

## Response to Kathleen Fisher's "Look Before You Leap"

**Andrew O. Fort**, *Texas Christian University*

**Louis Komjathy**, *University of San Diego*

**Abstract.** *This article provides two short responses to Kathleen M. Fisher's essay "Look Before You Leap: Reconsidering Contemplative Pedagogy," published in this issue of the journal.*

### Looking Further: A Response to "Look Before You Leap"

**Andrew O. Fort**

I found Kathleen Fisher's essay thoughtful and thought-provoking, and appreciate the opportunity to respond, with both praise and reservations.

Early along, the author properly indicates her specific teaching location, so I will do the same. I teach at a medium-sized private (loosely) denomination-affiliated university (Disciples of Christ) in Texas, where students must take one introductory religion course – and it is the only one for most. Like the author, I certainly find that students have differing levels of interest in religion, but quite a few I teach have a "spiritual hunger"<sup>1</sup> (and a longing for the "slower" thinking of many contemplative studies practices) and many attend church and a weekly Bible study. I should also add that I am a member of the AAR Contemplative Studies Group steering committee and know many of the figures quoted in the article, some well.

The first and most important point I want to make is that like any group of scholars, and perhaps more than average in emerging fields, advocates of contemplative studies (CS) are a diverse bunch, and most argue for CS as an *enhancement* of the valuable traditional liberal arts education, *not* a replacement for it. For an expanded statement of my views, see Fort (2013, 2016) and for some cutting-edge critical thinking on CS, see my fellow respondent Louis Komjathy's *Contemplative Literature* (2015). I also want to point out that many of the figures Fisher discusses (particularly the oft-quoted Mirabai Bush and Daniel Barbezat) are not trained in religious studies, and I think those of us in this field have an important role to play in the development of CS.

In the following, I offer some brief remarks responding to various issues Fisher addresses. Given my commitment to liberal education, I would never say that cognitive skills only teach students what, not how, to think. I concur with Fisher's concern over such an assertion and am very much in agreement with her eloquent description and advocacy of critical thinking. Similarly, I find the extent that university education needs to add "spiritual" or emotional elements to "mere" intellectual experience (13) arguable – and we in CS

---

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this essay, I will avoid discussing the problematic nature of terms like "religion" and "spiritual."

do argue about it; also, if one looks at, for example, Arthur Zajonc's actual teaching materials, a great deal of high-level intellectual content is present in it.

I think good contemplative pedagogy actually enhances reflection on what it means to "think" and "know." For example, Fisher's discussion of students' superficial dismissal of Phyllis Trible's exegesis of Genesis 2-3 as mere "opinion," (9) made me wonder if she might include a reflective exercise (which I would call contemplative) asking students to attend to their emotional resistance to *and* intellectual justification against Trible's reasoning. Some quiet, internal reflection might bear more critical reasoning fruit than the likely experience of embarrassment in their inability to form a reasoned argument in the open classroom.

On another point, as Fisher indicates, there seems to be some conflict between the findings of the book *Cultivating the Spirit* (and Barbara Walvoord) and those of Christian Smith and *Academically Adrift*. The former speak of the importance of and value for students of "meaning and purpose" questions, and *Cultivating the Spirit* explicitly supports contemplative exercises as part of their academic experience (see Astin et al. 2011, 148; Fort 2013, 13-14). The general level of student stress and anxiety also argues for the value of contemplative practices. None of this denies college students' focus on early adult personal concerns (which she describes well), their practical pursuit of credentialing, or resistance to the core curriculum and some universities' theological mission. While almost all my students are pragmatically driven, many also voice regret about it and appreciate contemplative exercises as a calming change of pace.

We do need more good quantitative studies on whether self-knowledge fosters empathy, or self-contemplation fosters narcissism (12). My anecdotal impression is that the answer about both is "sometimes, for some people," not always or never. My experience is that contemplative exercises (with accurate information about others *and* critical reflection) usually do increase students' awareness of their self-absorption and encourage openness to and engagement with other people and views.

I agree that one should be careful with contemplative classroom pedagogy (15). However, I think it is important to note whether such practices are offered in, for example, a mandatory introductory class or in an upper-level elective where the students both "opt in" and presumably have an idea of what they will experience. In the latter case (such as my Buddhism and Mysticism classes), I am confident that such practices enhance the course (see Fort 2011).

The author takes particular aim at the pedagogy of Fran Grace, and shares what I consider some legitimate reservations (see comments below). However, I was the co-organizer of and co-presenter on the panel Fisher mentions in footnote 11, and I found both Grace's written proposal and actual presentation far more balanced on the merits and limits of quantitative measures of contemplative pedagogy than described here; why would Grace have spent the time and energy to enlist her scientific colleagues, otherwise? Nor do my notes on Kurtis Schaeffer's response match Fisher's (that "there is no need for scientific study of contemplative practices"); he is in fact part of UVA's Contemplative *Sciences* Center. This is a place where the author would also have benefited from the introductory chapters in Komjathy (2015).

Still, I agree that academic course work is not therapy, that close attention should be paid to this "slippery" boundary, and that this is a matter about which teachers of contemplative courses should be particularly careful. Fran Grace's pedagogy pushes boundaries, though I would argue that her co-author Judith Simmer-Brown does so less

## Response

(see Simmer-Brown 2011),<sup>2</sup> and the fact that Simmer-Brown is at Naropa University suggests that her students are in fact looking for contemplative pedagogy.

Fisher makes important points about the power of the grade (17), and acknowledges diversity among contemplative educators. In a footnote, Fisher quotes the first part of my thoughts on grading in her article. Here is the note in full.<sup>3</sup> Yes, grading contemplative exercises can be problematic, but I think there are responsible work-arounds.

Regarding Fisher's conclusion, I agree that sometimes contemplative pedagogy can be insufficiently critical (as can "regular" teaching in many classrooms!) and that this legitimately puts off other scholars. Our first job is to help students understand religion(s) and themselves better, not help them feel good or be happy. Awareness that professors are at different life stages than their students is also important. I further concur that non-contemplative pedagogy (which takes up most of my class time) develops students as whole persons in many ways. Still, as I argue here and elsewhere, I strongly believe that first-person contemplative pedagogy can enhance most students' critical thinking and overall academic experience.

Obviously, the comments above show how stimulating I found this article. I hope my response furthers these important conversations on contemplative pedagogy.

### **Consider Where You Stand: A Response to Kathleen Fisher's "Look Before You Leap"**

*Louis Komjathy*

Contemplative studies is an emerging interdisciplinary field dedicated to research and education on contemplative practice and contemplative experience, including the possible relevance and application to a wide variety of undertakings. It may employ first-person, second-person, and third-person approaches, although "critical first-person discourse" is a defining characteristic. Contemplative pedagogy refers to an approach to teaching and learning informed by and perhaps expressed as contemplative practice. While sometimes conflated, contemplative studies, in my way of thinking, encompasses contemplative pedagogy; contemplative pedagogy is one expression of contemplative studies, perhaps, albeit, an essential one (see Coburn et al. 2011; Komjathy 2015; Komjathy forthcoming; Roth 2006; Simmer-Brown and Grace 2011). Contemplative pedagogy may be expressed in three primary ways, namely, teaching and learning informed by personal contemplative practice, formal in-class contemplative exercises, and/or actual courses in contemplative studies. Given the diverse, decentralized, and experimental characteristics of the field, there is no single or dominant model or authority, although there are some influential expressions and emerging trends. Thus, any attempt to critically evaluate the field requires attentiveness and may prove problematic, if not wholly flawed. Superficiality, politicization, and misrepresentation are ever-present dangers. Following the field's primary commitments and

---

<sup>2</sup> She and I have also had long personal conversations about this issue.

<sup>3</sup> "With some careful thought, one can evaluate contemplative study in quite familiar terms: what is the student's depth and quality of knowledge, reasoning, and insight about the history, theory, and practice of the subject matter? A teacher can assess the following: did students (1) do the assignment, (2) comprehend the reading and lecture and critically reflect on them, (3) gain insight through exercises into the readings and their context, the process of practice, and oneself (perhaps comparing expectations with actual results), (4) organize and express their thoughts with clarity and sophistication, and (5) use good writing mechanics? One might also offer and utilize student efforts at self-assessment (degree and quality of effort and insight)" (Fort 2013, 32, footnote 11).

models, “critical subjectivity” is required, including reflection on one’s own interpretive tendencies, theoretical (theological?) commitments, unquestioned assumptions, and perhaps ingrained opinions.

In the case of Fisher’s article, there is thus a question of weight. By this I mean the relative significance of the piece, the balance of her presentation, and the viability of her claims. I find the article worthy of consideration and relatively balanced, although at times it still borders on using straw-man and red-herring arguments and much of it is unrecognizable in terms of my own contemplative approach. On the most elementary level, what is noteworthy about Fisher’s treatment is the degree of engagement, qualification, and nuance. Unlike many other “critics,” she also has some direct personal experience with contemplative pedagogy. Fisher has, in turn, correctly acknowledged the diversity of contemplative educators and associated approaches. That said, she tends to focus on particular expressions (for example, by Barbezat, Bush, Grace, Simmer-Brown, Zajonc). While I have great respect for these individuals and their work, they tend to be on the more spiritualist end of the spectrum. Some stronger critical voices include John Dunne, David Germano, Harold Roth, Jacob Sherman, and myself. Along these lines, Fisher mistakenly conflates contemplative pedagogy with “spirituality in education.” While there is some overlap and shared concerns, especially among certain segments of contemplative education, these are distinct approaches.

I concur with Fisher that individuals interested in contemplative pedagogy and the field as a whole would do well to reflect on the four primary issues that she raises, namely, student interests, appropriate pedagogy, academic values, and experiential learning. In fact, under one reading, her article could actually be understood as an expression of contemplative pedagogy, and I believe that each area could be addressed within the context of such an approach. One may design courses with particular attention to the specific demographics of one’s own students and one’s own institutional context. Moreover, few serious contemplative educators view education in terms of the “either/or” dilemmas sometimes presented in the article. In my view, contemplative pedagogy should not deemphasize critical thinking in preference for experiential learning, especially in the form of uninformed opinions and “student feelings.” This is *not* the type of critical subjectivity that contemplative pedagogy ideally utilizes and advocates. Rather, it involves the *critical* investigation of one’s own subjective experiences and perspectives. It thus challenges the privileging of excessive intellectualism over lived inquiry in much of academic discourse, what B. Alan Wallace (2000; see also Ferrer and Sherman 2008) has referred to as the “taboo of subjectivity.” It encourages one to consider the various dimensions of human personhood in its fullest expression, including consciousness beyond mere intellectualism and rationality. How might one understand religion in an embodied and kinesthetic way? Moreover, if contemplative practice is about *practice*, is it not worthwhile, perhaps even necessary, to develop an appropriate experiential methodology?

While I could point to a variety of subtexts of the article (for example, Catholic higher education and Catholic theology), subtexts with which I am all too familiar, given length concerns I will simply mention a couple of issues that could be addressed using contemplative pedagogy. First, Fisher suggests that emphasis on self-care may too easily lead to self-absorption, without fulfilling the projected outcome of empathy. If this is a concern, one could use “other-identification” exercises. For example, one could have students choose a “dominant other,” especially a politicized other, and imagine themselves through the identity in question. There might also be an associated dialogic exchange or service-learning component; here “beholding” exercises might be helpful. Second, Fisher problematically suggests that students’ “ultimate concerns” are pragmatic, superficial, and

## Response

consumerist. This rather seems to be some students' (and parents') "immediate concerns" that reflect larger enculturation and socializing forces. Here Fisher rightly uses critical subjectivity to discuss her own students, classroom experiences, and institutional context. However, if one is actually interested in an existential or theological approach to academic inquiry, one could use a reflection on death to clarify students' deeper values and aspirations. That is, a more serious and sophisticated contemplative pedagogy could address many of the issues that Fisher encountered in the classroom and that influenced the present article. At times, one senses that Fisher wants to "protect students from themselves," or at least to ensure conformity to conventional patterns of learning.

On a more personal note, Fisher almost completely misrepresents my own views, apparently due to a superficial and self-serving engagement with my work. Rather than cite the relevant passage here (Coburn et al. 2011, 171-72), let me simply say that I have been not only one of the main advocates for including "religiously-committed" and "tradition-based" contemplative practice in appropriate ways (controversial from a different perspective), but also one of the main critics of "decontextualization" and "reconceptualization," specifically by hybrid spiritualists and secular materialists. In addition to exploring the complex interplay among views, practices, experiences, and goals, I have drawn attention to the ethics and politics of appropriation. This stands in contrast to the work of Mirabai Bush, with whom Fisher inaccurately associates me. A simple perusal of the online syllabus of my Contemplative Traditions course would have led to a more sophisticated understanding of both contemplative studies and contemplative pedagogy. How much more would this have been the case if Fisher consulted my edited volume *Contemplative Literature* (2015)?

Perhaps the most serious issue raised in the article is the "danger" of contemplative pedagogy, specifically the potential psychological upheaval that might occur if students "are allowed" to engage contemplative practice. While I agree that contemplative educators often "transgress" conventional academic boundaries and that contemplative practice may result in adverse outcomes, there are ways to address this. For example, in my own Contemplative Traditions course, students choose from a list of pre-approved, basic, and safe practices, submit an action plan, and consult directly with me. I also recommend local mentors and affiliated communities, and I have working relationships with the Office of Mission and Ministry and Counseling Services. Along these lines, Fisher correctly points towards the importance of reflecting on one's own affinities, competencies, commitments, and preparation. Aspiring contemplative educators might also need more formal training. One should only employ contemplative pedagogy after critical investigation and in responsible ways, with the latter depending on the former and open to community discussion.

Finally, I would add that education as a liberating practice is *inherently dangerous and subversive*. Like Paulo Freire, Gustavo Gutiérrez, and bell hooks, I believe in the importance and transformative power of radical education. People need to wake up – wake up from the dream of insular thinking and unjustified comfort. Is not higher education based on *open inquiry* and *free exchange of ideas*? Should we not offer courses in theology because they may unsettle students' personal beliefs? Should we not offer courses in ethnic studies because they may challenge white privilege and institutional racism? There are many moments of instability and discomfort in becoming an intellectually mature and socially engaged human being. Contemplative pedagogy is simply one approach among many for facilitating deeper inquiry and engagement, and individuals must determine the extent to which it is appropriate for themselves, their students, and their institutional context. In addition to "looking before you leap," we should consider where we stand and how we have been positioned.

## Bibliography

- Astin, A., Astin, H., and Lindblom, J. 2011. *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students' Inner Lives*. San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass.
- Coburn, T., Grace, F., Klein, A., Komjathy, L., Roth, H., and Simmer-Brown, J.. 2011. "Contemplative Pedagogy: Frequently Asked Questions." *Teaching Theology and Religion* 14, no. 2: 167–74.
- Ferrer, J., and Sherman, J., eds. 2008. *The Participatory Turn: Spirituality, Mysticism, Religious Studies*. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press.
- Fisher, Kathleen M. 2017. "Look Before You Leap: Reconsidering Contemplative Pedagogy." *Teaching Theology and Religion* 20, no. 1: 4–21.
- Fort, A. O. 2011. "Awareness Practices in an Undergraduate Buddhism Course." In *Meditation and the Classroom: Contemplative Pedagogy for Religious Studies*, eds. Simmer-Brown, Judith, and Grace, Fran, 179–85. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press.
- Fort, A. O. 2013. "Contemplative Studies and the Liberal Arts." *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 33: 23–32.
- Fort, A. O. 2016. "Creating Contemplative Studies in the Southwest: Theory and Practice." *International Journal of Dharma Studies* 4, no. 13: [link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s40613-016-0039-3](http://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s40613-016-0039-3) (accessed December 2016).
- Komjathy, L., ed. 2015. *Contemplative Literature: A Comparative Sourcebook on Meditation and Contemplative Prayer*. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press.
- Komjathy, L. Forthcoming. *Introducing Contemplative Studies*. West Sussex, England: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Roth, H. 2006. "Contemplative Studies: Prospects for a New Field." *Teachers College Record* 108, no. 9: 1787–1815.
- Simmer-Brown, J. 2011. "Training the Heart Responsibly: Ethical Considerations in Contemplative Teaching." In *Meditation and the Classroom: Contemplative Pedagogy for Religious Studies*, eds. J. Simmer-Brown and F. Grace, 107–20. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press.
- Simmer-Brown, J., and Grace, F., eds. 2011. *Meditation and the Classroom: Contemplative Pedagogy for Religious Studies*. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press.
- Wallace, B. A. 2000. *The Taboo of Subjectivity: Toward a New Science of Consciousness*. New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press.