

spirituality at least, contemplative practices seem to be powerful means of learning. At the same time, I have encountered something of what Purser and Loy call the Faustian bargain of McMindfulness: students find that practicing makes them feel better, so they come to assume that the purpose of practice is feeling better. This is one of my failures and points to the need to contextualize more effectively the practices I introduce.

In the end, my efforts at CP remind me how susceptible any spiritual life is to the twin temptations of novelty and nostalgia. Novelty was the stronger pull for many of my students, who seemed eager to try new practices, the newer (and more Buddhist) the better. Nostalgia sometimes tempted me, when I remembered—no doubt with naïveté—the days when anxiety was less of a burden, visible and invisible, in the lives of my students, the dynamics of the classroom, and the spirit of the age. But most of life is lived in the middle, in the hard and often monotonous work of committed spiritual discipline, where dryness, plateaus, and mistakes are part of the deal. I think my students and I all found our places in that middle space, at times frustrated, at times bored, at times satisfied in progress and glad for good company. Teaching, too, knows the dual temptation to rush to the new or retreat to the familiar. Like any other pedagogical approach, CP is not a panacea, nor is it just a new gadget. Like any spiritual work, using CP responsibly takes commitment, risk, care, and constant evaluation; doubts and mistakes are part of the deal. But so, I have found, are surprise and delight, as practice helps students question their overly settled understandings of religion and spirituality and discover their gifts for attentiveness and quiet.

ANITA HOUCK

*Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, Indiana*

## **II. Flipping the Classroom Inside-Out: A Systematic Theologian Discovers Contemplative Pedagogy**

### ***Hitting a Brick Wall***

Shortly after receiving tenure in 2009, I hit a brick wall. Having poured so much energy into the tenure process, which included a large-scale book

*Brian D. Robinette is Associate Professor of Theology at Boston College. He researches and teaches in the areas of systematic, philosophical, and spiritual theology. He is the author of Grammars of Resurrection: A Christian Theology of Presence and Absence (Crossroad, 2009), which won the College Theology Society's best book award. He is currently working on a theology of creation, tentatively entitled The Difference Nothing Makes: Creation, Christ, Contemplation.*

project, I found myself intellectually and emotionally spent. Uninspired and unable to gain traction with another major research project during my post-tenure sabbatical, I felt I was wandering through a desert. I had heard rumors about the “post-tenure blues,” but I somehow imagined myself immune.

Weeks turned into months before I discovered a way to channel my wayward energies: by focusing on teaching. Actually, I had long desired to devote more time to pedagogical development, but the constraints of the tenure process, along with my relative newness to the professorate, made anything more than piecemeal adjustments quite difficult. With nothing but time, I resolved to explore more fundamental dimensions in my teaching, even to start from scratch, or at least to allow myself the patience for dramatic reinvention. But where to find inspiration?

I initially found it in boredom itself. Or to put it another way, I found inspiration in the apparent barrenness of my experience—those extended periods when I felt listless, confused, distracted, empty, or anxious. I asked myself: Why not take interest in the very doldrums that seem to have me in their grip just now? Why not inquire into them more deeply, more generously, and remain open to what secrets, if any, they hold? My hunch, which admittedly felt more like necessity at the time, was that a long, discerning look into the inner dimensions of *acedia* would somehow turn out to be a source of renewal for me, and perhaps even a subject matter for the classroom.

My inquiry was really twofold. On the one hand, I began to read broadly in subjects related to boredom, attention, and desire. This meant revisiting such classics as Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations* and Seneca’s letters, Evagrius Ponticus’ *Praktikos* and Meister Eckhart’s sermons, the writings of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, Pascal’s *Pensées* and Simone Weil’s *Waiting for God*. There were more contemporary works in philosophy and theology as well, including Josef Pieper’s *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, Pierre Hadot’s *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, Michael Raposa’s *Boredom and the Religious Imagination*, and Martha Nussbaum’s *The Therapy of Desire*. Neuroscientific and psychological works were also helpful, especially William James’ *The Principles of Psychology*, Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi’s *Flow*, Daniel Siegel’s *Mindsight*, and Iain McGilchrist’s *The Master and His Emissary*. A few odd entries rounded things out, such as Orvar Löfgren and Billy Ehn’s ethnographic study, *The Secret World of Doing Nothing*.

Then there was the inner work. Although I had maintained a contemplative practice for most of my adult life, the arduous process of working toward tenure, along with raising two young boys, made my practice more erratic. Not that contemplative practice is necessarily at odds with “ordinary life”—indeed, the latter is its proper work—but a host of pressures, both internal

and external, made me less attuned to the inmost depths of silence. What the sabbatical gave me, however, or what it *forced* upon me, was the time to face my inarticulate feelings of emptiness and confusion; the opportunity to experience and learn from them more fully, rather than resist or suppress them.

This “looking deeply” is, of course, the heart of contemplative practice, and I vowed I would find ways to make the art of attention more central to my teaching. I would “attend to myself” while offering my students the same opportunity—as a properly academic and spiritually formative task. The question became *how*.

### *Experiments in Contemplative Pedagogy*

There is now a fairly extensive literature on contemplative pedagogy.<sup>26</sup> I have benefitted greatly from that literature since I first embarked upon my pedagogical experiments. But my initial steps into flipping the classroom inside-out, so to speak, came at a time when such resources were scattered and less known in the academy. Just as Maureen Walsh discusses in her contribution following, I initially felt some mixture of excitement and skepticism in introducing contemplative practices in the classroom, partly because I was unsure whether students would take to them and partly because I fretted over whether I was compromising the academic rigor of theological study. (There is a distinctive paranoia for many in our discipline that desperately wants to reassure our students and colleagues that theology *really* is a properly academic subject and not a brand of religious indoctrination or group therapy.) Inspired and emboldened by my sabbatical readings, however, I settled upon an approach that would make spiritual exercises themselves the subject of academic study.

The year after my sabbatical I offered a course that would begin to transform every aspect of my teaching. Entitled “Spiritual Exercises for Philosophers and Theologians,” this course took an academic and experiential approach to examining the historical development of spiritual exercises in the West. Using Pierre Hadot’s work as a historical and topical backbone to support primary texts, the course sought to introduce students to a variety of spiritual exercises to show how philosophy and theology are not only conceptual enterprises but “ways of life.” Just as an athlete trains for competition, or a musician devotes countless hours to practice, so too must a would-be philosopher or theologian undergo a process of perceptual, affective, and

<sup>26</sup> The following texts, mentioned previously, have been particularly useful for me: Daniel P. Barbezat and Mirabai Bush, *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education*; and Judith Simmer-Brown and Fran Grace, eds., *Meditation and the Classroom: Contemplative Pedagogy for Religious Studies*.

cognitive transformation through the cultivation of embodied skills and mental habits. Examples of such exercises included: concentrating on the present moment, meditation upon death, becoming indifferent to indifferent things, practicing gratitude, meditative reading, the art of dialogue, systematizing the passions, curtailing possessive desires, observing moods and states of mind, discerning desires, examining conscience, and in some traditions, cultivating non-conceptual awareness through prayer or meditation. Beginning with Platonic and Stoic philosophy, the course highlighted these exercises while tracing their adaption and transformation in ancient, medieval, and modern contexts. In addition to Plato and Seneca, figures such as Augustine, John Cassian, Boethius, Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Ávila, Simone Weil, Thomas Merton, and Etty Hillesum were featured.

To trace these exercises and traditions while noting their convergences and mutations demands serious academic work. But the subject matter naturally invites personal appropriation. I called this the “lab” portion of the class, making explicit from the outset that students should expect to experiment with these exercises throughout the semester. To facilitate this, I developed an Observational-Experiential Journal (OEJ) in which students systematically reflected upon their engagement with the exercises. For example, while reading Plato’s *Phaedo*, students were provided adaptable instructions for meditating upon death—a central feature of Socrates’ summons to the philosophical life. Or while reading Seneca, students were asked to “become a Stoic for three days” by implementing a few major disciplines outlined in his letters (e.g., practicing the present moment, distinguishing fate from freedom, bracketing reactive judgments, witnessing internal discourse, visualizing negative situations, curbing appetitive desires). Nearly all my students enthusiastically embraced these experimentations. Indeed, I was astonished by how readily they took to them. It is as though they needed only the slightest permission to take interest in observing their moods, their sensory perceptions, their thoughts, their patterns of desires, that is, to pay attention to themselves.

But the deeper and more challenging part of the course came as we approached meditation and prayer in the Christian tradition. Having explored with students how early Christian monastic practices both adopted and transformed numerous spiritual exercises from Greco-Roman philosophy, or how Augustine’s path of interiority both mirrors and reframes the neoplatonic pattern of contemplative ascent—not least because the Logos “descends” to *us* by assuming human flesh—the course entered into religiously thicker territory, which naturally prompted the question as to whether students must feel that they already belong to Christian faith to meaningfully participate. How does one “experiment” with spiritual exercises so firmly rooted in a theological worldview, if at all? Is it even appropriate to encourage it? How would I

assess it? Would my non-Christian or religiously ambivalent students feel uncomfortable or imposed upon?

I still find these questions challenging, even though I have successfully taught a version of this course many times now, including at the core level where religious affiliation (or non-affiliation) is noticeably rangier when compared to upper-level theology electives. What I have discovered, however, is that by first introducing spiritual exercises within a philosophical context, virtually all students become quite open to them in a theological context. This is not to suggest that context is merely accessory; but when, for example, students encounter the sayings of the Desert Fathers, or Augustinian interiority, or Teresa of Ávila's "prayer of quiet," or Ignatius of Loyola's rules for discernment, or the tradition of *lectio divina*, they can readily see how much they share with the spirit of ancient philosophy, and therefore how much theology, for all its various tasks and concerns, is nothing if not a way of life.

I discovered that incorporating insights from other disciplines and contemporary voices also makes a difference in fostering participation in the classroom. For example, when introducing meditation and contemplative prayer to students, we read classic texts from the tradition while occasionally comparing them to contemporary "mindfulness" practices. The purpose of this is basically twofold. First, to provide broad entry. Because many students are at least generally aware of secular approaches to mindfulness, and perhaps have some experience with them, they may find that the psychological and cognitive neuroscientific framing of mindfulness provides perspectives on ancient wisdom they might not otherwise have. This turns out to be especially important when entering into silence together in the classroom. When instructing students on the basics of meditation practice in class—for example, body posture, breath, noticing sensations, feelings, and thoughts, opening the heart—I always do so by encouraging students to adopt the framework that is most conducive to their participation. For some this will involve an explicitly theological intention, while for others it may be more broadly philosophical or psychological in orientation. Plenty of students may not even know where they stand on these issues or what their intentions really are, and yet here too they will find silence unfailingly hospitable to them. Should they keep up with the practice beyond the course, I explain to them, they will discover more about what their intentions really are and what role the practice of silence might assume in their lives.

The second purpose for comparison with contemporary mindfulness has to do with critical theological reflection. The massive groundswell of interest in mindfulness practices in recent years has shown a tendency toward the commodification and decontextualization of ancient contemplative wisdom. This is by no means to condemn the movement as such, but as Anita Houck discusses

in her aforementioned essay, there is now a growing (and perhaps predictable) backlash against the contemporary mindfulness movement, or what some call “McMindfulness,” on the grounds that it abstracts ancient contemplative practices from their communal, devotional, doctrinal, and ethical roots, with the effect that it merely indulges, rather than challenging and transforming, the individualistic, self-help mentality that permeates much contemporary interest in spirituality. The seriousness of this critique is not lost on students when properly raised, and doing so presents a powerful opportunity for students to begin thinking about the importance of intention and context. What is a spiritual practice *for*, actually? How do we discern a fruitful from an unfruitful practice? What difference does a community make, or a tradition? What role is there for spiritual teachers, for spiritual benefactors or saints, for the wisdom of others as we undertake a philosophical or theological way of life? What are some dangers or pitfalls to serious spiritual practice, and how might we navigate the inevitable ups and downs that attend it, that is, ecstasy and aridity, conviction and confusion, integration and brokenness? Above all, how does one’s spiritual practice benefit *others*? Is it primarily about “my” inner life, or does it contribute to love, justice, and peace in the world?

Questions like these are remarkably fertile for critical theological reflection in general, but teaching this course has confirmed for me that direct experimentation with spiritual exercises allows students to ask theological questions more deeply, from the “inside.” Whether they come from a religious background, or are in a state of suspension about belonging to a particular community of faith, by discovering and appropriating a range of spiritual exercises that have as their aim an attentive, discerning, and compassionate way of life, the study of theology becomes considerably more self-implicating for students. And for me, too.

### ***Ongoing Fruit***

Nearly a decade has passed since I first embarked upon my experiments in contemplative pedagogy, and I can look back and gratefully report that my sabbatical blues have borne much good fruit. I am simply not the same teacher as before. This is not to say that all of the courses I teach are focused on spiritual exercises per se, or that contemplative pedagogy has replaced other modes of teaching. But whether teaching an undergraduate core course or running a grad seminar, I continue to find ways to introduce some contemplative dimension as a way of proceeding. Just a handful of simple practices go a long way, I find.

For example, I now begin all my courses with a period of silence. Doing so allows for a shared recollection of attention and an environment for deep

listening. I also select some writings for each course that bring out some contemplative dimension in the material, some way of making explicit that doing theology *well* entails a purgation of desire and the cultivation of receptive awareness. Toward that end, I often assign Martin Laird's *Into the Silent Land*, in whole or in part, as a baseline accompaniment to the course itinerary, including in my grad seminars.<sup>27</sup> Confirming the oft-quoted (but not always understood) maxim of Evagrius Ponticus, "If you pray truly, you are a theologian," Laird's short classic offers a practical, accessible, and theologically finessed guide for discovering the ineffable and healing depths of contemplative awareness in everyday life. I also incorporate some version of an e-media retreat for all my undergraduates, usually for the period of twenty-four hours, that asks them to unplug from our media-saturated world while noticing the wider world as it "appears" without the mediation of the omnipresent screen. Short, low-stakes writing assignments allow students to reflect upon the cumulative effect that largely unnoticed habits of attention produce in us.

Whatever the specific practice, or its scope in the classroom, the fact that I undertake all of these practices *with* my students gives them a more palpable sense that I, too, am implicated in this material; I, too, am just as open to being challenged and enriched by theology as they are; I, too, am still learning how to become a theologian; and that above all, the practice of "paying attention to myself" is a deeper way of being attentive to *them*.

BRIAN D. ROBINETTE  
*Boston College*

### III. The Contemplative Pedagogy Coward

When I was asked about contributing to this roundtable on contemplative pedagogy, I was honored to be included in the mix. Yes, I have experimented in my teaching with contemplative practices for about five years

<sup>27</sup> Martin Laird, OSA, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

*Maureen L. Walsh is Assistant Professor of Theology and Religious Studies at Rockhurst University in Kansas City, Missouri. She teaches survey world religions courses along with courses concentrating on Buddhism and Christian feminist theology. Her research compares contemporary pregnancy-loss memorial rituals in American Catholicism and Japanese Buddhism. She earned her doctorate from Georgetown University with a specialization in religious pluralism and completed a two-year postdoctoral fellowship at Georgetown's Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship.*