirs at ADF.

In McIntyre's *80 Faces* piece, she talks about a mystical experience of hers on stage. McIntyre had been commissioned to reconstruct *Negro Spirituals*, a series of solos that Helen Tamiris, daughter of Russian Jewish immigrants, choreographed in 1928 as a way of exploring African American culture and expressing solidarity with oppressed peoples. McIntyre was about to perform the first solo, "Go Down Moses," on a program honoring Tamiris and African American choreographer Pearl Primus. I invite you to watch McIntyre's ADF *80 Faces* clip (https://youtu.be/XuumSdqH8_g).

In addition to showing this powerful video, I also discuss several other works by McIntyre. One piece is her duet, *A Brand New People on the Planet*, which she performs with longtime musician and collaborator, Olu Dara. In this dance, Dara and McIntyre are a homeless couple going about their business. We witness them discovering a box and opening it. When they do, their entire world changes. No longer are they living gloomy, downtrodden lives, their world becomes beautiful. Music plays. McIntyre begins to dance. They are both joyous and free. Then they close the box, and their world returns to its previous state. We watch as they open and close the box a few more times, with the same results. Finally, they wonder if they can hold on to the joyous and free and liberated

world even if they close the box. They attempt this and succeed. With this, McIntyre reminds us that, if liberation is possible for this common couple, it is possible for us all.

Another piece I include is a scene McIntyre choreographed for the film, *Beloved*, based on the novel by Toni Morrison (Demme, 1998). The scene, 'In the Clearing,' is an occasion in which the community is encouraged to engage in various activities to help them remember their value as human beings, even as they continue to live with the dehumanizing reality of slavery. The dance in this scene is McIntyre's version of the Ring Shout, a form of danced worship originally done by enslaved individuals away from the eyes of slave-holders. Let us watch the clip from *Beloved* (<https://youtu.be/om4c8bALlec>).

In watching this scene, I experience compassion and hope. The bodily practices of laughing and crying—and especially dancing—are all cathartic, and all contribute to a sense of healing and thus the real possibility that African Americans can find the strength inside to overcome the injustices of slavery to live in the fullness of joy and love.

Alice Coltrane

We listened to Alice Coltrane's *Journey in Satchidananda* as our opening practice. I was inspired to include this piece in my classes when, in an ACMHE Webinar, Professor Michelle Chatman shared that she has her classes engage in a John Coltrane meditation by listening to one of his songs. I like for my students to listen to Alice Coltrane's music because it expresses her unique spirituality—her roots in the black church combined with eastern spirituality. *Journey in Satchidananda* brings together various aspects of Coltrane's life and her spiritual and music influences. In this piece Coltrane combines Southeast Asian (Indian), jazz, gospel, and blues instrumentation, including the tamboura, harp, saxophone, bass, jingle bells, and snare and bass drums. The instrumentation and melodies are dense and lead to what is for me, a transcendent experience. Shortly after John Coltrane's death in 1967, Alice Coltrane turned her focus to living a spiritual life. She opened an ashram in California, which still exists. She continued to make music until her death in 2007, most of it within the context of her ashram.

Alice Walker

I include Alice Walker for several reasons. First, she is one of the most authentic and compassionate people I have ever met. Next, she is vocal about the importance of contemplative practices. In *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For* she tells us, “this is not a time to be without a practice,” and she discusses the importance of taking the time to be still and to listen within (Walker, 2006).

In her important essay, “Writing *The Color Purple*,” Walker talks about the contemplative approaches she had to take in order to write *The Color Purple* (Walker, 1983). These included not working a day job—some of her practices were extreme—moving closer to nature, spending time being and listening, and living a simple life as she waited for the characters within to reveal themselves to her. Walker makes it clear in her essay that the characters of *The Color Purple* were already existent—not necessarily on the earth plane, however. They were living in another realm and required certain things of her in order to reveal themselves to her. The nature, quietude, and stillness that they required were a way of moving her to an open and receptive state, in which they were comfortable coming forward to be known.

I also include Alice Walker because her work presents black people—and especially black women—as individuals who grow into self-aware, authentic people who know and exercise their agency and power. And finally, I include her because of her sense of the sacredness of all life and her lived connection with the unseen. A few pages from *The Color Purple* serve as examples of this. The dedication of book reflects her appreciation of the Divine.

To the Spirit:
Without whose assistance
Neither this book
Nor I
Would have been
Written.

The first chapter of the book begins: “Dear God,” and establishes the format for much of the book. The book is a series of letters to God—mostly—with some letters from each of the sisters, Celie and Nettie, to each other.

The last chapter of the book begins: “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God.” In this way, Celie’s growth is made clear. She has connected more deeply with the Divine and with all things.

And Walker’s statement after the end of the book reflects her sense of interaction with the unseen world.

I thank everybody in this book for coming.
A.W., author and medium (Walker, 1982)

Minnie Evans

One of the visual artists I include in my classes is Minnie Evans, a twentieth century folk artist. Evans painted fantastical figures of animals and people and angels that she says she received from angels and dreams. As a visionary artist, she didn’t plan her paintings or drawings in advance. In her view, they just happened.

In addition to wanting to expose students to another artist who is connected deeply with the unseen world, I also include Minnie Evans because of her willingness to follow her heart, no matter what others were saying about her. In the Folkstream documentary about her life and her art, *The Angel that Stands By Me*, Evans remembers that she had visions and saw things others didn’t, even as a child. One night, in a dream, she heard an angel say, Why don’t you draw or die? To her this was a clear message that she had to paint—or perhaps, more accurately, it was a message that she had to make herself a vessel for the angels to do their work (Light, 1983).

IN CONCLUSION

Turn all their faces to the light, and “if the beautiful see themselves, they will love themselves” (Jones, 1965). The four women I have discussed in this essay, Dianne McIntyre, Alice Coltrane, Alice Walker, and Minnie Evans, are uniquely important artists, who have their own connections to

their inner worlds, to the Divine and to others. And each of them creates work that offers images of beauty and truth to black people—really, to all people. By presenting them and their creations, I am helping students and retreat participants to see the power and importance of their own beauty and of living an authentic life.

So much of what we are bombarded with through our media tells us what to do, what to look like, what to buy, what is important and what isn't—how to be. But so much of this messaging is superficial. It is designed to make money for a few people. And it is designed to make some people feel that they are better than others and some people feel that they are worse than others. I hope that my efforts help people to let go of those outer messages and to hear from within how they should look, act, and be. In this way they can live authentic lives that honor who they are and their culture and background, and can enable them to make decisions based on inner awareness, not external noise.

Contemplative practices—slowing down or pausing, turning within, and experiencing nature and the arts—connect us to the truth and beauty that are our birthright, that are who we really are. We just have to remember.

Ruth Forman captures this all beautifully in one of her poems.

Final Practice

Let's conclude with one more practice. I invite you to read Ruth Forman's poem, "If I Forget to Dance" (Forman, 2009, p. 24).

If i forget to dance
remind me

yes if i forget to dance
take my hand
lead me to the polished floor
help me take off my shoes
put on myself //

Thank you.

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