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Cultivating Well-Being and Contemplative Ways of Knowing through Connection: One Woman's Journey from Monastic Living to Mainstream Academia

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CULTIVATING WELL-BEING AND CONTEMPLATIVE WAYS OF KNOWING
THROUGH CONNECTION: ONE WOMAN'S JOURNEY FROM
MONASTIC LIVING TO MAINSTREAM ACADEMIA

A Thesis Presented

by

Krista Hamel

to

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of

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how different types of connection – intimacy, community, and compassion – can positively impact the cultivation of well-being and ways of knowing. Using Scholarly Personal Narrative methodology (narrative storytelling supported by scholarship) I describe my journey from the 15-years I lived as a monastic yogic nun, followed by a period of heartbreak, to my recent experience as a tip-toeing Buddhist and mid-life graduate student who yearned for community, a place to belong, and an opportunity to be heard, seen and valued. I explore how the pain and suffering of loneliness, grief, loss, and change, when met by presence, patience, awareness, care and flexibility, can help to strengthen one's relationships with the self, others and surrounding environment. I close by outlining how contemplative pedagogy (learner-oriented, introspective and experiential learning) can help to create new ways of knowing, improve cognitive functioning and well-being, and cultivate compassion. I demonstrate how these three connections can transform the higher education learning experience from an abstract, impersonal view of reality to an authentic, interconnected, and intimate one that help students develop long-lasting and meaningful relationships well beyond the classroom walls.

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METHODOLOGY

Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it. Embracing our vulnerabilities is risky but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love and belonging and joy – the experiences that make us the most vulnerable. Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light. – Brene Brown (2012)

For my thesis, I have chosen to use Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) methodology, which “combines scholarship, personal stories, and *universalizable* [universally-shared] themes and insights.”¹ I use this methodology primarily because it is the most conducive way to relay how I have come to know about myself and others and cultivate wellbeing through connections. The importance of forming meaningful intimate relationships is a theme throughout this manuscript. With SPN methodology, I am “caught up in every word, sentence, in every statistic...in every comma.”²

In order for me to get the most out of this endeavor, I placed myself at the center of my learning and have come to realize that my story matters and is worth telling; it is my sincere desire that my words can also help others. Instead of doing research on something outside or separate from me, I became my own learning laboratory, working with the rawest data available to me – my own life, my own stories – mixing elixirs of memories, experimenting with my voice, measuring my own outcomes, collecting the variables of my past and present to determine what these experiences mean to me and how they impact others. It seems only natural to explore this personal subject matter from

¹ Nash, R., & DeMethra, L.B. *Me-Search and Re-Search: A Guide for Writing Scholarly Personal Narrative Manuscripts*. (2001) Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, Inc., p. 24.

² Ibid.

a microscopic level, through my own lens, by connecting with my own story and voice to learn about myself, others and the world around me.

In my thesis I address topics such as spirituality, intimacy, love, vulnerability, loneliness, and fear. At the age of 46 I could not imagine any other way of approaching these topics of humanness. For most of my academic life, I have kept a blanket over this human side of me, keeping the “I” out of my research papers and my studies. My experiences were rarely honored or seen as valid means of scholarly thought. Instead, I had to separate myself from my work and look towards scholars “out there” to support my ideas. SPN methodology has allowed me to remove this insecurity blanket and discover a new found freedom to develop and express my voice like never before. What could be more important in life than to “write to discover who we are?”³ Through SPN I have discovered a cracked, strong, soft, fearful, and wholeheartedly honest voice. In this writing process, I have come to embrace all of these voices. I have come to accept who I am. (First Goal of thesis: To make intimate connections. Check.)

During this writing process I have plunged to murky depths and have seen myself make my way out into a spacious clearing. By reliving certain events, I gained clarity and made peace with the hard parts. I have created meaning out of life events and stirred up further questions to investigate in my lifelong search for truth. In short, healing happened and continues to happen. Science has even backed me up, as narrative expressive writing

³ Ibid., p. 60.

has been “linked with improved mood, well-being, stress levels and depressive symptoms”⁴ (Second goal of thesis: To increase my well-being. Check.)

In addition to these positive changes from the SPN writing process, I felt a shift in my perceived loneliness; my story made me feel that I was not alone, that I was connected to others who grapple with similar challenges, who ask the same questions, and experience similar joys. These were what the developer of the SPN methodology, Professor Robert Nash, describes as the universalizable truths. And by these connections I found value in my own voice and wisdom that inspired me to move through to the final chapters, towards ultimately finding ways to help others. In essence, my storytelling has a “means to an end.”⁵ My voice is not calling out helplessly from some deserted island. Instead, it is reverberating throughout the universe in a “series of overlapping concentric circles with others.”⁶

⁴ Chan, A.L. *6 Unexpected Ways Writing Can Transform Your Health*(blog). Huffington Post. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/11/12/writing-health-benefits-journal_n_4242456.html.

⁵ Nash & DeMethra (2001) p. 77.

⁶ Ibid., p. 25.

INTRODUCTION

*A deep sense of love and belonging is an irresistible need of all people. We are biologically, cognitively, physically, spiritually wired to love, to be loved, and to belong. When those needs are not met, we don't function as we are meant to. We break. We fall apart. We numb. We ache. We hurt others. We get sick.*⁷ – Brene Brown (2010; 2012)

Driving over the Severn River Bridge that morning I remember how the sky pulled me toward her. Why is it so hard to find a word that describes that blue hue? I have tried but no words can seem to capture that blue feeling. It was like someone *adjusted the lens* on that day. The sky was brighter, sharply focused, a sign that the haziness of the humid summer had come to an end and autumn was settling in. I moved closer to the windshield to feel the heat of the late summer sun on my face. The Severn River flowing beneath me fed slowly into the Chesapeake Bay. I love mornings like this.

When I arrived at work, I was told I could use a colleague's computer that day; I was not considered a permanent employee and did not have a desk of my own. You should have seen the Dean's face the week before when she walked in the office and noticed the makeshift desk my supervisor created for me out of unopened summer youth camp brochure boxes and a large bulletin board. She was clearly not amused. In any case, I was grateful to be able to sit comfortably at a colleague's desk that morning.

Around 9:50 am, everything stopped when one of the Twin Towers was hit by a plane. The entire world took a collective gasp for air. Minutes later, the second Tower

⁷ Brown, B. (2012). *The Power of Vulnerability*. TED Talks. Retrieved from www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCvmsMzIF7o
<http://www.cnn.com/2010/LIVING/11/01/give.up.perfection/>

was struck. This was not a dream. After receiving news about the Pentagon, I turned my head and saw my colleague bury her head in her hands. Her husband would have been at the Pentagon that morning but he was safe and sound at a conference in Florida. The community college where I worked was located a stone's throw away from the U.S. Naval Academy, the National Security Association (NSA), and uncomfortably close to the Pentagon. I was in the hornet's nest. We all were. Those "friendly skies" did not seem so friendly anymore.

I immediately picked up the phone and called my mother to hear her voice, to tell her I was ok and that I loved her. We exhaled in unison.

I got up and checked on others around the office and saw the many faces of fear. I distinctly remember locking forearms with my colleague friend, looking into her eyes and saying, "None of this – the overlapping project deadlines, the higher education politics, and the lack of sufficient parking – matters. The only thing that matters is our connection with one another, with our friends, with our family. That's it." For the next 10 years we worked together, we would stop, lock arms, and look each other in the eyes and did a connection check-in when either one of us needed it, during stressful moments. Those stressful moments give us "access to our hearts...and help us to remember that we don't have to face life's challenges alone."⁸ When I make deep and meaningful connections with others I feel understood, I feel a sense of mutual caring, and a sense of who I am in that moment. Occasionally, I feel a resonating spark of joy! While we may have felt it all

⁸ McGonigal, K. (2013). *How to make Stress your Friend*. TED talks retrieved from http://www.ted.com/talks/kelly_mcgonigal_how_to_make_stress_your_friend/transcript

along, science is just now revealing that seeking out and maintaining these connections can improve our sense of safety and well-being, decrease stress, anxiety and risk of depression, as well as strengthen our immune system and increase our longevity.⁹¹⁰¹¹¹² In other words, loneliness is detrimental for our health, and having meaningful connections can pave the road towards good health. This connection, this “sense of belonging – the feelings that we are part of a whole greater than ourselves, with which we are physically, mentally, and spiritually involved – is a necessary factor to our well-being.”¹³ To this end, I have found that seeking and maintaining three types of connections – intimacy, community, and compassion – can help me acquire that “necessary factor” of well-being. Intimacy is that deep, personal connection and love where the heart resonates with the person or object being loved. Community is that sense of belonging to a meaningful group, that feeling of being part of the larger whole. And compassion is recognizing and having the desire to alleviate the suffering of oneself and that of others.

The pages to come paint a portrait of how I have been able to find strength and peace of mind through life’s challenging moments, from the 15 years I lived as a yogic nun to my current life as a Buddhist and graduate student, and of how I have come to know more deeply about myself and the world around me through meaningful connections, through love.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Seppala, E. (2012). Connect to Thrive: Social Connection Improves Healthy, Well-being and Longevity. *Psychology Today*.

¹¹ Bergland, C. (2013) Social Connectivity Drives the Engine of Well-being. *Psychology Today*.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-athletes-way/201305/social-connectivity-drives-the-engine-well-being>

¹² George, B. (2015). Overcoming the Loneliness of Leadership. Blog. *Psychology Today*.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/what-is-your-true-north/201510/overcoming-the-loneliness-leadership>

¹³ Ferrucci, P. (2006). *The Power of Kindness*. New York, NY: Penguin Group, p. 73.

CHAPTER 1: THE YOGA YEARS

1.1: Living Community

After the towers fell, the College closed down and we were all sent home. I drove back over the Severn River Bridge; this time my attention was no longer drawn towards the sky, instead I felt the need to look into as many cars as I could as they drove slowly past me. There was an eerie sense of calm as people made their way over the bridge bound for family, friends, and the safety of home. I was one of those people on my way home to be with my family. When I arrived, we all gathered in the meditation room to do our practices. With my family, my spiritual family, my satsaunga, I felt a deep sense of belonging, purpose and meaning.

For 15 years I lived in a yoga ashram, also known as “the house,” in Maryland. This part of Maryland was considered the “South”, with soy bean fields and tobacco leaves scattered about on the road, the ones that never made it to the barn for curing. The house was surrounded by tulip poplar and dogwood trees. There, I lived with my ‘brothers’, Arun and Satyam.

Arun is an emergency physician fluent in five languages, player of numerous musical instruments, and former researcher and international speaker on veganism. He is my quirky brother who always manages to wear his pajama pants at least four inches above his naval. The thought of him (and his pajamas) brings a smile to my face every time.

Satyam is a community educator and leader who brings a small bedroom community, outside of DC, together through yoga, inspiring stories and meditation. With

his soft voice and gentle demeanor, he makes people from all backgrounds – lawyers, educators, teenagers, grandparents, construction workers, doctors, students, environmentalists – feel like an important piece of the whole, part of a true community of practitioners.

And then there was me. It is worth rewinding the clock to take a look at how I started on this path, when I lived in Seattle in the early 90s. This was my first time living in a city. My internal headlines read, “White female from small town Vermont moves to the big city!” I remember sitting on the bus all giddy inside for being a minority, the only white person on the bus. Finally! Everyone was so nice and extremely health-conscious. I loved Seattle.

At the time, I worked at a group home for three adults with disabilities – Tye, Rob and Chris. Tye was a young man with autism who absolutely adored Elvis. He worked at a recycling center crushing cardboard boxes into tightly wrapped cubes and became quite adept at it. Rob, who suffered from a childhood brain injury, loved to go to the supermarket every Wednesday and pick up stacks of “nickel” papers (want-ads) only to turn around and tear them slowly into shreds. He enjoyed this very much. Rob was often seen rubbing his large hand across his chin and repeating, “I’m doing good, myself, I’m doing good myself”. His lightheartedness touched everyone around him. Chris was a young man with autism, with a meticulously combed bowl haircut who repeated everything people said. He also had a strong desire for human touch but only got as far as holding his hand three inches above another person’s hand, without touching it. He was afraid to make contact. His internal struggle for connection reminded me of how lonely

and empty the world can be without human touch. But Chris kept trying nonetheless. This work was challenging but I will never forget each of Tye's, Chris', or Rob's ability to touch my heart and with those around them in their own unique way.

One day, a new staff member, with a six inch beard and long, brown hair that rested at the base of his spine, walked in the door at the group home. He just finished a stint as a ranger patrol on Mt. Denali in Alaska. He seemed familiar to me and I asked him, "Do you meditate? Do you do yoga? Are you a vegetarian?" He answered yes to all of the questions. At this point in my life, during my early twenties, my mind was reeling with existential questions. He managed to quench my curiosity and address each of them. That staff member's name was Satyam.

This marked the starting point of my 20-year journey on the path of yoga.

At that time I had been living in Seattle for about five years and was starting to feel unsettled, disconnected. Just prior to meeting Satyam, I joined an all-female expedition team called "Walk on the Wild Side." Even though I felt drawn toward the spiritual path, I wanted to follow through with my commitment to the expedition team. The aim of the expedition was to walk across the country to raise money and awareness for wild salmon restoration projects. After six months and six hundred miles later, after many nights of doing meditation and singing mantra music alone, I left the walk to surround myself with practitioners on the same path. I needed community. I needed a spiritual place to belong. Eventually, I made my way to Maryland to fully dedicate myself on this path and moved in with my brothers, Satyam and Arun.

As a collective we supported each other on this path, day and night. There was trust and safety between us. We did everything together. We cooked, cleaned, laughed, and cried together. Every morning at 5 am we gathered in the sun room to sing kirtan (devotional mantra music) and meditate. This was my *satsaunga*, my good company, my community that promoted and supported a healthy, wholesome, spiritual practice. I rarely felt depressed in the house. Perhaps this overall sense of affinity with them had much to do with it. For me, this community gave me a sense that I was part of something larger than myself.

Individually and collectively we ideated on our place in the cosmos, linked to all animate and inanimate beings. Twice a day we sang Sam'gacchadvam', an ancient Rg Veda Sanskrit chant of universal and eternal connectedness, before daily group meditation:

Sam'gacchadvam' Sam'vadadhvam'
Let us move together; let us sing together

Sam'vomana'm'si ja'natam
Let us share our minds together

Deva'bha'gam' ya'tha'purve
Like sages of the past;

Sam'jana'na' upa'sate
altogether enjoy the universe

Sama'nii va' a'kuti
unite our strength

Sama'na' hrdaya'ni vaha
make our hearts as one heart

Sama'nam astu vo mano
and our minds as one mind

Yatha' vaha su saha' sati
so we truly know one another, become one

It is beautiful to think that the creators of this chant had their own ‘sages of the past’ and people around them to honor and acknowledge as part of their oneness, their community, even back when it was created between 1700-1100 B.C.E.

1.2: Love Lessons #1

I believe being a part of a community is crucial for maintaining well-being as it is a place we can receive support, find security in belonging, open our eyes to the needs of others, work through conflicts, and in this case with my brothers, be motivated to engage in healthy behaviors. These healthy behaviors, as science reveals, are contagious as they spread through our social connection.¹⁴ If people are eating a healthy diet around us, we are more likely to eat a healthy diet. If people are calm and content around us, we are more likely to remain calm and content. These healthy behaviors can spread like germs!¹⁵

Being a part of a community reminds me how I felt when I sang in a choir. I imagine a chorus room full of singers where auditions are taking place to measure what part each person will sing – tenor, alto, bass, and soprano. Here we are defining roles, finding our place within the community. Once the parts are established we run through a song and discover many areas that need work. Here we start establishing goals to work

¹⁴ Komaroff M.D., A. *Social Networks can Affect Weight, Happiness* (blog), Harvard Health Blog. <http://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/social-networks-can-affect-weight-happiness-201112163983>

¹⁵ Ibid.

towards, together. A portion of the song involves singing the same notes together, in unison, making sure that we sound like one voice. Here we ensure our own needs and voices do not overpower the needs and voices of others. There is nothing quite like being in a room full of 50 to 100 people singing the same notes together. Here we find strength in numbers delivering one powerful message, together. We develop a sensitivity in our relationship to one another. Occasionally, there is dissonance, a “mingling of discordant sounds” (Merriam-Webster). In community there are differences that are sometimes resolved and sometimes not. We can develop an appreciation for the uniqueness of each other’s viewpoints and personality traits. Occasionally, we are given the opportunity to sing a solo. Here we discover our unique voice without the support of the choir which tests our strength to stand alone in a crowd. And sometimes our solo voice is backed up by the choir where we find comfort and support from our community.

In the house we sang in harmony, unison and in dissonance; we were a close spiritual family, held together by the teachings, the mission of “Self-Realization and Service to Humanity” and by our love for God.

1.3: Intimacy with God

When I was young I floated around Christianity, went to Catholic school and occasionally attended a congregational church with my grandparents. I associated Christianity with strict nuns with beady eyes. I took the “Body of Christ” during mass because I liked the taste and texture of the rice wafers. I did not really believe it was the Body of Christ going inside of me. I loved the hymns and felt connected to people

through music. When I sang, “How Firm a Foundation,” the words penetrated my mind and circulated throughout my body:

“In ev’ry condition-in sickness, in health, in poverty’s vale, or abounding in wealth; At home or abroad, on the land, on the seas, As days may demand, shall thy strength ever be.

Fear not, I am with thee, O be not dismayed, For I am thy God and will still give thee aid; I’ll strengthen and help thee, and cause thee to stand Upheld by My righteous, omnipotent hand.” (Published by John Rippon, 1787)

To me, God was an abstract and symbolic figure of almighty-ness and hope. He did not have a face but He had a force. I also liked the idea of being protected by His ‘righteous, omnipotent hand’ and felt comforted by that. I believe this church was one of my first exposures to community. I liked how God brought people together under one roof, in song, in conviction. Even though I attended church a couple times a month with my grandparents on the weekends, I still felt that connection with the congregation. Everyone was so friendly and welcoming. I felt included. I also adored my grandparents and would go everywhere they went. Going to church provided me a quiet space to spend time with them. Oh how I loved hearing them sing. It made them happy and when they were happy, I was happy. They both stood tall with their heads held high, singing hymns of praise. And when they noticed me looking at them they each looked down at me with their warm eyes and soft wrinkled smile and wrapped their arms tightly around me. I felt the vibration of their voice resonate within me. That sense of connection with my grandparents and the church community was enough to keep me open to my belief in God.

But as I grew older I spent less time with my grandparents and stopped going to church, and started questioning the concept of God as I became more aware of the suffering in the world. I let my faith rest as I went to high school and throughout college.

As an undergraduate, I started to learn more about the world around me: war, women's rights, and social and racial injustices. Each of these issues were linked to strongly held beliefs, beliefs that clashed with other strongly held beliefs. Some (most) of these beliefs were linked with religious beliefs. The more I learned about these injustices and issues, the more cynical I became. That openness I once felt in my connection with God and with others was slowly closing. With all of the suffering I saw around me, I started to doubt there even *was* a God. I started to judge people of faith for being so closed-minded that they would deny people their rights to land, food, reproductive rights, and education. And in this process of doubt and shedding of my own faith, I helped start an atheist club. But the club did not have any base, direction, or meaning. It only served to divide rather than connect people. And that was what I needed. That is what I knew to be the true way of living my life, through connection. At the time, I also gained a deeper appreciation for nature and my place in it – the beauty of the mountains, the force and flow of the ocean, the fierceness and fragility of wildlife. I started to think more about its origins, its evolving nature, and I even stopped to pause and appreciate the complexity of the human body. I wondered how this beauty and this perfection of humanity, the world, and the universe formed from nothing. This curiosity rekindled my once-held affinity towards God.

So I soon bowed out of this club and yearned to connect to that force that I believed created the world around me. I did not believe in a religion that was based in fearing God or going to Hell because I made mistakes. That never made sense to me. I wanted a personal God, one I could connect with on an intimate level. One that could answer the existential questions I started to ask: Who am I? What am I doing here? Where am I going? I found those answers some years later with yoga.

During that time in Maryland, my relationship with God was indeed an intimate one. There was no fear, only love and devotion. Like many yoga groups in India, our Guru, affectionately called Baba, was regarded as the embodiment of God, who had a human frame. He left his physical body in 1990, so I never met Him in person. But that did not matter. I fell in love with Him through His teachings and the practice. Baba gave over 1000 discourses on a wide range of topics from bio-psychology, ecology, history, geography, linguistics, music, poetry, and socio-economics, just to name a few. He was a living and loving entity within me. During meditation, in my mind, I came to know about intimacy as we served one another, as we loved one another, as we held and fed one another. And whenever I felt He let me down or felt distanced from Him, I would express my frustrations to Him like I would with any loving relationship.

Eventually as my practices started to wane, so, too, did my relationship with God and my brothers.

1.4: Leaving Community

*In our loneliness and isolation, there is a deep longing, a yearning, usually unconscious or ignored, to belong, to be connected to a larger whole, to not be anonymous, to be seen and known.*¹⁶

Life was not always easy in that house, nor was the path strewn with flower petals. The yogic lifestyle involves achieving optimal levels of health, but some of these health practices were challenging. Bathing with a bucket full of cold water was never easy. In our efforts to conserve energy, we only heated our respective bedrooms during the winter. That was tough and made for some quick dinner preparation and frigid toilet seats! Occasionally, we sat outside to meditate for three to six hours at a time when conditions were less than ideal – in the rain, in the middle of the night at the cemetery or in a snow-covered field. I admit, I had some wonderful, mystical experiences in those settings.

Living this way, I found it challenging to move about ‘normally’ in society. I was ultra-sensitive to crude images, language and behavior. I chose to wear oversized clothing to modestly cover my body and sported a Sinead O’Connor style haircut and was “playfully” teased for it.

Food often got in the way of making connections with others. Typically, food can be found at the center of life’s events – birthdays, weddings, funerals, when we are ill. Food is an instrument through which we can express our love. True connection occurs over food. But I was unable to eat the food in restaurants or eat food prepared by others

¹⁶ Kabat-Zinn, J. (2006). *Coming to Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the Work Through Mindfulness*. New York, NY: Hyperion.

because my yogic diet did not include onions, mushrooms or garlic. There are not many dishes without these ingredients. I was not able to eat my lunch with my co-workers without being repulsed at the sight and smell of meat. There was this gap between us.

It was hard to balance these two very different worlds.

1.5: Love Lessons #2

Have you ever been surrounded by people you love and still feel lonely? It's a painful irony. For so many of those years I lived love in different ways – with God, through my disciplined practice of yoga, as a spiritual soldier with my brothers, in a mystical realm with mantras, meditation, moral codes, and mission work. I knew my brothers loved me, and I loved them. But it wasn't enough. The separateness I began to feel from the rest of the human race created a large void in my heart. Eventually I felt the need to experience love and connection through human touch, human emotions, human desires and most notably self-love. I was living in a community that was no longer aligned with my evolving true self.

For five years, I stood at the fork in the road wondering if I should continue on the path that was lined with a familiar job, familiar brothers, familiar routines and practices. My job provided financial security during the Great Recession. My brothers looked out for my welfare, providing support for my health, spiritual practices and a sound shelter. We had a shared history, shared spiritual sentiments and goals. We worked together towards the betterment of humanity through the teachings and practices of yoga and meditation. And for this reason I lived so long with a sense of guilt of the possibility of turning my back on my spiritual family, and in turn, the greater universal

family. The thought of losing this connection haunted me for years. I wondered if I was giving up on my family and humanity altogether. I wondered if this was the only path for me, the only way for me to serve humanity.

I contemplated the other road ahead of me, the path full of uncertainty, with no job, no routines, and no spiritual community, the path that filled me with great fear of not knowing what lay beyond each bend. Choosing this path would require taking a leap of faith into the unknown. I would need to find the confidence within myself to move toward that dark and mysterious road ahead:

Enlightenment is never easy. It is frightening to leave our old selves behind, because they are the only way we know how to live. Even if the familiar is unsatisfactory, we tend to cling to it because we are afraid of the unknown.¹⁷

After five years of deliberation I mustered up the strength, packed my few belongings, and returned to my home state of Vermont.

¹⁷ Armstrong, K. (2001). *Buddha*. New York, NY: Penguin Group, p.35.

CHAPTER 2: ANOTHER PATH

2.1: Love Me

*Admit something:
Everyone you see, you say to them,
“Love me.” Of course you do not do this
out loud, otherwise someone would
call the cops. Still, though, think about
this, this great pull in us to connect.
Why not become the one who lives
with a full moon in each eye that is
always saying, with that sweet moon
language, what every other eye in this
world is dying to hear?¹⁸*

This above poem from the Persian poet, Hafiz, captured my yearning to connect with, to love and be loved by another when I moved back to Vermont. For the first year I struggled to find my way, to fill that spiritual void. I was unable to sit for meditation. I started eating foods that were previously forbidden and even stopped fasting. My life was dry, going to work and coming home day after day, week after week. I felt empty and without purpose. I no longer had my spiritual family around me. I no longer felt that intimacy with Baba. All of the seats around me were vacant. I had nothing to stand and fight for, to feel passionate towards. I was empty.

¹⁸ Hafiz. (1999). Translated by Daniel Ladinsky. *With That Moon Language. The Gift*. New York, NY: Penguin Compass.

2.2: Intimacy with Another

*I never heard the sound and thrill of my painful heart
until that very day she touched it.*
– Santosh Kalwar

As I searched for a spiritual connection, I also yearned for a relationship. Living as a celibate nun I hardly had any physical contact with others; an occasional hug with co-workers was about it. I wanted someone to love and connect with in a more intimate way. While attending a group meditation session at a local center, I met a woman. We started spending more and more of our time discussing and comparing our beliefs and practices. I enjoyed her light approach to life and her ability to not take herself so seriously. That infectious laugh did not hurt either. For one year we opened up to each other in ways neither of us had experienced before. We felt safe and free with one another and laughed, a lot. I actually felt the pounding of my heart when we were together. I was completely enraptured. I remember having absolutely no appetite. None. And I love to eat. Dare I say it, I wanted to devote my life to her.

One day we were sitting out on my terrace in the heat of the midsummer sun when she received a call inviting her to come for an interview for her dream job out of state. As she spoke on the phone I saw her eyes beam with joy and excitement. She even danced a little jig on the ledge of the cement fireplace. At that moment, I knew it was over. I no longer mattered. I could hear my heart shatter into pieces as it hit the ground. She interviewed, was offered the job and moved out of state within two months. It all happened so fast.

Was this actually love that I felt? Or was it passion, “enmeshed with feelings of desire, of wanting or of owning and possessing?”¹⁹ Or was it sentimentality, “experiences of pleasure” disguised as love?²⁰ Safety, trust, pleasure and love were all present. And when the relationship ended, I experienced intense suffering. As I look back, I believe this relationship was a little bit of everything – love, passion, and sentimentality. Perhaps these intense feelings might have partially come from 15 years of celibacy and living with such “devotee” fervor for so long. Perhaps. But they were real and they made me feel alive.

This heartbreak hit me with an unforgiving force. I wondered if I would ever be able to, once again, feel that same pull the moon has with the sea when they fall into that rhythmic embrace. It felt strange to be in that place. That tender and apparently all-too-human place.

I never heard loneliness that loud before.

I was that cow in the field chewing on my emotional cud, over and over, reliving the pains and joys of that relationship. I awoke each morning with my hand over my heart, trying to console my soul, and spent a lot of time thinking what I have learned along the way from intimate relationships.

2.3: Love Lessons #3

Intimacy helps me go below the surface, underneath the thickness of my skin to uncharted territory, deep into the marrow of my bones. There, I am exposed,

¹⁹ Salzberg, S. (1995). *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness*. Boston, MA: Shambhala, p. 19.

²⁰ Ibid.

defenseless, raw, tender, and scared, but at the same time I am excited, alive, and on fire. It is both uncomfortable and freeing to be without my armor and by feeling this way I know who I am in that moment – happy, sad, uncomfortable, strong, cold, warm, sensuous, and clumsy. I may not like all the parts of me that surface but this is who I am. And I accept who I am. This connection teaches me how quickly I can find or lose myself and how important it is to be aware of this unstable nature of things. There is an intensity that comes with intimacy and with it comes fear from the uncertainty of not knowing what to say or do or of not knowing how long this love will last. I am left feeling helpless.

With intimacy, there is no room to analyze and no words to explain or hijack that experience. It is a pure, tender, connected place.

It is funny how the word tender is defined in two very different ways and how it reminds me of intimacy. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, tender means affection and it also means “painful when touched”. Affection and pain. The two words could not be more different. But it certainly describes the experience explicitly. Similarly it captures my experience of intimacy with its simultaneous soft and abrasive sides. Taking the good with the bad is worth it to me.

Intimacy is a salve for my soul. With one kiss, I turn into water. The touch of my lover’s lips sends waves throughout my body. This intimate contact brings me feelings of “trust, safety, a sense of calm”, and compassion; this intimate touch sends the hormone of love through my veins.²¹

²¹ Chillot, R. (2013, March). The Power of Touch. *Psychology Today*.

Wellbeing from intimacy occurs when we are free to be fully human with one another, to express our fears, our joys, and our open, honest, and unarmored self. When we allow each other time and space to see, hear and respect each other. When we can enjoy the lightness of being, concentrate on what we have rather than what we do not have, and appreciate the simple moments we share. When we experience mutual benevolence that leaves no room for belittling! When we challenge and inspire one another to grow and to think deeply about things. When we are supportive of one another in healthy habits, interests, our strengths and sensitive to our weaknesses.

Wellbeing from intimacy results from allowing space to recognize that sustaining a loving relationship is hard work when we are challenged by compromises, doubts, insecurities, and disagreements. Disagreement and compromise frees us from our attachment to being right, and exposes us to different views, approaches and perspectives. These challenges help us to become more flexible. Effort, patience, and commitment help to nurture and allow growth through difficult times, doubt or change.

Wellbeing from intimate relationships comes from maintaining one's own identity. Allowing each other time for silence and solitude gives us the opportunity to know ourselves better, the space to be who we are.

Wellbeing from intimacy comes from releasing our tendency to cling on to our connections and attend to the present moment, without complications, without trying to control what is going to happen next. When we can let things happen, let things be as they are and accept whatever comes, and whatever changes. There is a sense of freedom that comes when thinking about connections in this way.

And when it becomes difficult to relate in these ways or if your evolving self no longer resonates with your partner, or when you feel that your own truth is being compromised, this may be the time to let go. In my case, I had no choice than to let go. She was gone, and I could not change that. My process of letting go started by looking inward.

2.4: Brilliant City

After what seemed to be an eternity of darkness, I searched in my own ‘hope’ chest to find my way out of the trenches of this abyss. I found solace in poetry and began to “*Rumi-nate*” in another way:

Dance when you're broken open.
Dance when you've torn the bandage off.
Dance in the middle of fighting.
Dance in your blood.
Dance when you're perfectly free.
Struck, the dancer hears a tambourine inside her,
like a wave that crests into foam at the very top,
Begins.
Maybe you don't hear that tambourine,
or the tree leaves clapping time.
Close the ears on your head,
that listen mostly to lies and cynical jokes.
There are other things to see, and hear.
Music. Dance.
A brilliant city inside your soul!

-Rumi

I was in search of that ‘brilliant city’ inside my soul. Would I be able to find this music and dance underneath these layers of pain and suffering? They were there, tucked behind my intestines or somewhere close by, waiting to see the light of day.

Enter: Buddhism.

At the time, I was entering my first semester of graduate school. My area of concentration, contemplative studies, saved my life. During this time, I was able to deepen my knowledge of self and the world around me through Buddhism and other wisdom practices. This investigation involved the practice and study of meditation, mindfulness, compassion, self-reflection, and poetry. Buddhism was a new approach to spirituality for me that left me with my thoughts, emotions and breath, coming and going. I just sat with myself with no expectations of proper techniques or outcomes. It was awkward and unfamiliar. I was challenged to see things as they were, and to find some sort of meaning at any given moment. I was challenged to look inside of me to see who I truly was.

CHAPTER 3: COMPASSION

If you don't love yourself, you cannot love others. You will not be able to love others. If you have no compassion for yourself, then you are not able of developing compassion for others.
– The Dalai Lama

On March 16, 2015, I drove 165 miles from Burlington, VT to Lenox, MA to the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Well-Being. I do not get out much. I have some fear around driving through and to unknown places. Flying to a foreign land is a piece of cake. Going to India alone – not a problem. But driving to a nearby state, ugh. I get a little choked up. I believe it stemmed from a brief period of commuting into Washington, DC. Talk about aggressive driving. I almost lost my life about three times on the “DC speedway”. Never again.

As soon as I saw that I would be travelling the entire distance to Kripalu on the quiet and scenic Route 7, my anxiety dropped to post deep tissue massage therapy levels. I arrived with a tender heart and a lump in my throat. Tears came to my eyes, followed by that weird tingling in my nose. I did not fight it this time. I just let it happen. The tide was coming in, yet again, bringing another wave of sadness. This wave comes and goes, sometimes when I least expect it. There I was in the lobby of the Kripalu center, many months after the breakup, still grieving her loss. The loss of her touch, her sweet smile, her laugh, the depth our connection.

I carried the burden of this loss for so long, all the way to Kripalu.

This was my first time at Kripalu, a place where people go to get in touch with their softer, stronger, spiritual or creative sides. A quiet refuge. I was there for one week of self-compassion training, led by self-compassion researcher Kristin Neff and clinical psychologist, Christopher Germer. I was surrounded by 90 participants. Among those were social workers, therapists, meditation teachers, educators, grandparents, and parents all with the aim of bringing self-compassion into their own personal and professional lives. I know what you are thinking. Self-Compassion? You may be wondering if this is the same as self-indulgence or self-pity. Or a sign of weakness. Or another a variation of self-esteem. None of the above.

Self-compassion fosters positive feelings toward oneself while maintaining a sense of connection with others²². Self-compassion also involves a sincere desire to rid oneself of suffering, to regulate one's own emotions and ultimately one's thoughts and actions, as well as having the ability to accept and care for one's pain²³. All of these aspects of self-compassion help to bring about "lower incidences of anxiety and depression."²⁴

The first morning at Kripalu, we all gathered together for an hour of silent meditation. With my eyes closed, I wondered who was sitting next to me. I wondered what I was going to learn. Will this just be a cry-fest? Is this going to rid me of my pain? Thinking. Wondering.

²² Neff, K. D. (2003). Development and Validation of a Scale to Measure Self-Compassion. *Self and Identity*, 2, 223-250.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

And then I came back to my breath, to that very moment. Without trying to fix. Back to my breath. Some fidgeting, and more breath. Then something magical happened. The sun rose on my eyelids as the tingsha bells sounded three times, marking the end of meditation. The start of a new day. And perhaps (well, hopefully) a new heart.

Germer opened the session by asking us, “How would you treat a friend who is suffering?” To my friend, I offered my presence, ear, embrace, softness. And then he asked how we would treat ourselves when we suffer. The answers were quite different. While I was patient with my friend, I seemed less so with myself. I wanted immediate results. I wanted to be fixed now. Whereas with my friend it felt more process-oriented, “We’ll get through this”; I was more patient, more connected. But I felt isolated and lonely with my own suffering. I felt actual physical pain, a physiological reaction occurred, that fight-flight response kicked in. This physical reaction held me back from alleviating my own suffering. What an eye-opener this exercise was for me. From that point on, we were invited to touch some discomfort and meet our suffering, pain, and imperfections in a new way, just as we would with a friend.

I was reminded of a beautiful Arabic phrase I came across weeks before, “Kayf-haal-ik” or “Haal-e shomaa chetoreh” which begs to know, “How is your heart today?” This has stuck with me ever since. Just think about it for a minute. What an interesting world it would be if we greeted one another in this intimate, compassionate way and tapped into the tender most cavern of our being, without the armor of aggression or fear, but instead, with openness and curiosity. With love and care. And what would happen if we touched into ourselves in this way? To be able to connect with ourselves with

tenderness and love by asking, “How is my heart today?” That is the moment when the bubbles of self-compassion rise to the surface.

In order to fully understand what self-compassion is, it is helpful to first look at what it means to *feel* compassion. In Sanskrit and Pali languages the word for compassion is *karuna*, which means ‘to suffer together.’ More explicitly, compassion can be described as the recognition of suffering and the desire to alleviate it²⁵.

Compassion, according to some dictionary entries, is mixed with feelings of sympathy and pity. So in the case of feeling sympathy or pity for others there is this sense of judgement. This pity for others implies that you are somehow greater than the one suffering, that they are less than you, that you are separate from each other. Taken a step further, “pity arises from meeting pain with fear. Compassion comes when you meet it with love.²⁶” I opt for love and connection, thank you.

3.1: Love Lessons #4

It’s this very love that removes the barriers between us, and brings us to that shared human place of suffering, binding us to one another.

It is easy to feel this unconditional bond towards our close friends and family but what about everyone else? What about our enemies or people we do not know at all or have feelings for? Have you ever thought about sending love to them? That is where the Buddhist practice of metta meditation comes in. Metta is a Pali word meaning

²⁵ Neff, K. (2011). *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself*. New York, NY: Harper Collins, p. 10.

²⁶ Levine, S. (1997). *A Year to Live*. New York, NY: Belltower, p. 18.

lovingkindness, the practice of generating kindness and care with oneself and others by the repetition of loving phrases.

Within the self-compassion scope, Neff refers to this caring act towards one's self as *self-kindness*, of warmly and unconditionally accepting one's shortcomings and failures, and actively comforting ourselves instead of criticizing.²⁷ The very act of self-kindness has allowed me to feel intimacy and love towards myself for the first time without guilt or shame.

As the sun made its way across the sky, Germer led the group of 90 participants in another exercise. We began by placing our hand over an area of our body that feels 'comforting and soothing.' Together we took our breath in and out and after a while, we offered ourselves words of kindness, again and again. Words that we needed to hear at that very moment. I filled my entire being with love, tenderness, and nurturing.

Then we shifted our focus to someone we love or someone who is struggling. I chose my mother. I pictured her in my mental landscape and sent words and feelings of 'warmth' and compassion to her. We breathed in love for ourselves and breathed out love for the other. This meditation was nicknamed, "One for me, and one for you." I felt a sense of softening, an opening, and a tenderness for myself and my mother. We then moved on to an exercise with phrases commonly used in metta meditation but with a self-compassionate twist.

We internally repeated the following words first to someone we love:

²⁷ Neff, K. (2011a). Self-compassion, self-esteem, and well-being. *Social and Personality Compass*, 5, 1-12.

May you be happy.
May you be peaceful.
May you be healthy.
May you live with ease.

With the warm feeling of the other, we brought ourselves into the imagined presence of our loved one and repeated:

May you and I (we) be happy.
May you and I (we) be peaceful.
May you and I (we) be healthy.
May you and I (we) live with ease.

And finally with our already stirred up feelings of warmth and kindness, we turned towards ourselves and repeated:

May I be happy.
May I be peaceful.
May I be healthy.
May I live with ease.

This was an interesting progression. Typically, metta meditation starts with the self and goes out to others. But if you are far from being your own friend or treating yourself lovingly, then starting with one's self can be a great challenge.

During this exercise, I felt a slowing down and folding into myself like a warm blanket, recently removed from the dryer, was placed over my shoulders. This experience allowed me to stand by myself and kept me from abandoning myself. With metta, pain and suffering turn into tenderness that hovers in my heart. It is a time for me to remove

my armor around it and meet it with gentleness, openness and softness. A time to befriend who I am already.²⁸

The next day, we were invited to further explore the power of soothing (self) touch practice that can be used when feeling badly. This could take the form of giving ourselves a hug, by supporting our face with our hands, rubbing our abdomen gently, or by placing our hand over our heart. I found my landing pad:

*Cold hand.
Tendermost heart.
Delicate pulse.
I come to know my breath once again.
Soothe and smooth the jagged edges of my shattered core,
with the balm of lovingkindness.
Warm hand.
Warm heart.
-K. Hamel*

My hand took permanent residence over my heart throughout the week. While I was in the shower, during meditation, while walking down the hallway. Even in bed, before I went to sleep. This was becoming a habit, one that I never wanted to break. It was my own compassionate form of pledging allegiance to the united states of tenderness. This created a shift in my existence. I had no idea that bio-physiological changes were occurring.

²⁸ Chodron, P. (2001). *The Wisdom of Now Escape*. Boston, MA: Shambhala. p. 4.

3.2: Love Lessons #5

I was shocked to find out that the human body doesn't care where the soothing touch is coming from; it reacts positively to gentle touch no matter what. In the same way as I mentioned earlier about the benefits of being touched by another, each time I placed my hand over my heart it triggered the release of "the hormone of love and bonding."²⁹ Studies have shown that increased levels of oxytocin strongly increase feelings of connectedness for self and others.³⁰ This stuff was working! And there was more to come.

Later on, we were asked to create our own self-kindness phrases. Those that felt most intimate and meaningful to us. Mine were about love, courage, health and peace.

I repeated the following phrases over and over:

May I be loved
May I be brave
May I be healthy
May I be peaceful

Surprisingly, my phrases soon evolved into:

I am loved
I am brave
I am healthy
I am peaceful

²⁹ Neff, K. (2011). *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself*. New York, NY: Harper Collins, p. 47.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

Neff jokingly said we were only in the “courtship” phase with these phrases, and to feel free to “date” others as we see fit. I was and am fully dedicated to “love” and “courage” but seem less apt to use “health” and “peace”. And I know these phrases will continue to evolve but for now “love” and “courage” are words I want to hear, words I want to connect with, to actualize in my own life. I still utter these phrases when I need a helping hand.

In addition to offering these words of lovingkindness to oneself and loved ones, you can also extend them to someone you do not know well or someone you are having a struggle with. Then they can be offered to everyone around you in your neighborhood, town, state, and eventually the entire world. All will inevitably fall within the scope of loving-kindness.

3.3: Love Lessons #6

Compassion enables me to reach out to one and all, known or unknown, friend or foe, because I “do not know what wars are going on down there where the spirit meets the bone.”³¹ This is so true. At the beginning of the week at the Kripalu center, I was in the company of strangers. As the week progressed, after multiple break-out sessions I learned that sorrow and pain were no longer just my own. I was not alone. Self-compassion enabled me to turn inward, pause long enough for my heart to open, and brought some balanced awareness of my suffering and to that of others. These practices have given me the tools to respond rather than react to my suffering. I am grateful and I am growing.

³¹ Williams, M. (1997). *The Ways we Touch: Poems*. University of Illinois Press, p. 55.

Self-compassion has helped me to view myself positively and with sincere interest to maintain a healthy and balanced state of being, by providing myself the care and attention I need, when I need it, by placing my hand over my heart or uttering 'may I be peaceful, may I be strong, may I be loved.' Over and over. When I respond to a painful situation with compassion, I have the desire to rid myself of suffering. These positive and compassionate states of mind have helped me to be kinder to myself. Simply speaking, cultivating compassion has helped me to deepen my relationship and overcome resentment and pain I have with myself and others. These compassion practices are starting to enable me to develop lovingkindness to the point where it arises effortlessly within and around me.

I believe cultivating compassion can help people remain steady in the face of pleasant and unpleasant circumstances, and can help form pathways where obstacles appear. And by cultivating compassion, we will be able to meet life's challenges with greater ease and approach painful experiences or difficult situations with a gentle, open, and balanced mindset.

CHAPTER 4: CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICES

In the hustle and bustle of life we lose track of who we are, who our friends and family are, and of what surrounds us. How can this be? We all have eyes, ears, a nose, and hands. But are we actually using them? Why is it so challenging to use our *common sense*? Why do we forget to use our *sense-ability*? And what about our sense of being? Instead, we end up engaging in another time zone, mourning the past or worrying about the future, losing touch with the joy and simplicity that each moment can bring, losing track of who we truly are. It is my experience that contemplative practices – mindfulness, meditation, yoga, mantras, and Buddhism – help bring us back on track, in touch with ourselves.

Although my yoga practice is quite different from my Buddhist practice, they each bring about similar experiences and outcomes. They allow time for needed stillness, tenderness and space to relate to myself intimately. In yoga, the sentient diet, yoga postures, meditation, mantras, and moral codes all brought me closer and closer to God, in essence, my true self. Yoga also helped me tune into my body's natural rhythms, and revealed how my body worked or failed to work if I did not take care of it. My body would beg me to fast, without food or water, like clockwork every month; it was ready to rest for 24 hours and rid itself from accumulating toxins and waste. Yoga also helped me see the interconnectedness of all things – plants, humans, animals, etc. Buddhism allows me to experience this same interconnectedness through mindfulness practices. With Buddhism, I relate with my humanness – my heart, thoughts, emotions, sensations, perceptions – in essence, my being, my true self. These are two different practices with

similar ends that I have benefitted greatly from. Today, yoga and Buddhism are referred to as contemplative practices, methods that deepen insight, awareness, and compassion.³²

They say practice makes perfect. For music, sports, and math that may be true, but with contemplative experiences practice makes imperfect. I believe these practices help us to experience our imperfect selves in an imperfect world with openness, acceptance, love and resilience. The following examples will demonstrate how various contemplative practices can help to increase well-being and develop new ways of knowing about ourselves and the world around us.

4.1: Pretzel Logic

Over 20 years ago I was in search of a better me, of a more peaceful, healthier me. Thanks to crossing paths with Satyam at work that day in Seattle, my search came to an end. I found an all-encompassing ensemble of physio-psycho-socio-spiritual equilibrium. Everything about yoga – the postures, diet, music, philosophy, and meditation – made logical sense and felt conducive to my mind and body. It was not about being able to place my foot behind my head or stand on my head for hours on end. Instead, yoga helped move me from a self-centered existence to a universally-centered one, as I developed a sense of belonging to an interconnected whole, concerned and sensitive to the needs of others. Yoga also gave me a peace of mind. Perhaps these are reasons why it has become so popular around the world. The main aspect of yoga people have gravitated towards is the physical postures, known as asanas.

³² Haynes, D. (2004). Contemplative Practice and the Education of the Whole Person. *ARTS: Arts in Religious and Theological Studies*, 16, 8-10.

Asanas helps bring flexibility and strength to the body, increase oxygen to the bloodstream and brain, and regulates the hormonal system, resulting in a calm and focused state of mind. The effects are almost immediate. When I practiced regularly, I felt a fluidity and stability with life. After each yoga session I led, students would come up to me and comment on how they experienced that “calm yet energized” state or slept better on the night of class. Today, science is catching up with this ancient practice affirming what people have been experiencing for thousands of years, that yoga reduces stress and anxiety.³³

When I started on the yoga path, yoga studios were few and far between. Now, they exist on every street corner. In fact, 21 million people have found their way to the mat.³⁴ It seems everyone’s mother and grandmother are signing up for teacher training. Class formats go beyond basic yoga postures and are now specialized to suit various diseases or ailments. Many of them are evidenced-based yoga classes such as Yoga for Veterans, Yoga for Anxiety, Yoga for Depression, Yoga for Cancer, Yoga for Diabetes II, and Yoga for Heart Health to name a few. Clearly, people are looking for newer and better ways of understanding how their mind and body work. People are yearning to find out who they truly are. People are looking for peace and mental clarity. Many are finding these things with asanas and other yoga practices.

³³ Harvard Health Publications, Harvard Medical School. (2009). Yoga for Anxiety and Depression. <http://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/yoga-for-anxiety-and-depression>. 2009.

³⁴ Clarke T.C., Black, L.I., Stussman, B.J. et al. (2015). Trends in the Use of Complementary Health Approaches among Adults: United States, 2002–2012. *National Health Statistics Reports*, 79. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. pp. 1-15.

4.2: Mantra

Another yoga practice that helps to bring mental clarity is the use of a mantra. Traditionally mantras (Man [mind] + tra [liberation] = liberation of the mind) are tools that help people reach enlightenment. For some, mantra is a means to reach God. For others, mantra can be used to increase wellbeing. These sacred incantations are usually repeated in coordination with the breath which helps to slow down and redirect the (over) thinking mind to a more relaxed and centered state. Essentially, mantras help to decrease rumination.

There is a well-known saying and belief in yoga, “*as you think so shall you become*”. It is believed if you think about money all of the time, you will become money in the next life. If you ideate on your enemy all of the time, you will embody those negative feelings you have toward your enemy.

Mantras, on the other hand, direct thinking in positive ways. They are accessible, portable, and can be used at any time by repeating a single word or a phrase in Sanskrit. Sanskrit is known as the mother of all languages, where the sound of each syllable is believed to vibrate in the body, mind and the entire universe. Mantras can also be repeated in one’s native tongue. They can be spiritually meaningful or used to cultivate a pleasant feeling or state of mind such as peace, courage, love, strength, flexibility, balance, joy. Finding the right mantra may take a little time and require some experimentation.

Personally, mantras keep me focused and calm as I use them throughout the day during meditation, before I pick up the phone, turn on the light, as I clean my home, or

while sitting at a stop light. This constant integration helps me to inculcate positive feelings all day long. Occasionally they find their way into my dreams. In this way, it is believed that I am “*kuru punyum ahoratram*”, doing virtuous deeds day and night. These incantations affect my entire outlook and existence and eventually help to enhance my interactions with others.

Practicing mantra is a means of anchoring the self, of staying grounded, and at ease. In addition to being felt, mantras can also be measured. Recent studies reveal that the use of mantras can help reduce the symptoms of PTSD.³⁵ This has great implications as “8 million adults have PTSD during a given year”.³⁶ Mantras can provide powerful means to effect emotional, spiritual and behavioral change.

Mantras are not the only way to approach trauma or suffering, bring about well-being, and help get us in touch with ourselves. Sometimes we have to stand face to face with our emotions, fears or suffering.

4.3: Dukkha

Dukkha is a central concept in Buddhism. In the Pali language it is a term commonly translated as suffering. The experience of suffering, according to Buddhist scriptures, comes from “getting what one does not want” and “not getting what one does want”³⁷:

³⁵ Bormann, J. E., Hurst, S., & Kelly, A. (2013). Responses to Mantram Repetition Program from Veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder: A qualitative analysis. *Journal of Rehabilitation Research & Development*, 50(6), 769-784.

³⁶ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2015, August). *PTSD: National Center for PTSD*. Retrieved from <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/PTSD-overview/basics/how-common-is-ptsd.asp>

³⁷ *Dukkha*. (2005). Published by Access to Insight. Retrieved from <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/ptf/dhamma/sacca/sacca1/dukkha.html>

Birth is dukkha, aging is dukkha, death is dukkha; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, & despair are dukkha; association with the unbeloved is dukkha; separation from the loved is dukkha; not getting what is wanted is dukkha.³⁸ (Samyutta Nikaya 56.11)

Initially, I regarded this as a bleak outlook but as I looked deeper and started to work with it, I found it very practical. I have discovered that observing my emotions or my suffering, by quieting down mental chatter and bringing a heightened attentiveness to my own awareness, I can actually remove them from the driver's seat. By asking myself, "Who is suffering? Who doesn't want what is happening to be happening,"³⁹ I am able to shift from being an emotional participant to an objective observer of my suffering. It is not always easy to bring awareness to awareness and to be alert in that moment of suffering. I guess that is why it is called a practice, a process. With this approach we can practice and be willing to accept "what comes into" our lives and "let go of what leaves" our lives.⁴⁰

By observing our emotions, recognizing and accepting them as part of the way things are, we gain clarity on things, and allow the mending process to begin. We can see these moments as opportunities for growth that eventually help us deal with set-backs. In this vein, Jon Kabat-Zinn, the father of mindfulness, says the following:

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Kabat-Zinn, J. (2006). p. 350.

⁴⁰ Salzberg, S. (1995). *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness*. Boston, MA: Shambhala, p. 13.

Healing is a coming to terms with things as they are, rather than struggling to force them to be as they once were, or as we would like them to be to feel secure, or to have what we sometimes think of as our own way.⁴¹

This is a hard lesson to learn that requires constant practice, effort and reminders, a “minding” again and again. By accepting the fact that we can no longer change certain events in our lives, we are challenged to change ourselves. We are challenged to move ahead in life and accept life as it is – ever-changing. We can understand this further if we examine the Buddhist concept of *anicca*, a Pali word meaning impermanence.

4.4: Breathtaking-Change

Anicca, one of Three Foundations of Existence in Buddhism, represents the transitory nature of all things – thoughts, life, emotions, and relationships. As we become aware of and receptive to this eternal truth, of watching things come and go, arise and cease to be, our relationship to change, changes. Our need to keep things the same and within our control, softens. Dependence and our attachment with situations, people, and things dissipate.

The most practical way I experience and accept change is through mindful meditation and the attentiveness to my breath, where I become more tuned into the transient nature of things. With an awareness of the coming and going of breath, of emotions, sensations, and situations, I am reminded of this inescapable reality of impermanence. I am in this continuous state of letting go. By simply being with this flow

⁴¹ Kabat-Zinn, J. (2006). pp. 336-7.

of breath coming in and out of my body, I am able to experience impermanence in action. With each breath comes a new moment. No two moments are ever the same. In these varying moments I learn to "...embrace the change that is to come."⁴²

4.5: Love lessons #7

The experience of opening myself to myself is different each time. I discover various "me's" in the moment – grounded, embarrassed, resistant, depressed, happy, and anxious. And each time I respond mindfully to these various "me's", I gain a little more clarity and patience with them, and "trust in the unknown."⁴³ This process requires effort, practice, stillness, and motivation to see things as they are and gives me the courage to accept all aspects of myself.

Experiencing change in this way somehow makes everything that arises – thoughts, situations, and emotions – become easier to manage. Acknowledging, accepting, and embracing uncertainty allows us to flow more easily with life's rapid current. Essentially, life is easier if we go with the flow. Adopting this sense of flexibility in life can help us face change with greater ease. And that is probably one reason I gravitated towards meditation – for mental and spiritual flexibility and centeredness.

4.6: Mindfulness

If you were really present with your moments as they were unfolding, no matter what was happening, you would discover that each moment is unique and novel and therefore, momentous.⁴⁴

⁴² Jang, J. (2011). *Transcending Adversities through Intentional Self-Care: The Rejuvenating Narrative of A Student Affairs Quarterlifer*. p. 48.

⁴³ Welwood, J. (1992). *Ordinary Magic*. Boston, MA & London, UK:Shambhala, p. 167.

⁴⁴ Kabat-Zinn, J. (2006). p. 163.

Mindfulness, “moment-to-moment, non-judgmental awareness”⁴⁵, has made its way to the mainstream. It is not hard to go through the day without seeing it mentioned in the news, classrooms, magazines, and even in pharmaceutical ads. It is everywhere. Nearly 18 million Americans are now coming back to their breath.⁴⁶ Could this be in part because people are paying attention to the information they are receiving from the media about how mindfulness helps reduce rumination, anxiety, and stress, improves communication, and enhances empathy and compassion, and overall sense of well-being?⁴⁷ Perhaps.

Mindfulness can be practiced anywhere, on the meditation cushion, at the supermarket, standing in line at the bank or while walking in nature.

4.7: Walk this Way

Morning broke. As the fog settled in the wetlands along the Winooski River, a seagull passed overhead. I released my one-and-a-half-year-old puppy, Liila, from the attachment of the leash. I watched her be free. My 19 pound golden doodle is the epitome of mindfulness, living in the moment with every sniff.

The bright blue sky spotted by cottony white clouds quickly changed to a somber grey canvas overhead. The air was thick with a medicinal smell of some overgrown weed. The trees rattled in the wind. Some leaves had fallen to the ground, others crunched beneath my feet. The sound of autumn, of transitions:

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 108.

⁴⁶ Clarke, et al. (2015). Trends in the use of complementary health approaches among adults: United States, 2002–2012. *National Health Statistics Reports*, 79(4). Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics, pp. 1-15.

⁴⁷ Tang, Y., et al. (2007). Short-term meditation training improves attention and self-regulation. *PNAS*, 104(43), 17152-17156, p. 1.

*Change in the air.
Constant movement.
Change all around me.
Clinging on to a world spinning on its axis.
Be.
Still.
-K. Hamel*

I spoke aloud to myself trying to go over what went wrong during a heated discussion with a friend the day before. My inner dialogue sounded off, “Get it together, Krista! Wait...gentle, gentle. That interaction hurt you. You are still hurting. Pause. Where am I? And where is my dog? Take a breath. This is pain.”

In that second, I became an observer of my own suffering, separate from my pain. And then I slid back to the present. It worked! I was once again surrounded by the newness of nature, looking at the goldenrod to my right and jewelweed to my left. Tiny lime green seed pods hung from a delicate branch, waiting for some sort of contact. I reached out and lightly touched the pod; it popped open, coiled up and released tiny, tender seeds into the air, in all directions. What a performance!

More change. More endings. More beginnings.

The crickets started their symphony.

Then a rumbling engine sounded overhead. Liila and I stopped in our tracks and looked intently under the body of the plane flying over us, which seemed only an arm’s distance away. Seconds later, there was an abbreviated echo of the jet engine that was followed by a sonic boom, the song and dance of the sound barrier being broken. We stopped. We listened. And then kept walking.

4.8: Love Lessons #8

Sometimes I am absent from these acts of beauty and events around me, a no-show, sleepwalking my way past these moments. But mindful walking allows me to feel the magnitude of the present moment. During these moments, I have come to feel like I am learning to walk again, like a baby, awkwardly placing one foot in front of the other, with curiosity and uncertainty, with a little anxiousness and vulnerability, but with a desire to forge ahead. This new-found awareness has made the ordinary moments extraordinary. By witnessing this display of these intriguing forces of nature I am lured into the present and alert to what is happening all around me – my puppy running joyfully through the field, a woodpecker searching for food nestled in the bark, or the sudden explosion of a jewelweed pod scattering seeds. These are incredible moments not to be missed. What I also find interesting is the fact that the surrounding beauty and wild activity of nature have absolutely no ego to muck things up, no air-about-them, no emotions, and no shoulda-woulda-couldas to drive their own experiences. Nature doesn't 'do'. It just is. It doesn't worry about the past or the future. So what remains? A pure sense of being. I am left with deep gratitude for what surrounds me and my connectedness to it all. As I live more in the moment and less in story, I feel a 'returning to life'.⁴⁸⁴⁹

The more I am able to incorporate these mindful moments, the more it becomes a habit. The more it becomes a habit, the greater positive shifts I feel from within.

⁴⁸ Kornfield, J. (2008). *The Wise Heart*. New York, NY: Bantam Books, p. 200.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

By bringing awareness to my body, mind, time, and space in this way I feel a deeper sense of stability, anchored and not jolted with every upset. I feel more ready to receive and respond to each moment. This stable space allows me to face and stay with my emotions long enough so that they eventually loosen their grip on me which helps me gain some sort of comfort with them, and lessens the urge to run away from or resist them. During those moments, the pain, searching, and yearnings are all forgotten and are no longer in control. A peace of mind emerges. Finally.

Contemplative practices are a perfect package of healing tools for attaining well-being, self-knowledge and attuned awareness of one's surroundings. First and foremost, contemplative practices can help us flourish because they are accessible mentally, physically, spiritually and economically. Secondly, we can experience positive effects from the practices within short periods of time. These proven effects include decreasing the stress response, anxiety, depression, and anger and increasing the relaxation response.⁵⁰ Most importantly, these practices can help develop positive mental habits that will protect us and those around us from the impacts of stress.

Contemplative practices helped me approach the challenges and changes that were occurring in my life after I left Maryland and were instrumental in making a smooth and successful transition into graduate school.

⁵⁰ Forbes, B. et al. (2008). Using Integrative Yoga Therapeutics in the Treatment of Comorbid Anxiety and Depression. *International Journal of Yoga Therapy*, 18.. p. 89.

CHAPTER 5: CONTEMPLATIVE PEDAGOGY: FOR EDUCATORS

5.1: Lonely Hearts Club

Loneliness isn't a feeling to be ashamed of, but simply a way for your body to tell you that you need more connections just like hunger means you need food⁵¹ – Shasta Nelson

It had been 20 years since I set foot in a classroom and I was scared as hell.

Scared that I would not be able to handle the course load. Scared that I would not do well academically. Scared that I would not relate with my fellow students and my instructors.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, I was one of 3.9 million people over 35 years of age enrolled in a degree-granting institution.⁵² I was without a partner, without a community and in dire need of making connections in the classroom. Nobody likes to admit they are lonely but I am repeating it here: I was lonely. Apparently loneliness emerged as a primary predictor for all types of mid-life stress, according to a 2012 study published in the *Journal of Gerontology*.⁵³ Good to know I am not alone in this lonely world!

Entering school at midlife in need of connection was daunting. Opportunities to make meaningful connections were virtually non-existent. Quarter-life undergraduates have a potpourri of social activities to choose from – Greek life, team sports, and various clubs. Not to worry, I had my own club, the Lonely Hearts Club. Even though I was surrounded by family, friends, and coworkers, I still felt isolated.

⁵¹ Nelson, S. Retrieved from <http://www.womansday.com/health-fitness/womens-health/g2056/how-to-deal-with-loneliness/> Author of post: Holly Corbett. *12 Fascinating Facts about Loneliness*.

⁵² Diederich, P. *Going Back to School in Midlife* (blog). Viva Fifty! Retrieved from <http://www.vivafifty.com/going-back-school-midlife-635/>

⁵³ Scott, S. B. et al. (2012). Combinations of Stressors in Midlife: Examining Role and Domain Stressors Using Regression Trees and Random Forests, *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B*(68), 3, pp. 464-478. 11.15.13. p. 464.

Time was also a factor. Much of my time was dedicated towards my day job or immersed in school work, which left little room for social contact; it was important for me to cultivate true connection in the classroom and with the coursework itself. I didn't have many resources from my past experiences to cultivate those connections in the classroom.

5.2: That was then, this is now

During my formative years in school, I struggled academically, unable and uninspired to engage in the subject matter. Much of my learning experiences were based on abstract, impersonal concepts that I could not relate to, let alone have time to reflect on. So I came to know about myself and the world around me through my body, my senses. I liked to move, sing, and act. In this way, learning came alive, rather, I came alive! As an undergraduate, I majored in music and dance and excelled in these areas. Unfortunately, there were only glimpses of active and experiential learning opportunities during that time. For the most part, I was an average student, insecure about my academic abilities and bored out of my mind.

One class that I took more than 20 years ago about the Holocaust, "The Face of Evil", still remains with me to this day. For my final project I chose many ways to engage with the subject matter: I interviewed friends about the concept of evil, I sang a song written by a Holocaust survivor, and I created a mock interview with Elie Wiesel based on my research of him. But most notably, I interviewed a Holocaust survivor. I will never forget that experience. Ever. Through this multi-disciplinary approach, the subject took on a life of its own. It was the deepest I have ever immersed myself in my schoolwork.

However, due to the analytical and philosophical approach to the subject matter in the classroom, I found it difficult to relate with my classmates. There were pieces missing – awareness of emotions, deeper connections with my fellow students, instructor and interviewees, exploration of compassion, and the opportunity to (literally) sit with my own suffering and that of others. In essence, what was missing was love. In order to come to know about something, or someone, intimate connection is required. Love must be present.

One comes to know nothing beyond what one loves. And the deeper and more complete the knowledge, the stronger, more powerful and living must be one's love and fervor. – Goethe⁵⁴

When I was in the presence of this Holocaust survivor I regarded him as ‘other’ and felt separate from him. He was a subject that I judged and labelled as a victim; I wondered if he would show his identification tattoo. Were there ways that I could have felt more compassionate towards him? Were there ways I could have felt a sense of common humanity with him, other Holocaust survivors, and my fellow students? Would we have connected more if we sat in silence together? If we experienced lovingkindness together? I believe so. Now more than 20 years later, higher education is finding ways of cultivating this connectivity through the incorporation of contemplative pedagogy, also known as the “quiet revolution”, which offers “a wide range of education methods that

⁵⁴ Von Goethe, J. W. (1998). *Trost bei Goethe*, ed. Heinrich Tieck, trans. Arthur Zajonc (München: Langen Müller, p. 69.

support the development of student attention, emotional balance, empathetic connection, compassion, and altruistic behavior.”⁵⁵

As a graduate student, I experienced contemplative pedagogy in the form of mindfulness exercises at the beginning of class that helped me cultivate focus and a sense of calm. This pedagogical approach also helped me increase self-awareness and sensitivity to other people’s suffering through first-person, SPN reflective writing process where we “saw” ourselves in our coursework. These are just a few examples of contemplative practices that occur in the classroom. The following section will look at other approaches to contemplative pedagogy.

5.3: A Quiet Revolution

Creating a learning community that is supportive, fosters introspection and reflection, asks questions through the practice of conversation and dialogue allows us to get to the heart of mindfulness – compassion. – Marga Odahowski

Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves. ⁵⁶

Today, contemplative tools are finding their way into every academic discipline, from kindergarten to higher education, as fully-embodied learning experiences through mindfulness, reflection, and compassion practices. As a student in contemplative-based courses, I was placed at the center of my learning which enabled me to “connect [the]

⁵⁵ Zajonc, A. (2013), Contemplative Pedagogy: A Quiet Revolution in Higher Education. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 83–94. doi: 10.1002/tl.20057).

⁵⁶ Palmer, P. (2007). *The Courage to Teach*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., p. 11.

inner world to the outer world.”⁵⁷ I was immersed in the subject matter and discovered its connection to my own life. I was given the opportunity to see who I was – in thought and in action – in the material. Engaging in the learning process by starting with myself, an intimate point of reference, is a safe place where I find confidence and meaning. This safe place helps me become receptive to new ideas, develop emotional regulation, and self-awareness, abilities “considered greater than intellectual gains” in Higher Education.⁵⁸ I have found that this safe space is effectively created by educators who are self-aware and engaged in contemplative practices themselves.

The more educators are able to deepen their self-knowledge, the more they will come to know who their students are. In other words, in order to cultivate care, stillness, and presence in students, it is recommended that educators instill these qualities in themselves first. Through mindfulness, compassion, and reflection we can become more aware and careful of our interactions and relationships and begin to form a meaningful learning community.

Studies have shown in order to increase well-being and minimize stress, we need six hours of social time every day.⁵⁹ However, as a midlife graduate student, when most of my time is spent doing independent course work, sleeping, working alone in the workforce, I believe it is important to create meaningful relationships in the classroom. It is important to create community.

⁵⁷ Barbezat, D.P., & Bush, M. (2014). p. 6.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p.8.

⁵⁹ Harter, J., & Rath, T. (2010). *Your Friends and Your Social Wellbeing*. Blog. Gallup. Retrieved from <http://businessjournal.gallup.com/content/127043/friends-social-wellbeing.aspx#1>

By incorporating contemplative practices in the classroom we are “...more likely to experience a sense of trust, connectedness, security...all of which are necessary for... [students] to experience well-being and to thrive socially, emotionally, and academically.”⁶⁰ The classroom then becomes a setting for cooperation rather than competitiveness, resulting in the development of a caring community. In this community “...we can receive support, find security in belonging, open our eyes to the needs of others, and work through conflicts...” (*Love lessen #1*).

Some instructors like to use these practices as a way to bring a sense of calm and centeredness at the beginning of class, others embed the practices in assignments or discussions to deepen knowledge of the subject matter.⁶¹ In either case, they help to enrich our relationships with ourselves, each other and the world by “transforming the typical learning experience from abstract and impersonal, to a meaningful and intimate level,” as we will see in the following examples.⁶²

5.4: Mindfulness

Mindfulness in the classroom can enhance emotional regulation, executive function and empathy.⁶³ The quiet pause experienced through mindfulness acts as an important resting period that helps students develop a “clear-thinking, level-headed frame of mind,” allowing them to “learn and recall more than when...depressed, tired or

⁶⁰ Black, A., Busch, G., & Woodrow, C. (2014). *Being and Becoming a Mindful Educator: Contemplative Practices for Teaching, Leadership and Wellbeing*. In S. Garvis, D. Pendergast (Eds.), p. 7.

⁶¹ Barbezat, D.P., & Bush, M. (2014), p. 39.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Zeiden, F., Johnson, S., Diamond, B., Zhanna, D., & Goolkasian, P. (2009). Mindfulness Meditation Improves Cognition: Evidence of brief Mental Training. *Conscious and Cognition*, 19. Elsevier. Doi:10.1016/j.concog.2010.03.014, p. 597.

angry.”⁶⁴ These resting periods can “cultivate states of mind that are receptive and relaxed” where the engagement with the academic material is “charged with motivation and even awe.”⁶⁵ Imagine more and more students coming to school with a sense of readiness and curiosity.

Mindfulness also eliminates the hierarchical dynamic of a teacher-centered classroom and places everyone on an even plain with an increased awareness to what is happening in the classroom at that very moment. As a result, students can develop feelings of equanimity and compassion for themselves and others that invite collaboration, cooperation, care, kindness and growth in the classroom. This learning environment can then become an intimate community where *“we are free to be fully human with one another to express our fears, our joys, and our open, honest, and unarmored self...Where we experience mutual benevolence that leaves no room for belittling! Where we challenge and inspire one another to grow and to think deeply about things. Where we are supportive of one another...with our strengths and weaknesses.”* (Love Lessons #2)

5.5: Beholding

Applying mindfulness to an object being studied is known as contemplative inquiry. Art history professor at Holy Cross, Joanna Ziegler, introduced her students to a form of mindful inquiry called *beholding*. She asked her students to visit the Worcester

⁶⁴ Jensen, F. (2005). *Teaching with the Brain in Mind*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD, p. 19.

⁶⁵ Burggraf, S., & Grossenbacher, P. (2007). Contemplative Modes of Inquiry in Liberal Arts Education. *LiberalArtsOnline*, p. 4.

Art Museum to view the same painting at the same time and day of the week throughout the semester, using the same mode of transportation and report what they “saw”.⁶⁶

These students were asked to observe what was happening to them emotionally and physically during these extended moments of focus. This was a process of connecting, opening up, and of developing a curiosity for the subject they were observing and for themselves as well.⁶⁷ In the end, the students developed sustained attentiveness that “lead to care and the capacity to focus on what is valuable in art, nature, and life.”⁶⁸ They developed a relationship, an intimacy, with the art and their surroundings through sustained and repeated beholding. I had the privilege of participating in a similar form of contemplative observation for a class assignment:

Two men entered the café dressed in dark oversized clothing. I heard one talking to the other in slurred speech. His skin, wrinkled and leathery red. His eyes, barely open. That was Man B. The younger man, Man A, had a chain around his neck, black finger nail polish and two rings clipped to his eyebrow. He sat across from me, placed his tattooed covered arms on his lap, and poured a mysterious powder into his coffee. It didn’t look like a sugar packet. What was it? Was it drugs? Bath Salts? Enter: Judgement. “Focus on what’s happening rather than creating secondary storylines,” I reminded myself. Man B coughed deeply to loosen the phlegm from his throat. I tried to help him swallow by swallowing my own saliva. I wondered how many meals they eat each day. I was curious why I assumed they were homeless or lacking in food intake. Who were they? And why did it even matter? Instead we just remained with one another. I felt quiet inside but uneasy with a lump in my throat, wondering where they slept at night. More cool air blew passed me as people left the café.

Man A and B mimicked each other with grunting sounds. They laughed. I concealed my chuckle. “They are living in the moment,” I thought. Man A offered me salt and pepper. I thought to myself, “He is kind, he has a heart, he is human. We were all Man A’s and B’s.”

Man B belched but I didn’t react. Not even a flinch. Perhaps I was feeling connected rather than separate from him. I belch too! They finished their last bite, packed

⁶⁶ Barbezat, D.P., & Bush, M. (2014), p. 150.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 151.

up and left the café. As the cold breeze swept through the front door when they left, I wondered if they had a warm place to go.

Contemplative observation can help to cultivate new ways of knowing through intimate connections that come from... attending *“to the present moment, without complications, without trying to control what is going to happen next.”* (Love lessons #2) In this way, the student’s sense perceptions and experiences become a launch pad for their future learning. Allowing students the opportunity to feel that they are a “noticing kind of person” helps them to develop self-awareness, sensitivity and alertness to their surroundings.⁶⁹

These are all very important skills that enable students to move about smoothly in life as an adult. In addition, these skills help students to gain independence as learners, as human beings. As a result, this learning community reflects the same activity of neuronal networks when they fire and wire together, gaining strength and new networks in the process. In the classroom community, more strength and connections are created by the firing and wiring between the teacher and the students. A beautiful platform for learning develops. A collective, caring and compassionate consciousness is born.

5.6: Compassion

Water is fluid, soft, and yielding. But water will wear away rock, which is rigid and cannot yield. As a rule, whatever is fluid, soft and yielding will overcome whatever is rigid and hard. This is another paradox: what is soft is strong.
– Lao-Tzu

Knowledge without compassion is inhuman; compassion without knowledge is ineffective
– Physicist Victor Weisskopf, MIT

⁶⁹ Johnston, P. (2004). *Choice Words*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers, p. 17.

Over the last three decades, since 1980, American college students have scored 48 percent lower on “empathic concern” (the tendency to feel and respond to others’ emotions).⁷⁰ Why could this be? Could this be due to an increase in classroom competition? Individualism? Achievement-based learning? Could students be opting to engage with their gadgets over acts of goodness? Could this be due to an increase in online interactions versus face to face interactions? I believe fear is a root cause. I believe we are afraid to trust, connect, reach out, feel vulnerable, and to witness the same in others. But if we “approach others with...compassion, that will automatically reduce fear and allow openness with other people” and “create the possibility of receiving affection or a positive response from the other.”⁷¹ Compassion softens. Compassion opens. Compassion connects.

By incorporating compassion practices in the classroom, a community of cooperation rather than competitiveness can emerge. Essentially, if we are in “communion with ourselves than we can create community with others.”⁷²

In order to provide care for students, it is helpful that educators cultivate care for themselves first through compassion practices - through lovingkindness, through mindfulness, through self-compassion. These practices enable “*us to turn inward, pause long enough for our heart to open, and bring balanced awareness of our suffering and to*

⁷⁰ Anderson, P., & Konrath, S. (2011, July). *‘Why Should We Care?’ – What to Do About Declining Student Empathy*. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/Why-Should-We-Care-What/128420/>.

⁷¹ Dalai Lama, H.H. (2009). *The Art of Happiness*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books, p. 69.

⁷² Palmer, P. (2007). p. 92.

that of others.” (*Love lessons #6*) This action of turning inward will have a direct impact on teaching and learning.

Some approaches of incorporating compassion practices and principles in the classroom can include the following:

1.) **Role playing** helps students imagine themselves in the other’s shoes. This enables students to understand why other people (i.e., characters in a book or people around them) may be expressing themselves in certain ways. Role playing also helps students develop empathy, an awareness of different cultures, and different points of view.

2.) **Bearing witness**, sharing in the experience (misfortunes) of others, through classroom dialogue, SPN writing, documentaries or civic engagement can help students recognize that all voices and stories deserve to be heard and remembered. Bearing witness can also inspire students to take action and affect change because, “...if you never look at the problem, then it never occurs to you to be part of the solution.”⁷³

3.) **Lovingkindness** helps to increase positive emotions, social support, generates kindness and care with oneself and others by the repetition of loving phrases, all valuable skills for college students to develop as they integrate as adults in society; this practice has been shown to increase positive emotions and social connections.⁷⁴ Lovingkindness can be used as a standalone exercise at the beginning of class or it can be applied directly with the subject matter, i.e. sending lovingkindness to war crime victims, to criminals

⁷³ Williamson, M. (2014). *Bearing Witness to the Agony of Others*. Huffington Post Blog. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/marianne-williamson/bearing-witness_b_5518543.html

⁷⁴ Kok, B.E. et al. (2013). DOI: [10.1177/0956797612470827](https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797612470827)

themselves, impoverished populations or to those who exploit others, etc.

Lovingkindness gives birth to compassion that “*enables us to reach out to one and all, known or unknown, friend or foe, because we “do not know what wars are going on down there where the spirit meets the bone.*”⁷⁵” (Adapted from Love Lessons #6)

4.) **Mindful Communication** helps to create a space of trust which can often lead to deeper bonds between everyone in the classroom. Mindful communication is being present and remaining open with one another. It is synchronicity between body, speech, mind and the environment, a unification, a coordinated cooperation between how one sees, hears, feels and responds during a conversation. Mindful communication has helped me build trust and stronger relationships with others as I listen with full presence “with what is happening in the moment without trying to control it or judge it.”⁷⁶ This presence creates a stronger connection between people. When people feel heard, they feel cared for, they feel connected. Author Norman Fischer describes this experience well,

Listening...turns a person from an object outside, opaque or dimly threatening, into an intimate experience, and therefore into a friend. In this way, listening softens and transforms the listener.⁷⁷

And I would add that it transforms the one talking as well.

While listening mindfully I try to remember to **breathe and focus** on the information spoken; **respect** the person speaking by remaining present, without the urge to interject my opinion or comments; **empathize** with the person speaking, paying

⁷⁵ Williams, M. (1997). *The Ways we Touch: Poems*. Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, p. 55.

⁷⁶ Barbezat, D.P., & Bush, M. (2014). p. 137.

⁷⁷ Fischer, N. (2004). *Taking our Places: The Buddhist Path to Truly Growing Up*. New York, NY: HarperOne, p. 42.

attention to their body language and tone of voice; **remain open and curious** to the other person's view, even if they do not match my own views; **sit in silence**, listen to and reflect on what is being said because "*silence...gives us the opportunity to know ourselves better, the space to be who we are...*" (Love Lessons #3). It also allows time to focus on the other person's interests. I try to be just as careful when I respond. Responding slowly and precisely brings greater meaning to my words and represents who I am. So I strive to regard each word I speak as a "gem".⁷⁸ I believe every word should be treated as a finely cut, precious stone that reflects that inner light of truth within each of us that has long been awaiting to be excavated.

5.7: Challenges for Educators

While there are many benefits of having contemplative practices in the classroom, there are also some challenges. First of all, in order to be able to address problems or questions the students may have while engaging in these practices, educators must have the experience as a contemplative practitioner, "able to respond in ways that help students learn."⁷⁹ Second, educators must be sensitive enough to determine how far students are "willing to go" and adapt to the student's moods, experience (or lack thereof), and belief or non-belief backgrounds.⁸⁰ How insistent should an educator be if the student resists? Third, reflection takes time. Educators will need to dive deep to find ways to make contemplative connections fit in with the subject matter and may need to collaborate with

⁷⁸ Trungpa Rinpoche, C. (1984). *Elocution*. Boulder, CO: Shambhala. Retrieved from http://www.chronicleproject.com/stories_41_print.html

⁷⁹ Barbezat, D.P., & Bush, M. (2014), p. 68.

⁸⁰ Ibid., pp. 68, 69.

other colleagues. Lastly, students are accustomed to fast-paced living, getting results immediately, and doing something at every moment. It may be a challenge to slow things down and do nothing or focus on one thing. As a result, educators will need to be patient, flexible, creative and grounded in their own beliefs in the practices when planning and delivering contemplative pedagogy.

5.8: Conclusions for a Connected Classroom

Contemplative practices in higher education can help foster student/teacher and student/student connectedness, respect, and enhance awareness by listening, seeing, writing, feeling, and being. A learning community of intimate connections emerges. This introspective, first-person learning helps students become aware of their own thinking by placing importance on the unfolding learning process rather than the anticipation of results; “this future orientation keeps many of us from experiencing the fullness of the present, the fullness of life.”⁸¹ As a result, students experience the process of loosening their grip over a situation and experience the joy and magnitude of the present moment. In addition, student’s awareness, perception and observational skills improve.

In learning, relationships matter. Through intimacy, community, and compassion practices students and educators can start to develop caring connections with themselves, and eventually with others. These connections can help everyone in the classroom avoid the habitual need to blame, label or judge, and enable them to listen more deeply to one another. These connections can help everyone to see each other’s commonalities and differences. These connections should be given as much importance in the classroom as

⁸¹ Kessler, R. (2000). The Teaching Presence. *Virginia Journal of Education*, 94(2), p. 22.

academic achievement because they are important skills that can help students develop long-lasting and meaningful relationships beyond the classroom walls.

I believe classrooms should not be “focused on filling-in-the-blanks,” instead they should be “focused on filling in the person.”⁸² Because contemplative-based classrooms transform the learning experience from an achievement-oriented, abstract, and impersonal view of reality to an authentic, interconnected, intimate and meaningful one. (For a detailed list of contemplative pedagogical resources go to Appendix A.)

⁸² Berkowitz, J., & Myers, A. (2014, August 24). In re: A Compassion in the Classroom: A Real Strength for Education [web log message]. Retrieved from http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/leadership_360/2014/08/compassion_in_the_classroom_a_real_strength_for_education.html

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Connectedness through intimacy, compassion, and community keeps me adaptable to life's ebbs and flows. These connections allow me to tap into the tender core of my existence, giving me a sense of belonging and a precious opportunity to love and be loved. I believe as long as we remain open and present with others, we will see and hear each other as we truly are. We will find ways to go beyond the thickness of our skin to "unchartered territory," where we are raw, tender, alive and human!

In a world fraught by stress, growing isolation, individualism, competitiveness, speed and stimulation, war and mass murder, there is a deep desire in all of us for peace. For quiet. For stillness. For the opportunity to slow down in an axis-spinning world. A deep desire for reflection, the space to delve inward and see who and how we are. A deep desire for connection, for belonging, for compassion. A deep desire to find the courage to face our suffering and fears, and the willingness to become friends with them.

These connections have allowed me to be more aware of my body, my surroundings, my mind and my soul. These connections have helped me to accept that love, joy, struggle, pain, change, imperfection and vulnerability are inevitable on this path towards cultivating well-being, developing contemplative ways of knowing, and a sense of meaning in life. Perhaps the best way to describe my sentiment is through the following poem by Rumi:

The Guest House

This being human is a guest house.

Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
As an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

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

It is easy to welcome and find meaning through joy and love but not so easy to roll out the welcome mat to loss, change and suffering. You never know, they may be “clearing you out for some new delight.” Each time I mindfully respond to these painful

situations, large or small, I gain a little more clarity and patience with them and with myself. Greeting “guests” in this way requires effort, practice, flexibility, stillness, and motivation to see them as they are. Mindful responses help me look at these guests face to face, by spending more time with them and not shutting myself off from them. By accepting them as a part of being human. By observing them and not letting them take control. Responding to pain and suffering with compassion and openness to connect with them helps to soften their forceful knock and gives me the courage to open my door, look at my visitors, pause, breathe and let them all in. All of this is possible by maintaining a close link to ourselves and our surroundings, adaptable to what comes and goes:

*There is a maple tree that stands outside my living room window.
She swings and sways.
She whistles and wails.
All to nature’s powerful gusts.
Her arms outstretched and ready to bear the burden of
Vermont’s relentless winters,
year after year.
When the moment arises, she releases her heavy,
white blanket to the ground,
along with bits of bark and branch.
Rooted, she resumes her posture.
She is resilient.
She is my teacher.
- K. Hamel*

Forming meaningful intimate, compassionate, and communal connections can help us stay rooted and able to withstand nature’s powerful gusts. They serve to help us grow and provide us with something to work with as we strive to be true, loving and resilient human beings.

I have come to realize that “it’s all one life, one journey, and we’re all in it together.”⁸³ We are connected in our search for truth, trying to discover more about the mysteries of this human life and the universe we live in. Along the way, we stumble, we form bridges, we destroy them, and we rebuild them. We are all human beings with beating hearts, pumping blood through our veins with a strong desire to belong and connect with others and the world around us. We just need reminders and support from one another as we travel this human path together. In acknowledgment of our shared quest for eternal peace, meaning, and freedom from suffering I close with my favorite 15,000 year old Sanskrit blessing for us all:

Sarve ’tra sukhinah bhavantu sarve santu nirámayáh;

Sarve bhadráni pashyantu na kashcid dukkhamápnuyát.

Oṃ shántih oṃ shántih oṃ shantih.

Let everybody be happy; let everybody be free from all physical or psychic ailments; let everybody see the bright side of everything; let nobody be forced to undergo any trouble under pressure of circumstances...peace to all living beings.

⁸³ Idliby, R., Oliver, S., & Warner, P. (2006). *The Faith Club*. New York, NY: Atria Paperback, p. 269.

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Appendix A

Contemplative Pedagogical Resources

(Source: The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society
-Permission granted)

Campus Initiatives

- [Brown University's Contemplative Studies Initiative](#)
A group of Brown faculty with diverse academic specializations who are united around a common interest in the study of contemplative states of mind, including the underlying philosophy, psychology, and phenomenology of human contemplative experience.
- [Center for New Designs in Learning & Scholarship at Georgetown](#)
Since 2000, CNDLS has supported Georgetown University's faculty and graduate students with tools, resources, and opportunities for new learning environments.
- [Emory Collaborative for Contemplative Studies](#)
An interdisciplinary group of faculty, postdocs and students at Emory University who share and investigate the application of contemplative practices in our modern society.
- [Mindful Awareness Research Center at UCLA](#)
MARC was created to bring to a renowned mental health research institution the ancient art of mindful awareness in a scientifically supported and rigorous form.
- [The Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education at Stanford University](#)
Creating a community of scholars and researchers from various disciplines, including neuroscientists, psychologists, educators and philosophical and contemplative thinkers around the study of compassion. Offers a teacher certification program.
- [UCSD Center for Mindfulness](#)
The UCSD Center for Mindfulness is a multi-faceted program of clinical care, professional training, education, research and outreach.

Grants/Awards/Fellowships

- [Francisco J. Varela Research Awards](#)
The Varela Awards solicit research grant proposals that stimulate basic and translational research that evaluate both state and trait effects of contemplative practice and incorporate first-person contemplative methods into cognitive/affective neuroscience.

Organizations and Networks: Higher Education

- [Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education \(ACMHE\)](#)
A project of The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society; a professional association that promoting the emergence of a broad culture of contemplation in the academy.
- [Education and Spirituality Network](#)
A directory and newsletter exploring the role of religious diversity and spirituality in education.
- [Education as Transformation](#)
Works with colleges, universities, K-12 schools and related institutions exploring the impact of religious diversity on education, strategies for addressing this diversity, and the role of spirituality in educational institutions.
- [Mindfulness in Education Network \(MiEN\)](#)
Manages an active Yahoo Group/mailling list with news, announcements and events for educators who want to bring a contemplative awareness to their work.
- [Koru training](#)
An evidence-based training and curriculum designed for teaching mindfulness, meditation, and stress management to college students and other young adults.

Programs of Study

- [BA in Contemplative Psychology, Naropa University](#)
- [BFA in Jazz and Contemplative Studies at the University of Michigan](#)
- [Concentration in Contemplative Studies, Brown University](#)
- [Individualized MA & Concentration in Contemplative Studies, Burlington College](#)
Graduate studies in mindfulness studies, contemplative arts and other topics affiliated with the Institute for Contemplative Studies, and an 18-credit concentration focusing on theoretical, scientific, ethical, personal, and practical areas of training in
- [M.A. in Integrative Health Studies, California Institute of Integral Studies](#)
A 40-credit program; first in the nation to prepare master's level leaders in the expanding fields of integrative health and wellness coaching.
- [M.Ed. & Certificate, Mindfulness for Educators, Antioch University New England](#)
- [M.Ed. in Curriculum & Instruction: Contemplative Inquiry and Approaches in Education, Simon Fraser University](#)
- [M.Ed. in Interdisciplinary Studies: Mindfulness Studies Specialization, Lesley University](#)
- [MA and Certificate in Holistic and Integrative Education, California State University-San Bernardino](#)
- [MA in Contemplative Education, Naropa University](#)

- [MA in Contemplative Psychotherapy, Naropa University](#)
- [MA in Interdisciplinary Studies: Mindfulness Studies Specialization, Lesley University](#)
- [PhD in Religious Studies with a Contemplative Studies concentration, Rice University](#)

Research

- [American Mindfulness Research Association](#)
A comprehensive electronic resource and publication database on the scientific study of mindfulness.
- [Contemplative Mind in Life: Research Resources](#)
A space for news dedicated to contemplative research in the cognitive neurosciences, clinical sciences, developmental, social and health psychology, and education.
- [Functional Neuroimaging Laboratory \(FNL\): Cognitive, Affective, and Contemplative Neuroscience Research](#)
This research is intended to clarify adaptive mind-brain-body interactions and their therapeutic relevance in psychiatric disorders.
- [Mind & Life Institute](#)
Works to promote the creation of a contemplative, compassionate, and rigorous experimental and experiential science of the mind which could guide and inform medicine, neuroscience, psychology, education and human development.
- [Spirituality in Higher Education: Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose](#)
A seven-year study examining the role that college plays in facilitating the development of students' spiritual qualities.
- [The Britton Lab at Brown University](#)
The Britton Lab studies contemplative, affective, and clinical neuroscience under the direction of Willoughby Britton, Ph.D.
- [The Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education at Stanford University](#)
Creating a community of scholars and researchers from various disciplines, including neuroscientists, psychologists, educators and philosophical and contemplative thinkers around the study of compassion. Offers a teacher certification program.
- [The Center for Investigating Healthy Minds](#)
Housed at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Waisman Laboratory for Brain Imaging and Behavior, CIHM studies how contemplative practices might play a useful role in changing the mind in a positive manner.
- [The Contemplative Science Lab/MARGAM](#)
Research in the Contemplative Science Lab under Zoran Jospovic, Ph.D. aims to explore the neural correlates of contemplative practice through a multifaceted

approach that looks at the ways meditation and contemplative practice can re-organize the cogniti

- [The Jha Lab at the University of Miami](#)
Using behavioral methods, event-related potentials, and functional MRI to investigate attention and working memory under the direction of Amishi Jha, Ph.D.
- [The Lazar Lab at Massachusetts General Hospital](#)
Studying neurological, cognitive and emotional changes associated with the practice of meditation and yoga under the direction of Sara Lazar, Ph.D.
- [The Lustyk Women's Health Lab at Seattle Pacific University](#)
Investigating the stress response in women, including effects of mindfulness meditation, under the direction of M. Kathleen B. Lustyk, Ph.D.
- [The Shamatha Project at UC Davis](#)
Under the direction of principle investigator Dr. Clifford Saron and Buddhist scholar Alan Wallace, the Shamatha Project is exploring how three months of intensive training in the practice of meditation affects cognition, behavior, and physiology.
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