

## Teaching Mindfulness and Writing

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A few years ago, two friends and colleagues of mine at Brooklyn College received a grant from the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society to establish a program of contemplative practices at the college. As part of that program, they started a faculty study group where interested faculty read and discuss texts related to contemplative practices and consider how they can apply the ideas in these texts to their own classes.

In one such text, Krishnamurti (originally published in 1964) challenges us to think about the purpose of education:

I wonder if we have ever asked ourselves what education means. Why do we go to school, why do we learn various subjects, why do we pass examinations and compete with each other for better grades? . . . Is it merely in order to pass some examinations and get a job? Or is it the function of education to prepare us while we are young to understand the whole process of life? Having a job and earning one's livelihood is necessary – but is that all? Are we being educated only for that? Surely, life is not merely a job, an occupation; life is something extraordinarily wide and profound. It is a great mystery, a vast realm in which we function as human beings. If we merely prepare ourselves to earn a livelihood, we shall miss the whole point of life; and to understand life is much more important than merely to prepare for examination and become very proficient in mathematics, physics or what you will (The Function of Education, 1).

In another text, Carl Rogers (1980) emphasizes the importance of the teacher (facilitator) being in touch with his own thoughts and feelings, being “real” to his students:

Perhaps the most basic of these essential attitudes is realness, or genuineness. When the facilitator is a real person, being what he or she is, entering into relationships with the learners without presenting a front or a façade, the facilitator is much more likely to be effective. This means that the feelings that the facilitator is experiencing are available to his or her awareness, that he or she is able to live these feelings, to be them, and able to communicate them if appropriate. It means that the facilitator comes into a direct, personal encounter with the learners, meeting each of them on a person-to-person basis. It means that the facilitator is *being*, not denying himself or herself. The facilitator is *present* to the students (271).

Rogers also insists that the teacher (facilitator) must have what is referred to in meditation practice as “lovingkindness” in his attitude toward his students:

There is another attitude that stands out in those who are successful in facilitating learning. I have observed this attitude; I have experienced it. Yet, it is hard to know what term to put to it, so I shall use several. I think of this attitude as a prizing of each learner, a prizing of his or her feelings, opinions, and person. It is a caring for the learner, but a non possessive caring. It is an acceptance of this other individual as a separate person, a respect for the other as having worth in his or her own right. It is a basic trust--a belief that this other person is somehow fundamentally trustworthy. Whether we call it "prizing," "acceptance," "trust," or some other term, it shows up in a variety of observable ways. The facilitator who has a considerable degree of this attitude can be fully acceptant of the fear and hesitation of the students as they approach new problems as well as acceptant of the pupils' satisfaction in achievement. Such a teacher can accept the students' occasional apathy, their erratic desires to explore byroads of knowledge, as well as their disciplined efforts to achieve major goals. (271-72)

More recently, Parker Palmer in *The Courage to Teach* (1998), stresses that the good teacher has an "open heart" in his attitude toward his students:

[This book] is for teachers who refuse to harden their hearts because they love learners, learning, and the teaching life. (1) . . . How can we who teach reclaim our hearts, for the sake of our students, ourselves, and educational reform? That simple question challenges the assumption that drives most reform – that meaningful change comes not from the human heart but from factors external to ourselves, from budgets, methodologies, curricula, and institutional restructuring. Deeper still, it challenges the assumptions about reality and power that drive Western culture. . . . Yet at this point in history it should be clear that external "fixes" will not come soon enough to sustain the deepest passions of people who care about teaching. Institutions reform slowly, and as long as we wait, depending on "them" to do the job for us – forgetting that institutions are also "us" – we merely postpone reform and continue the slow slide into cynicism that characterizes too many teaching careers. (19-20)

The participating faculty found different ways to apply the ideas to their own classes. One practiced meditation with athletes as a way of helping them to be in "the zone" that would allow for maximum athletic performance. Another had students do meditation in preparation for creative writing. I decided to present to my students the sorts of beliefs and attitudes that the group had been discussing by choosing primarily religious readings for a freshman composition class based on the theme of "Mindfulness and Peace."

At the time I had been reading a lot about Buddhism. I decided, however, that if I were going to bring religious readings into my class of very diverse Brooklyn College students, I would have to bring in all the major religions: Judaism, Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism (I omitted Hinduism, whose underlying ideas are similar to those of Buddhism). This would be to show respect to the religions of all the students in the class, as well as to encourage students to understand and respect religions other than their own and to see that there is great similarity in the underlying beliefs of all religions. Of course, there were also students in the class who had no religious beliefs, or who had been brought up with and then abandoned a particular religion, or who were committed, anti-religious, atheists. In fact, I felt apprehensive about bringing a focus on "God and religion" into what was supposed to be a writing class. I should probably mention here that I am an ESL specialist and that this class was a special ESL section of freshman composition, so I had for example an Israeli student (who happened to be an atheist), some Russian Jewish students, some Moslem students (from Pakistan, Egypt, Albania), some Buddhist students (from Burma, China) and some Christian students (e.g., from the Dominican Republic). So it was quite a religious and non religious mix.

I started the class by announcing the theme of "Mindfulness and Peace" and distributing the following list of readings:

- Week 1 Piercy, "To Be of Use"
- Week 2 Kushner, from *Who Needs God?*
- Week 3 Khan, from *The Inner Life*
- Week 4 Wallis, from *Faith Works*
- Week 5 Krishnamurti, from *Think on These Things*
- Weeks 6-7 poems
- Weeks 8-10 Chodrun, *When Things Fall Apart*
- Week 11 King, "Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech"
- Week 12 Aung San Suu Kyi, "Freedom from Fear"
- Weeks 13-14 poems

I said right away, "Now a lot of the writers that we will be reading say that they "believe in God," but I want to make it very clear that as far as I'm concerned, you don't have to believe in God, or you don't have to believe in any specific God. So please don't go to the dean and say "Professor Fox told us that we have to believe in God." The questions that we will be considering are "What do these writers believe?" and "How do these beliefs seem to affect their lives?"

On the first day of class, I always have students read, discuss, and write a summary of a poem that is related to our class theme. For this class, I chose the poem "To Be of Use" by Marge Piercy, which starts with the lines:

The people I love the best  
jump into work head first

She goes on to say:

I want to be with people who submerge  
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest  
and work in a row and pass the bags along

and ends:

The pitcher cries for water to carry  
and a person for work that is real.

This poem introduces ideas which are discussed by every writer in the syllabus. Each writer says that in our lives, we should not focus on satisfying only ourselves. Rather, to have a good, satisfying, meaningful life, we must be concerned about our relations with others and with making a meaningful contribution to the world. Most of the writers in the syllabus discuss this in a religious context, but I pointed out to the students that it is not just religious people who have these beliefs. Psychologists discuss high levels of “self actualization,” which involve feeling connected to and concerned about others, and philosophers ask “What is a good life?” and “What is a good person?” and many answer by saying that contributing to others is essential to having a good life and being a good person.

The second text that we read in the class was an excerpt from Rabbi Harold Kushner’s book *Who Needs God*, in which Kushner suggests that the highest rules of ethical conduct come not from man but from God, and that people will live in a good way if they feel that “the eyes of God” are watching them. One of the essay topics I assigned to my students after this reading was, “How do you feel about religion?” – making it clear that they were free to express positive, negative or mixed feelings. One student wrote in her introduction, “The most important thing about religion is not the religion itself but how people use it.” She mentions that religion was good for her father, who had a gambling problem, but stopped gambling when he became involved in Christianity. On the other hand, religion was bad for her aunt, who got so involved in religious activities that she did not take good care of her children and did not let her children play with children of other religious backgrounds. . .

The third text we read was an excerpt from the book *The Inner Life* by Hazrat Inayat Khan, a Sufi (Moslem) teacher who helped to introduce Sufism to the West in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. After reading and discussing this text, I had my students write an essay comparing what Kushner and Khan said about “right and wrong action.” I would stress here that although my aims in this class included discussing religion, mindfulness, meditation, and peace, I did not forget the goals of the writing class. The final essay exam for this class requires students to write a comparative essay about two texts, where they show that they can write a well-organized comparative essay with developed paragraphs, in which they correctly summarize parts of the texts, use

relevant quotations, compare and contrast the ideas of the authors, and discuss their own thoughts and/or experience related to the texts. In this class, the students wrote 10 essays over a 15 week period and every other essay was of this comparative type. So the students were being well prepared to write a passing final essay.

So I asked the students to compare Harold Kushner and Hazrat Inayat Kahn. I had several Moslem students in the class, who had unfortunately heard and seen negative and false ideas about Islam expressed in U.S. media, and, as Moslems living here, they had experienced discrimination. It was highly meaningful to them to hear Islam discussed in a positive, respectful way in a U.S. classroom. And seeing the similarity between these "peace-oriented" Jewish and Islamic texts probably helped to ease tension between Jewish and Moslem students in the class, and might have even suggested to the class the possibility that at some time in the future, tension might ease and peaceful relations might exist between Jews and Moslems in the larger world, as well as between members of other religions that have been embroiled in tragic conflict in recent years. . . .

We read a text by the Christian writer and social activist Jim Wallis, who spoke of the advantages of "getting out of the house," or getting out of one's "comfort zone," and becoming concerned about and involved with people who are different from and less comfortable than you. He says of people who have done this:

Getting out of the house is actually the first step on a spiritual journey; take it and your life will begin to change. That is both the promise and the challenge. Only by the challenges encountered in stepping out do you learn what resources you have and what contribution you can make. What you gain is self-understanding as well as spiritual awareness. The path of self-discovery is critically linked to the process of social and political transformation. But the first step is to walk outside of the old, familiar places. (25)

We then read the Buddhist Krishnamurti, who writes about love:

Not the complexity of sexual love, nor the love of God, but just love, just being tender, really gentle in one's whole approach to all things. . . . To love is to have that extraordinary feeling of affection without asking anything in return. You may be very clever, you may pass all your examinations, get a doctorate and achieve a high position, but if you have not this sensitivity, this feeling of simple love, your heart will be empty and you will be miserable for the rest of your life. (The Simplicity of Love, 190-91)

Students then wrote essays discussing the similarity of Wallis's and Krishnamurti's ideas.

We then read a number of “spiritual” poems, some of which introduced ideas which would be discussed in depth by Pema Chodrun in her book *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*. One such poem was “When Death Comes” by Mary Oliver, in which she writes about meeting death:

I want to step through the door  
full of curiosity, wondering:  
what is it going to be like, that  
cottage of darkness?

And later in the poem:

When it’s over, I don’t want to wonder  
if I have made of my life something particular and real . . .  
I don’t want to end up simply having visited this world.

Another such poem was “The Guest House” by the 13<sup>th</sup> century Sufi poet Rumi, who says:

This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness . . .  
Welcome and entertain them all . . .  
meet them at the door laughing . . .

Be grateful for whoever comes,  
Because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.

The one book that we read in its entirety was Pema Chodrun’s *When Things Fall Apart*. In this book, Chodrun says that a number of times in her life, such as when her husband told her that he wanted a divorce, she felt that her life was falling apart. But through her practice of Buddhism and meditation, she found a sense of inner peace and self acceptance, and the ability to accept and to deal with the challenges and difficulties that life presented to her.

One student wrote :

Where can I get courage? I can request it in prayers to God . . . The God I believe in doesn’t send us the problem. He gives us the courage to cope with it. God doesn’t mean to punish us. He just means to test us and present us with problems and see how we react to them. In *When Things Fall Apart*, Pema Chodrun also says “Things falling apart is a kind of testing and also a kind of healing.”

She concludes:

The essence of life is that it's challenging. Sometimes it is sweet, and sometimes it is bitter. We cannot grasp anything. Whatever comes to us, we need to accept it. We have to live moment to moment. The only thing we need is to find out what to do and how to do when we meet bad situations. There are many ways in the different religions. We should try to understand and to follow them.

Another student wrote:

I am 24 years old and there have been many times in my life when things have fallen apart. Many times I have found myself in situations for which I have thought there was no solution. Crying was my best friend in those moments. I would stay in that condition until the moment I would realize that the problem was still there, that my suffering did not disappear, and had become bigger. I would stop crying and try to focus on what was happening. I would try to think clearly and not view myself as a helpless person, but as a human being, who has both good and bad moments in life.

Still another says:

When people are in a situation where things fall apart, there are two things that a person can do. The first is trying to solve it, trying to overcome it. Another is trying to escape it. People who choose the first way, they probably would feel hardship in the process. But when they overcome it, they will learn a lesson from it. They will open their mind; they will know they have the ability to overcome hardship. The whole world will be different to this person. In contrast, people who choose to escape the situation, they will live with darkness. Life is ruthless for them; they may even choose to commit suicide.

All the texts, as I said, suggested that it is best to live not for ourselves alone but also for others. Some individuals have lived this way to the heroic end of sacrificing their life for the good of others. Toward the end of the class, we read texts by two such individuals: Martin Luther King, Jr. and Aung San Suu Kyi. I asked students to write an essay comparing what these two individuals said about working for social justice.

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While taking this class, many of my students told me that they felt they were not just improving their English, not just learning to write good essays, but also thinking about ideas that would help them to live a better, more meaningful life. I also found that through reading, discussing, and writing about these texts with my students, I started

to understand and absorb the wisdom much more profoundly than if I had simply read the texts on my own. I look forward to continuing to share my personal spiritual journey with my students by continuing to teach writing courses in the future based on the theme of "Mindfulness and Peace," and also hope to continue to lead my students on the educational path proposed by Krishnamurti:

Surely, education has no meaning unless it helps you to understand the vast expanse of life with all its subtleties, with its extraordinary beauty, its sorrows and joys. You may earn degrees, you may have a series of letters after your name and land a very good job, but then what? What is the point of it all if in the process your mind becomes dull, weary, stupid? So, while you are young, must you not seek to find out what life is all about. And is it not the true function of education to cultivate in you the intelligence which will try to find the answer to all these problems. Do you know what intelligence is? It is the capacity, surely, to think freely, without fear, without a formula, so that you begin to discover for yourself what is real, what is true (The Function of Education, 2-3).

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