

# Contemplative Approaches to Reading and Writing: Cultivating Choice, Connectedness, and Wholeheartedness in the Critical Humanities

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*This article describes an approach in which two humanities instructors use 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. To derive conclusions from this approach, they analyze student work and student feedback from a 3000 level elective comparative literature course, "Spiritual Journeys in Young Adult Fiction." The results show that students cherish the opportunity to inquire into their habitual ways of relating to their academic work and to each other. They find a greater sense of choice, connectedness, and wholeheartedness, and rediscover their love for reading and writing.*

*Keywords: reading, writing, contemplative pedagogy, presence, relational connection, comparative literature*

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In this article, we detail how we use 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. This approach invites students to focus their considerable analytical skills on investigating the process of inquiry and meaning making itself, how they experience it personally and in interaction with others. Cultivating choice is at the heart of our approach. It hinges on students choosing to adopt an attitude different from the frequently disaffected stance with which students approach academic courses. It necessitates that they bring their whole selves to the course, to be wholeheartedly engaged, to be curious, to experiment with different ways to approach reading, writing and discussing and to reflect on what is meaningful to them. That they make these choices freely is key to creating the type of learning community that nurtures a cycle of openness, honesty and meaningful engage-

ment. To derive conclusions on the effectiveness of our approach, we analyze student work and summarize student feedback. But before we begin we want to address the genesis of the course and how we decided to make the process of reading and writing the focus of attention.

### LITERARY CRITICISM AND THE BRAIN

Our elective 3000 level comparative literature course entitled “Spiritual Journeys in Young Adult Fiction” attracts students from various majors although humanities majors are somewhat more common. It is a seminar, both reading- and writing-intensive, in which students discuss (online and in class) young adult fiction, defined broadly, from Philip Pullman’s *The Amber Spyglass* to Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha*. To date, the course has been taught five times between 2010-2015 with an enrollment of between 12 and 26 students per session.

The course came about as a collaboration between the article’s authors, a faculty developer with training in German and Comparative Literature and an instructional technologist with a degree in English literature. In conversation, we realized that our educational biographies bore some striking similarities. We share a complicated relationship with books and the academic discipline of critically analyzing them. Yet, if we were to visualize the effects of formal schooling on our love for reading and literature as it changed during our formal schooling, the chart would look like this:

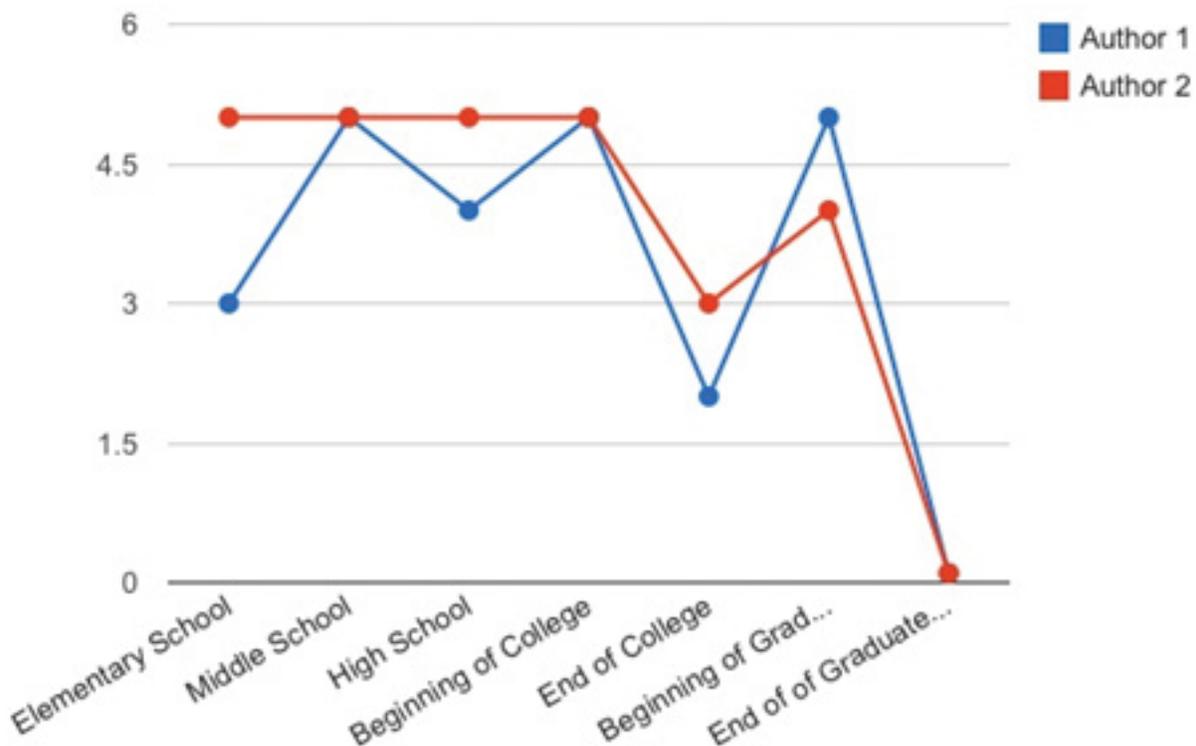


Figure 1: Effect of Schooling on Joy in Reading and Writing

At crucial times of our professional training we both burned out on the academic, analytical reading experience. Reading for the sake of producing airtight defenses for arguments did not hold joy for us anymore and seemed to remove us further and further from our lived experiences. In an open letter to prospective students of *Spiritual Journeys*, Bach puts it like this:

At the end of my undergraduate years and then again in graduate school I noticed that being a critical reader was not a choice anymore but a mental habit that took over whenever I opened a book. There is a lot of pleasure in dissecting a text, but I missed the simple joy of immersing myself in a book and contemplating what it told me about being human. (Bach & Alexander, 2014, course website, letter to students, para. 7)

Bach's experience is not unique, of course. Scholars at all times have noted that intellectual preoccupation can lead to mental deformations. Darwin, no stranger to the extensive use of particular areas of his brain, describes the costs of his single-minded scientific pursuit as well as what he might do differently if he could do it all over again:

[I]f I had to live my life again, I would have made a rule to read some poetry and listen to some music at least once every week; for perhaps the part of my brain now atrophied would thus have been kept active through use. The loss of these tastes is a loss of happiness, and may possibly be injurious to the intellect, and more probably to the moral character by enfeebling the emotional part of our nature. (Darwin, 1958, p. 138f)

For Darwin, a regular taste of the arts for sake of enjoyment is linked to emotional well-being and happiness. Underutilization, he fears, has let a particular part of his brain atrophy and may have caused intellectual, moral and emotional "injury." Modern neuroscience confirms Darwin's suspicion; repetition of a physical or mental activity strengthens "particular circuits in our brain" and ultimately transforms that activity into a habit. "The paradox of neuroplasticity...is that, for all the mental flexibility it grants us, it can end up locking us into "rigid behaviors." "Routine activities are carried out ever more quickly and efficiently while unused circuits are pruned away" (Carr, 2011, p. 34).

If Darwin had known this research before experiencing the negative side of neuroplasticity, would he have found the strength to change his habits and taken that regular dose of the arts he wistfully recalls? But even without this understanding, some of us are fortunate enough to find the path to reverse habits. In our open letter, Alexander describes his journey to balance as mediated through young adult literature:

One of my fascinations with young adult literature was born of the time in my life when I discovered it...as with many things somewhat later than you might expect. As I emerged from my sojourn in graduate study in English Literature, I found joy in young adult fiction. At that moment, I was so burned out on literature that I could barely read it at all. Young adult literature was not only my path back into a resumption of a life-long love of reading and learning but also a path back into a deeper understanding of myself, of what is moving and meaningful to me and into effective reflections on spiritual growth and development. (Bach & Alexander, 2014, course website, letter to students, para. 2)

For both of us, then, engaging with literary text was richest when reading became a doorway into a contemplative space that offers room for reflecting on and making meaning of complex life experiences as they were being filtered through the words on the page.

Years of teaching at a highly selective university taught us that a significant number of our undergraduate students experience a similar loss of joy growing from their academic training. We therefore created a seminar that would give students, particularly fourth year English majors at the brink of burnout, a chance to reconnect to their love of reading and to rediscover reading as a path to self-exploration. Instead of asking students to treat texts objectively for the sake of constructing smart academic arguments, we give them permission to relate to the reading subjectively and bring their most pressing personal questions into conversation with the stories we read. Instead of deconstructing texts, we invite them to enjoy them and engage with them in a way that helps them construct meaning for themselves as they ask: who am I; why am I here, and why should I care?

Paying attention to one's attitude towards reading and intentionally shifting the focus to a particular type of engagement with the written word is our first invitation to notice habits of mind and to exercise conscious choice.

## **READING TO CONTEMPLATE**

Although all of our students read and comment on our open letter and the course goals as part of their application to the seminar, and are thus selecting the course with an awareness of our intentions, we anticipate that we have some work to do early in the semester to help them transition to a different relationship to reading. After all, conditioned by years of schooling, college students typically approach reading as a means to learn about a subject, to get facts and information, to critically analyze a text and/or understand something other than themselves. The common academic emphasis on volume of material, on "covering" content,

further encourages a relationship to reading both bulimic and shallow. Cultural historians remind us that our educational system typically does not encourage young people to engage with a text in a deep, contemplative way.

Instead, education, especially in its “liberal arts” embodiments, has been devoted to providing students with *navigational* tools—with enough knowledge to find their way through situations that they might confront later in life. [. . .] Loving to read is largely alien to the history of education. (Jacobs, 2011, p. 112f)

Knowing that savoring whole books and reading for self-discovery are rarely learning outcomes specified in a college professor’s pedagogical plan, we ask ourselves: How can we design a learning experience for our students that encourages reading not only with their heads but also with their hearts? How can we help them develop the charitable disposition towards a book that’s necessary to experience the pleasures of reading? How will we encourage them to read in an unhurried fashion, without a particular goal in mind, open and attentive to whatever arises within? How will we foster an emotional openness to the subjective experience that can make reading a fertile bed for self-exploration and discovery?

Here is how we address these questions. To set the stage for experiencing choices in how we approach everyday activities, we frame our in-class, face-to-face time as a contemplative space. Instead of diving immediately into the material, we begin each class session with a centering activity to help students and ourselves become present to the topic of discussion and to each other. Such activities include guided meditation, reflective writing, visualizations, and brief sharing exercises. This centering is followed by reading out loud and listening deeply to excerpts from blog entries to acknowledge the diversity of viewpoints that students voice the night before class in responses to the readings. As we will show later in detail, bringing students’ attention to the present moment and to each other deepens the class community and the inquiry into the subject of study.

After the discussions that follow, we reserve the last five minutes at the end of each class to open a space for what we call “completion,” during which we invite students to voice anything that they feel needs to be said in order for them to feel complete with our time together. Sometimes a portion of those five minutes is spent in silence; a silence that grows more and more comfortable as the semester progresses. Into that silence, students speak what was important for them, frequently thanking a classmate for a comment that resonated with them or appreciating a passage from a text. Our experience with framing the discussion space through contemplative pauses confirms what other teachers have observed: “Students seem to thrive on such islands of quiet” (O’Reilly, 1998, pp. 5-6, quoted in Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p. 125).

We invite students to approach the act of reading with the same kind of unhurried spaciousness and openness, and an awareness of their present moment experience. We begin the semester by reading folktales and an excerpt of the noted child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim's analysis. Most of the students, still focused in a more traditional academic bent, critique the folktale as unsatisfying literature. They are skeptical that a folk tale carries the weight of Bettelheim's psychoanalytic reading. In a guided meditation, then, we ask them to recall the experience of hearing such stories as a child. Students often remember how they felt the story with their bodies and experienced its unfolding as a profound and unquestioned reality. As a way to extend this experience, we then suggest that students ask a friend or roommate to read to them as they snuggle in their favorite chair and that they write reflectively about their experience. Many students report that this experiment triggers further bodily memories of being read to as a child. They remember the feeling of suspense in their stomachs and the sadness or joy manifesting in the heart in response to a beloved heroine's adventures. These memories, of a kind of depth quite different from the depth of analysis, served as an opening for the rest of the semester for the students to experience again the pleasure of reading and to recognize that they can choose between different modes of interacting with literature. Not only is this simple cue effective in the course, but many students report years later that it still helps them to access this deeply, authentically pleasurable experience of reading.

Throughout the course, we invite students to practice being intentional about the way they relate to the act of reading. We acknowledge that young adult fiction may not warrant the devotion that one brings to reading scriptures in the contemplative practice of *lectio divina*. However, the intention to bring the text into dialogue with one's own story connects us more deeply with both, and opens us to new perspectives and meanings (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p. 113). In her learning portfolio, Deborah (we have changed students' names to protect their identity) reflects on how she read before the class and how she reads now:

Now, however, I feel like I would take so much more from that book if I read with the inquisitiveness I have gained from this class. I never imagined this class would transform the way I read, but I appreciate it so much because it allows the books to stick with me and become part of me in an even deeper way... (Individual student's unpublished course blog, 2012)

Deborah's comment expresses the appreciation of the majority of our students who experience that, with practice, they indeed can choose their relationship to the act of reading and that choosing to read contemplatively holds precious benefits. In their anonymous end-of-course feedback students overwhelmingly note that the course helps them explore the relationship between reading for per-

sonal growth and reading for academic learning (rating 4.73/5) and report connections between their enjoyment of reading and personal reflection and exploration.

### **WRITING FOR SELF-DISCOVERY AND MEANING MAKING**

To bring their reading experience and reflections into the sphere of the class community, we ask students to regularly share their thoughts about a text or a film in weekly blogs (we have written a how-to guide for faculty who want to use blogging in classes: Alexander & Bach, 2013). We choose that format for various reasons. The genre suggests informal, personal writing that is accessible and engaging. Although many students have never blogged, they are familiar with the format and enjoy personalizing their web page. Blogs also carry an immediate sense of audience and invite interaction (in our case the blogs are visible to all members of the class and students can leave comments on each other's entries), an important motivator for writing in general and one that is usually missing in standard writing assignments. And as blogs are emerging as an influential genre—a genre that moves people and that leverages proclivities of contemporary students—teaching writing today can legitimately explore blogging as a valuable complement to more specialist or scientific writing.

For the purposes of our course, students' blogs are a space for capturing and reflecting on private reading experiences in writing and to prepare for, deepen and extend our bi-weekly face-to-face discussion. Instead of emphasizing polished products, we introduce writing as a contemplative practice in which writing is allowed to be "the thing itself," a means for exploring what we don't know (Schneider, 2013, p. 150). Weekly blogging includes a reading response, a synthesizing blog post, and at least two commentaries to two peers' posts. As a starting point, for the reading responses we propose a series of questions: a) What strikes you most in reading today's assignment? What is puzzling, intriguing, gratifying, troubling, or upsetting? Why?; b) What specific thing (an image, a metaphor, a passage or a concept) would you like to hang onto? Why does it resonate with you? How is it related to your journey? After a short while, however, we encourage our students to develop their own questions, instructing them that the best questions are those that lead to a deep exploration of something that matters to them.

As a way of composing their thoughts at the end of the week, we ask them to synthesize in their personal blog what they consider to be salient or evocative points from the discussion. These observations conclude with a rich, genuine question for the group. Each student then offers written reflections to the questions of two of their peers, thus engaging each other's insights and further extending the week's conversation (for full assignment, assessment criteria, and technical details see our course website, Bach & Alexander, 2014).

During the first few weeks, we ask three or four students for permission to discuss their blog posts as a group as a means to establish criteria and standards for communicating personal reflections compellingly to others. As students become more comfortable with the semi-public format and learn from the writing of and establishing trust with their peers, their reflections become rich and vivid, and we enjoy some of the best and liveliest prose in response to this assignment.

In terms of the depth of the reflections, it comes more easily to students with a natural inclination towards contemplation. We find, however, that everyone benefits from the *practice* of meditative reading and writing, akin to what Bean (2011) refers to as exploratory writing. Some of the most satisfying experiences are with students who notice an absence of solitude and quietness in their lives and come into the class with a yearning to create this space for themselves. Here we would like to begin to quote at some greater length from students' writings to give voice to the nuances of their insightful reflections. We begin with Nadine's thoughts on the relationship between solitude and connection:

I thought that a spiritual journey was [...] a result of relationships between people. But I realized that a spiritual journey for me depends on alone time and individual contemplation—a safe zone to disagree with things, love things, and a safe place to write [my] narrative. But what's amazing is that this safe, individual reflection leads to a drive to share and instill a reaction from others through writing. A connection with myself hones the skills needed to make powerful connections with others. (Individual student's unpublished course blog, 2012)

In an age of constant communication and a fast pace of life (Iyer, 2012), it is significant that Nadine discovers that quiet individual contemplation is necessary for connecting deeply with others. Her insight is reminiscent of what Thomas Merton (1979) called "the paradox of solitude" (p. 16). "Instead of isolating us, solitude will connect us to the depth of the other in ways that were impossible before. Going forward, solitude and love will be inseparable" (Zajonc, 2009, p. 22f). By slowing down enough to pay attention, to contemplate and make meaning of her reactions to life's experiences in stillness, Nadine is able to reflect on the cultural norms and her personal habits and comes to appreciate an alternative way of being with herself and others. Knowing the alternative not just theoretically but through firsthand experience is the precondition for choice. Repeated reflective practice is the tool for exercising it, Nadine realizes, as she reflects further in her final learning portfolio:

Like with reading, there is an adjustment period of understanding the different modes of academic writing and writing for an impact. [...] In the feedback on my first reflective essay, it was clear that

I hadn't quite made the jump yet. I was stuck in the abstract and afraid to let feelings and imagination find their place in making an argument. They are truly the star of the show and I had left them out, falling back into academic habits of solely abstract thinking. But by the time I gave writing another shot, this time in a solely creative and imaginative realm, I was able to give in to the sensory writing that I love and actually get a reaction [from my readers.] I had written in a way that made people feel. I had made words hold the responsibility they deserved. (Individual student's unpublished course blog, 2012)

By exercising choice to write with a more sensory focus, Nadine experiences joy and the satisfaction that comes when others—in this case a peer reader—resonate with the words she crafts. In addition, the idea of her words holding responsibility points to an increased sense of purpose and self-efficacy. For some students, then, particularly humanities majors like Nadine, the significance of writing and their identity as writers comes into focus as they explore a different relationship to the process of crafting with words. At the end of the semester, Emily writes in her final reflection:

Before this class, I always viewed writing as something that was fun and cathartic, but I didn't actively realize that it was a part of my spiritual journey. Reflecting on my history as a writer, I can now see that each piece shows growth not only of my writing ability but also of self. This realization has placed a much greater importance on my writing; it isn't just a passion or a pastime anymore but also an integral part of my spiritual journey and a means of furthering my personal growth. (Individual student's unpublished course blog, 2012)

In Emily's case, our contemplative approach to writing led her to a renewed commitment to the act of writing as a tool for making meaning and for experiencing wholeness and wholeheartedness. Similarly, Ruth, a fourth year English major, also reflects on her relationship to the substantive difference between academic writing and writing for self-discovery. She ends her insight-filled learning portfolio reflecting on a certain loss of self during her time in college and declaring her commitment to making future writing meaningful for herself:

Ever since I was two or three years old making pretend words on a piece of paper, I have been writing. To me, this is my gift, and it is the joy of my existence. I have this outlet for my thoughts, and this is something this class has reminded me. I used to journal. I filled blank book after blank book full of my thoughts. But for four years, I have been writing countless essays that, frankly, I did not

care much about, even though my teachers did. Even in the fiction writing classes I have taken (even though I absolutely loved every second of them), there was an emphasis on the product versus writing for writing's sake. With the morning pages and the creative writing project, I have suddenly re-realized something: I love to write. So, as [Nadine] said, "Dive in." That is what I am going to do. I have decided that my immediate summer plans are not just going to include working at a beautiful café. I am going to start writing again on my own. Maybe I will start a novel or a play. [Jordan] and this class have inspired me. I want my writing to be revelatory of me to others but also to myself. I have learned from what I have written in this class, and I never want to stop learning from myself this way. I will take my notebook and my pen, my laptop, or paper napkins and a pencil and I will write so that I can feel my "heart sigh" like [Cassie] does when she draws. Finally, for the first time in a long time, I am seeking peace. (Individual student's unpublished course blog, 2012)

In our last class meeting, Ruth further expressed her gratitude for having had this opportunity to make sense of important aspects of her college experience and reconnect with a kind of writing that made her feel alive. She also emphasized again her appreciation for the contribution of her peers to this development.

### **LISTENING TO LEARN FROM EACH OTHER**

Indeed, our intention "to create a space where a republic of many voices might come to life" (Ayers, 2004, p. 69) is supported by the combination of face-to-face encounters and interactions via blogs. It greatly enhances the connectivity and closeness that students experience and consequently the potential for peer learning. To further encourage such learning, we give students ownership of the class discussion and invite them to facilitate class conversation in pairs. Our students embrace this opportunity wholeheartedly and build on the class structure that we model. As described earlier, that model includes a structure to the whole class period that encourages mindful reflection, with an opening connection and a closing that invites us to all be present, setting aside the distractions and harried pace that characterize our lives outside the bounds of precious class time. The structure encourages us to make the most of the face-to-face time we share where the unpredictable and surprising revelations of in-class discussion reward and deepen our experience of ourselves and each other. As such, the classroom becomes a space where we all open up to learning from each other, or in Ayers' words, "an environment where human beings can face one another authentically

and without masks, a place of invitation, fascination, interest, and promise” (p. 69). Together we create “the spiritual and ethical and intellectual and social spaces” (p. 69) in which mutual understanding and wisdom can emerge.

In this context, deep listening evolves as a central practice. As we intentionally listen to one another with presence and attention, we experience a growing level of trust and intimacy and a desire to truly hear what each of us contributes. Indeed, a few weeks into the semester, students note that they “hear” each other’s voices in the blog posts and are eager to refer to each other’s thoughts in our in-class conversations. They experience that “attentive rather than reactive listening” can have a profound impact on grasping “the role of not knowing and not judging in the process of learning, [. . .] the power of simply bearing witness, and the role of receptivity and opening in understanding” (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p. 139).

It is extremely gratifying to trace the impact of this careful listening through all students’ portfolios. For many, a new appreciation for the power of meaningful interpersonal connection was the most important learning experience gained from the class. Tilda, a somewhat shy student, concludes her portfolio by writing:

In taking this class, I discovered that I could learn to be more open and willing to share. I was more comfortable with one-on-one interactions, such as the small group discussions and the gratitude project, because we got to invest more time, attention, and energy into each other’s projects. In having an interactive class, I could read others’ blogs and see how others interpreted the texts and related to characters. I thought it was amazing how we were able to create a very open environment in which we could also share our personal memories with one another, and through these sincere and candid discussions and blogs, I slowly opened myself to sharing my experiences with you all. (Individual student’s unpublished course blog, 2012)

The blogging and small group discussions are significant, then, as the group is able to create a safety zone where all members of the class could make and explore meaning and connect deeply with others. Responding to a request to offer advice to future students on how to make the most out of their time in class, one student wrote:

I discovered, and hope you will too, that academia does not need to be cold and distant. In fact, we can learn the most beautiful and profound things from one another, when we are vulnerable and open to sharing not only our analytical thoughts, but our lives as well. (Bach & Alexander, 2014, course website, advice from former students, student 3, para. 1)

During our years as educators we have learned that students long for such deep connection with others, yet they rarely find it in the traditional educational settings. When they do, they are immensely grateful. They find value in approaching the other from a place of not knowing, in listening deeply, in seeing and being seen fully, and in engaging each other's unique perspectives supportively. With a framework of processing their experience, they discover the power of intersubjective contemplative spaces. Many emerge with "a more collective sense of 'we' or what Buber referred to as the 'sphere in between'" (Scott, 2014, p. 336). Meaningful, wholehearted dialogue is crucial to the humanities classroom because it is directly linked to the process of uncovering and creating meaning. "This creation of meaning in and through relationships reveals what is sacred in ourselves, others, the world, and our relationships" (Scott, 2014, p. 337).

### **CONNECTING TO WHAT'S ALIVE INSIDE**

We offer additional opportunity for cultivating openness and authenticity. A few weeks into the semester, we view and discuss Taylor Mali's (2012, 2013) thoughts on speaking with conviction and Brené Brown's (2012) TED Talk on "The Power of Vulnerability." These conversations help students explore questions of wholehearted communication and the human fear of letting oneself be fully seen by others. They also stimulate further inquiry into connections to oneself.

Educators may be hesitant to invite too much subjectivity into their classrooms. But like other teachers, we have found that students begin to move beyond their limited perspective and begin to understand the limitations of all perspectives (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p. 151). However, particularly in the context of the arts and humanities, it will take intentional cultivation to support students to leave initial reactions of pleasure or displeasure, of "I hate that" or "I love this," behind and engage in deeper levels of personal inquiry and to connect to their creative impulses. To support these developments, we ask students to experiment with Julia Cameron's (2002) tools for awakening creativity and authenticity and engage in the regular writing of "morning pages" and undertake an "artist date" (pp. 9-24). These experiments lead into a structured experiential project in which student explore a creative writing project, a gratitude project, or a project of their own design that involves reflecting on their first person experience. The goal of the experiential project is to give students tools for making meaning from their personal experiences. In this passage, Tonya shares what she calls an "aliveness list" and then reflects on the challenges of authenticity:

The feeling of holding warm tea in a jar. The taste of Swiss chard and eggs. The feeling of missing someone even when you saw them yesterday, or hours ago. Knowing you've made someone's day.

Knowing you've ruined it. Not regretting it. My out of practice fingers still finding that same Christmas medley on the piano. The taste of wanting to brush your teeth. [. . .] Laughing on the floor, with limbs having nowhere to go but up. Sitting five people on a couch. Trying to dance while running.

To me, a list of this nature equates often to passions, those things that actually mean something to me, pluck a heart string, pull my lips back into a smile, or let the water run from my eyes. This list outlines why I care. But that isn't so straight forward. I realize how easily I compare my list, or narrative, to others and how easily some relationships make me question the genuineness of my narrative. [...] Interdependence occurs when I can hold tight to the things that I love and simultaneously love where someone else is. (Individual student's unpublished course blog, 2012)

This passage traces the journey of many students in this class. By regularly writing in a contemplative mode, they connect to what's alive in them, recover their love for the written word, and, at the same time, experience a deep connection to and appreciation for others. Through contemplative inquiry, a new way of seeing opens up and allows students to connect with themselves, the material world and beings around them with fresh respect, gentleness, intimacy, and engagement. Some students, like Tonya, may begin to sense a whole new way of knowing, one that may begin to move them toward an "epistemology of love" (Zajonc, 2009).

Not everyone ended the journey with a sense of breaking free from the mental habits formed by academic training. In his learning portfolio, Jordan, a storytelling major, explains the issue at the heart of his journey as one of disconnection to his inner emotional life:

As the semester progressed and I heard more [of my classmates'] reactions to the characters and their stories, I began to realize that at some point as a reader I lost touch with my ability to forge similar connections. Instead of identifying with the guilt of the Holocaust as [Teresa] did, I could only see the parallels *Maus* makes to the Third Reich's unconventional views on animal rights. In *Ender's Game*, I could only see Card's commentary on natural selection. And in *The Amber Spyglass*, I could only read the Freudian precepts behind many of the book's images. It quickly occurred to me that I could very easily access the latent layer of young adult fiction, though at the cost of experiencing the more unique manifest layer. [. . .] I began to fear that I'd not only lost a certain quality as a

reader, but also as a human being. (Individual student's unpublished course blog, 2012)

Jordan's experience contains echoes to Darwin's self-diagnosis quoted earlier. Even at the end of the course, for Jordan the recovery process is far from complete. His portfolio concludes:

As class concludes, I can't say I've come to a sense of closure. I think my spiritual journey has only just begun as I attempt to reclaim my understanding of literature as well as humanity. However, the class has helped me to answer my original question, and perhaps this is also the reason I'm hopeful I'll find what I'm looking for. When I was young, I read *The Golden Compass* and was so affected that I remember crying at the end. I remember being on that mountaintop, and feeling the cold of Roger's dying body as I held onto him with every word I read, and reading and rereading that one part without letting myself read further, because I didn't want to let him go. I think this is why *The Golden Compass* is my favorite book. It reminds me that there's something very human at my core, even if I can't always see it. And it reminds me that I'm still capable of catharsis, and that maybe one day, when I'm ready, I'll be able to experience it. (Individual student's unpublished course blog, 2012)

In the act of remembering what it was like to experience reading as a child, Jordan discovers hope that he can access what he misses in his current experience. This note of hope is typical and for the overwhelming majority of the class the process of deep reflection was both empowering and affirming as the data from the anonymous end-of-semester evaluations shows. Students strongly agree with the statement that "this course has positively impacted my own personal development" (4.91/5.00). Students' anonymous comments further show that the contemplative engagement in this course becomes a way for students to explore and capture what Parks (2011) and others call the "self-authoring mind." Representative comments include:

- The way we engaged with the reading created an environment where I was learning and reflecting on myself, my priorities, and engaging with my peers on a level unattainable in other courses.
- The things I learned about myself are invaluable. This course allowed me to examine what's important in my own life. (Anonymous end-of-course evaluation, 2012)

After the grades are submitted, we invite students to write a brief paragraph for future students of the course advising them on how to approach the class. One student put it this way:

If I had to sum up all my ideas and advice into one mere sentence I would highly recommend this: that you keep an open mind and prepare to be brutally honest with yourself. What I loved about this class was that it was more than the typical “academic” class: in *Spiritual Journeys* I learned more about myself, my beliefs, and how to think than in any other class. The irony lies in the fact that I had no idea I even needed to learn any of these things. (Bach & Alexander, 2014; course website, advice from former students, student 2, para. 1)

This theme of contemplation opening a door to surprising insight comes up repeatedly from students in this class. Returning once more to Darwin, it seems clear that their experience shows them that their brains have not atrophied. Instead, they discover that with some practice they can recover their taste for the arts and with it the pleasures of self-exploration. By paying attention to how they approach a text they learn that they can actively choose to enjoy the process of reading. Many students have profound insights when they pay close attention to what is meaningful to them and why. Some discover the power of listening fully, opening to the experiences of others, learning that their own perspective is only one of many possible. A few get a glimpse into the transformation that can occur in bringing one’s awareness to the ways one relates to daily activities such as reading, writing and discussing and to the different ways we can make meaning from the experience.

Our hope is that students will carry with them a sense that alternative ways of being and relating are possible wherever they are, in the world of traditional academic rigor and their future professional and personal lives. That they are always in reach, waiting patiently for the quiet moment to spring, fully featured, to connect us to the full range of human possibilities.

### **THE EMOTIONAL AND SPIRITUAL DIMENSION OF SELF-REFLECTION AND ITS DANGERS**

In their reflections on a similar approach at Fairfield University, Gardner, Calderwood, and Torosyan (2007) observe that creating a more open learning community is a “Dangerous Pedagogy” in that student teacher power relationships become unmoored (pp. 13-14). It also creates more room for the “social, emotional and spiritual dimensions” to shape both the process and the content of the learning (p. 14). It is important to note that we have had a student who struggled with the seminar’s emphasis on genuine, personal reflection. We worked closely with this student to find ways to meet her needs. After some more reflection, the student decided that although she appreciated the invitation to share herself more au-

thetically with others, she found it impossible to do so and withdrew from the course.

Another danger that colleagues fear is that students' personal reflections may reveal that they are deeply troubled and in need of professional help. We regularly comment that this class may be experienced as therapeutic but it is not therapy. Students' reflections occasionally lead to exploring challenging experiences including dealing with abusive relationships, facing homophobia and fear of coming out, and living with the stigma of mental illness. Firstly, we stress that we are not therapists and that we rely on the support professionals and the Dean of Students Office when needed. In five years of teaching this class, there have been four students that we made sure had professional referrals. Because of the trust that had developed we were comfortable asking, "Do you have the support you need?" and made sure they got it if their answer was "No." We are nevertheless impressed by how often students find the process of reflecting on such difficult experiences in a safe space of a supportive learning community cathartic, self-affirming and positive.

The literature on transformative learning reminds us that any real change, one that involves a dissolution from established beliefs and a shift towards new meaning frameworks, is emotionally demanding for the person undergoing it (Kegan, 2000; Mezirow, 2000; Perry, 1968). That naturally brings challenges for the accompanying facilitator, challenges that college professors may feel uncomfortable with. Indeed, as Baugher (2014) observes, "perhaps the most formidable barrier is not the emotions of students but *teachers' own fear* of emotions in the classroom" (p. 235). However, he reminds us that

transformative learning necessitates opening to the unknown and a willingness to abide with the uncomfortable emotions that accompany such openness. [. . .] What English Professor Elizabeth Duntro calls a "pedagogy of witness" is not a call for teachers to become counselors or for the classroom to be turned into therapy sessions, but a recognition that to create spaces for transformative learning teachers must themselves learn to be comfortable with "holding" uncomfortable emotions—our own and those of our students—in an atmosphere of inquiry and loving kindness. (p. 236)

Mälkki and Green (2014) likewise affirm that the most important task of the accompanists is to just be with a student's liminal experience (p. 13). The choice and path belong to the learner. At best, what can be taught is a disposition and a method for integrating one's experience into a larger meaning framework (p. 14). And that is not a small thing.

## CONCLUSION

*“Contemplation is not the opposite of thinking, but its complement. It is not the emptying of the mind of thoughts but the cultivation of awareness of thoughts within the mind.”* (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p. 123)

Did the students in the class learn anything about young adult fiction? You bet. Although we did not use a textbook and our students may not readily rattle off a detailed history of the genre, they deeply engage with the texts themselves. Their class contributions, blogs and portfolios are filled with specific references to the texts and insightful interpretations. The seminar is successful in engaging students with the material because it tends to the motivational aspects of any learning experience. On the occasion of publishing his book *What the Best College Students Do*, educational researcher Ken Bain summarizes several elements that distinguish deep learners: “One was that they followed their passions . . . They came to realize the power of both being able to look inside themselves and to tap their own unique histories and personalities, and at the same time to realize that they were unique, so was everyone else, and they could learn from a wide variety of people” (Bain quoted in Young, 2012, pp. 1-2).

By deemphasizing content in favor of cultivating attention, conscious choice and meaning making, our students gain deep insight into their own motivation and rediscover their love for learning as a process of self-discovery. To put it with Bain: “It was that capacity for understanding what could motivate them—what purpose they might have in life—that was at the heart of their own motivation” (Young, 2012, p. 1).

Practicing to read in an unhurried fashion with attention to what resonates personally is thus not opposed to the task of a literary critic. On the contrary. Making reading and writing, the tools of our trade, objects of contemplative inquiry helps students not only understand their motivation but also to assess in what context and mind frame they actually enjoy using those tools. The ability to combine “contemplative striving with a vigorous scholarly life” (Zajonc, 2009, p. 11) can be highly valuable particularly for humanities students who consider graduate school. Knowing that wholehearted passion for the subject and the doing of a discipline are better predictors for graduate student success than SAT scores, we do well to cultivate students’ love of the tools of the craft.

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