IV. Response: Contemplative Pedagogy as Engaged Learning

I am grateful to be given the opportunity to read and to respond to these rich reflections on the practice of contemplative pedagogy. Like Maureen Walsh, and possibly Brian Robinette before his sabbatical transformation, I have usually identified myself as a member of the "loyal opposition" of this particular teaching tool. I have tried to remain grudgingly attentive to its strongest advocates in the comparative theology circles in which I travel, while at the same time shaking my head and sighing a bit to myself at what I perceive as a wild-eyed enthusiasm bordering on evangelism. It probably does not help that I am not personally prone to contemplative experience, nor that the Hindu *paraṃparā* with which I have associated for several decades has, at least in part, constructed its distinctive teaching tradition as a critique of meditative experience (*anubhava*) as means or end of liberation.

There are some intrinsic difficulties with my resistance. Most glaringly, in my teaching and writing, I have argued strongly in favor of experiential education generally and community-engaged learning in particular (hereafter CEL). In introductory courses, I have sometimes incorporated site visits or personal interviews into writing assignments. In more advanced classes, I have included service or international immersion placements as required components of the course. And I have written about these educational initiatives with what could only be charitably described as a wild-eyed enthusiasm bordering on evangelism.[33]

As I read these three essays, I reflected a bit on the irony of my situation, and it suggested a possible insight. For it turns out that, in just the right light, from a particular point of view, contemplative pedagogy and CEL look rather a lot alike. In this short response, then, I propose to reconsider these three reflections on the practice and perils of contemplative pedagogy through the lens of CEL. First, I ask about the specific pedagogical motives of employing one or another form of experiential learning. Second, I explore the importance of instructional and institutional context. Finally, I raise a few ethical

[33] Reid B. Locklin, "Weakness, Belonging and the 'Intercordia Experience': The Logic and Limits of Dissonance as a Transformative Learning Tool," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 13, no. 1 (2010): 3–13; Reid B. Locklin, Tracy Tiemeier, and Johann Vento, "Teaching World Religions without Teaching 'World Religions,'" *Teaching Theology & Religion* 15, no. 2 (2012): 159–81; Forrest Clingerman and Reid B. Locklin, eds., *Teaching Civic Engagement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

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questions related to experiential education and the risk of reinforcing distorted understandings of self and other.

Why bother with experience?

CEL begins with the presumption that student experience with a community partner should meaningfully advance the mission of that partner and meaningfully enhance students' academic and civic learning in the class.[34] Though all of these objectives are important, the impact of community-based experience on traditional academic learning often takes pride of place, both for individual instructors and for justifying this pedagogical practice in the wider academy.[35] I came to believe in the effectiveness of a CEL model in teaching religious pluralism, for example, in no small part because I observed that students working in community settings characterized by religious difference gained a level of intellectual sophistication well beyond that of students in a traditional seminar on the same topic. When the religious other has a face and a name, it turns out, there is a much stronger motivation to add nuance to one's reflections.

We find a similar concern for balancing academic and other kinds of learning objectives in these three essays. The first of Maureen Walsh's two assignments, for example, aims squarely at a deeper apprehension of course content, as students are invited to clarify a distinction between Samadhi and Vipassana schools of Buddhist practice by means of a meditative exercise. The Muslim prayer and fasting exercise, on the other hand, appears to correlate with more "civic" objectives, such as a sense of solidarity of these mostly Christian students with the worldwide *ummah*. Anita Houck speaks of both "contextualized" objectives related to learning about the religious practices under investigation and more "Jamesian" objectives related to student anxiety and mental focus. Brian Robinette, if I read him correctly, has an entirely different set of goals in mind. Here, contemplative practice ideally interrupts the ordinary, commodified ways in which we regard not only mindfulness, but even the acquisition of knowledge itself. In terms offered by the CEL theorist Dan Butin, I would suggest that Anita Houck and Maureen Walsh focus more on "technical" and "cultural" learning objectives, having to do with course content and civic competency, whereas Brian Robinette's

[34] See, for example, Kathleen Maas Weigert, "Academic Service Learning: Its Meaning and Relevance," *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 73 (1998): 3–10.

[35] Dan W. Butin, "Focusing Our Aim: Strengthening Faculty Commitment to Community Engagement," *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 39, no. 6 (2007): 34–39; Dan W. Butin, "The Limits of Service-Learning in Higher Education," *The Review of Higher Education* 29, no. 4 (2006): 473–98.

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objectives are more properly "anti-foundationalist," disrupting student assumptions in an attempt to re-orient their academic studies in a potentially transformative way.[36] Like CEL, then, the practice of contemplative pedagogy can function in diverse ways, depending upon the particular course, the way the practice is deployed, and the intention of the instructor.

There may also, however, be deeper differences. A fourth set of objectives articulated by some CEL faculty, particularly in the social sciences, are coded by Butin as "activist or political."[37] It is hard for me to imagine a contemplative pedagogy with a similar goal. The relevant parallel in this case might instead be an approach that aims directly at religious transformation—opening a possibility for students to become "little Buddhists" or "little Trappists," in a phrase Anita Houck borrows from Judith Brown. Brian Robinette flirts with such a learning objective, Maureen Walsh recoils from it, and Anita Houck executes a skillful evasive maneuver, insisting that her "goal is not spiritual growth, per se." If, as Maureen Walsh quotes Arthur Zajonc, "Our teaching is the expression of an ethic," it seems that a more direct, committed approach cannot be excluded a priori, even if it makes many of us squirm. Like the more activist versions of CEL, this may come down to a question of nerve. But it also has to do with context.

What can I get away with in this instructional space?

My first experiment with CEL was not especially successful. I attempted to include a project related to environmental ethics into an existing course on science and religion. Students perceived the project as a random piece of extra work, and they were basically correct. Although I had tried to make some revisions to accommodate the time spent on the project, I had not really rethought the course in light of the community engagement. My next forays, at another institution, veered in the opposite direction. I started my planning with a particular kind of community engagement in mind, and then I designed courses that would facilitate effective learning from that engagement. This yielded more favorable results.

Even here, however, the connection between the experiential learning and the academic content varied. One course on post-Holocaust theology grew directly out of a placement with Holocaust survivors, another paired readings in international development theory and social justice with three-month placements in the Global South, and a third course probably *could* have been designed without the CEL component. So too, in these three essays, contemplative pedagogy assumes a more or less central role in the contributors' course

[36] Butin, "Focusing Our Aim," 36.
[37] Ibid.

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designs. Brian Robinette's first attempt stands at one end of the spectrum, insofar as he creates a new undergraduate course for majors entitled "Spiritual Exercises for Philosophers and Theologians," precisely to invite "personal appropriation" of a contemplative approach. Maureen Walsh's introduction to world religions stands at the other end, as a traditional academic offering to which a few experiential activities have been appended for specific, limited purposes. Anita Houck reminds us that "most of life is lived in the middle," so it may come as no surprise that her examples occupy a middle space on this spectrum. Both her comparative theology introduction and the Spirituality and Comedy courses employ meditation regularly, alongside and closely integrated with course materials on religious practice and spirituality. In the disciplines of theology and religious studies, ethicists are generally among those most likely to evince interest in CEL; for contemplative pedagogy, perhaps, courses in spirituality—comparative or otherwise—represent the most natural home.

There are obviously other contextual factors that also influence our pedagogical choices. Brian Robinette teaches in a large, influential department in a world-class research university. He presumably has a fairly steady cohort of majors and graduate students, and he can design idiosyncratic courses with a lively expectation of strong enrollment and, at least beyond the core, some level of comfort with Christian prayer. Maureen Walsh's students are overwhelmingly Catholic, but they likely bring different expectations to their studies. Walsh also informs us that her department's academic independence was "hard-won" at Rockhurst. Anita Houck appeals broadly to the values of "Catholic higher education," rather than the specific context of Saint Mary's College. Nevertheless, her discussion appears to reflect an institutional context that is, again, somewhere between the other two. Academic cultures, the scars of departmental struggles, enrollment, and funding—all of these have a real impact on whether, and how, experiential learning strategies such as contemplative pedagogy can be effective.

A further complication for any form of experiential learning is the perennially fractured landscape of higher education, as well as disputed questions about what qualifies as academic study. Maureen Walsh and Brian Robinette both confess fears that contemplative pedagogy might cast doubt on the "academic rigor" of their departments. These fears are widely shared in the world of CEL. Stanley Fish's wonderfully titled *Save the World on Your Own Time* gives succinct expression to a wider literature that dismisses community-engaged and other ethically committed instructional practices as irrelevant at best and ideologically corrosive at worst.[38] One response to such criticism has been to draw renewed attention to institutional mission statements,

[38] Stanley Eugene Fish, *Save the World on Your Own Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

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particularly among public land-grant colleges and universities.[39] Such a strategy may be risky for advocates of contemplative pedagogy in church-sponsored universities, due to the contested histories of these mission statements in relation to departments of religious studies and theology. Either way, the appearance of experiential learning strategies like CEL and contemplative pedagogy in our classrooms would seem invariably to invite deeper reflection into the nature and purpose of the institutions we serve.

Do these experiences educate, or do they distort?

Stanley Fish is not the only critic of experiential education. Arguably, the sharpest criticism of CEL in recent years has come from some of its most fervent advocates. The language of "service" has become less popular among CEL instructors, as a category that risks reifying structures of privilege instead of critiquing them. Theorists such as Tania D. Mitchell have drawn attention to the dynamics of race and class bias in many traditional CEL frameworks.[40] Mara Brecht raises similar concerns about Christian hegemonies, across all teaching in theology and religious studies.[41] Community engagement can disrupt harmful stereotypes of religious and social others on the part of the student participants; unfortunately, as CEL teachers are becoming increasingly aware, it can also reinforce such stereotypes.

Obviously, contemplative pedagogy as such poses relatively little risk of directly impacting vulnerable persons and communities, for good or for ill. In this respect, it is very different from CEL. But, interestingly, Maureen Walsh and Anita Houck nevertheless raise similar ethical concerns about power and the potential dangers of "putting on" a Buddhist practice of meditation, for example, in the limited context of an academic course. Walsh worries mainly about distorting the practices and self-understandings of religious others, whereas Houck raises the possibility that "McMindfulness" may have a distorting effect on students' own interior lives. Interestingly, all three contributors discuss one tool CEL educators have long used to address these kinds of concerns: critical reflection.[42] Houck and Robinette both refer to

[39] For example, Krista M. Soria and Tania D. Mitchell, eds., *Civic Engagement and Community Service at Research Universities: Engaging Undergraduates for Social Justice, Social Change and Responsible Citizenship* (London: Routledge, 2016).

[40] Tania D. Mitchell, David M. Donahue, and Courtney Young-Law, "Service Learning As a Pedagogy of Whiteness," *Equity & Excellence in Education* 45, no. 4 (2012): 612–29.

[41] Mara Brecht, "Soteriological Privilege," in *Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom: Hybrid Identities, Negotiated Boundaries*, eds. Mara Brecht and Reid B. Locklin (New York: Routledge, 2016), 85–97.

[42] Julie A. Hatcher and Robert G. Bringle, "Reflection: Bridging the Gap between Service and Learning," *College Teaching* 45, no. 4 (1997): 153–58; Tania D. Mitchell,

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reflection journals, but I wonder whether this is a space that surfaces much ethical content. Houck notes that students report "reductions in anxiety, stress, and feelings of depression," as well as "meaningful insights into important issues in spirituality." Robinette focuses mainly on student enthusiasm for "observing their moods, their sensory perceptions, their thoughts, their patterns of desires." Walsh comes closer to the kind of reflection typically encouraged in CEL when she reports resistance to Buddhist practice as a sign that students are taking it seriously. Still, it seems to be only Walsh herself who worries about extracting such practices "fairly cleanly from their original contexts." One could hardly imagine a more vivid image of colonializing privilege, yet this question does not seem to be part of the students' reflective process.

And here is where my ironic skepticism again rises to the surface. CEL teachers and students have what I think may be a secret advantage: our form of experiential education is *logistically difficult*. You cannot really engage with a community partner for four to five minutes at the beginning of every class. This takes time—generally, a minimum of twenty to thirty hours of engagement each semester on the student side, and countless more hours on the part of the instructor or a community liaison to establish fruitful partnerships over an arc of multiple years. This investment does not guarantee that our efforts will pay off. On the contrary, as already noted, CEL carries serious potential for harm, on the part of students and the communities they engage. But the sheer difficulty of the project encourages a certain level of rigorous, ethical self-reflection. Why on earth am I doing this? Do I really think it is worth it?

Or maybe the time commitment required for CEL just encourages an inflated sense of self-importance. I find myself asking: What if we *could* incorporate four to five minutes of community engagement at the beginning of every class? What would happen? Such an experiential learning practice might require that teachers and students focus more narrowly on small changes in attention and assumptions—about oneself, about one's relation with others—over longer periods of time. It might require more carefully crafted reflective prompts, and a more deeply refined sense of ethical discernment and gracious accompaniment.

It might, in other words, look very much like contemplative pedagogy.

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"Traditional vs. Critical Service Learning: Engaging the Literature to Differentiate Two Models," *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 14, no. 2 (2008): 50–65.

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