
Reviewed by Kate Chaterdon

*Contemplative Practices in Higher Education: Powerful Methods to Transform Teaching and Learning*, by Daniel P. Barbezat and Mirabai Bush, is not only an extremely useful text for teachers interested in “contemporary contemplative contributions to modern pedagogy,” but also a timely one (xi). As Parker Palmer notes in the foreword, higher education is in desperate need of reform – but not just any old reform. Rather, reform that addresses the wrongs perpetrated under the “objectivist model of knowing, teaching, and learning that has dominated, and deformed, higher education” and which “keeps students at arm’s length from the subjects they learn about” (vii). As a corrective to this problem, Palmer suggests bringing contemplative practices into education, practices like those described by the educators featured in this book.

Authors Daniel Barbezat and Mirabai Bush, executive director and founding director of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, respectively, are active leaders in the contemplative education movement. The Center, a nonprofit organization, was created in 1995 “to encourage contemplative awareness in American life in order to create a more just, compassionate, and reflective society” (xxii). In their effort to fulfill this mission, the Center and its initiative, the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education, are involved in a number of programs and projects, including an annual academic conference, retreats for educators, a contemplative pedagogy summer workshop, teaching and learning center grants, an academic journal, and now, a book. Both Barbezat and Bush are also educators at the college level (Amherst College and Smith College, respectively), where they implement contemplative practice into their teaching.
The primary aims of *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education (CPHE)* is to provide readers with the theoretical and practical knowledge they will need to implement contemplative practices in their teaching. More specifically, *CPHE* is divided into two parts: a “theory” section and a “practice” section. Part one, the “theory” section, explains what contemplative practice and contemplative pedagogy are, and presents some current research that supports the use of contemplative practice in the classroom. Part two, the “practice” section, illustrates some of the ways contemplative practices have been implemented in higher education, and includes first-hand accounts of this implementation. The organization of *CPHE* is well suited for teachers new to contemplative pedagogy, as well as those who are already experienced contemplative pedagogues, but who are curious about how other teachers bring contemplative practice into their work.

Barbezat and Bush begin part one, titled “Theoretical and Practical Background,” by explaining how this book “responds to the call” of higher education by addressing the dire need for post-secondary education to foster the development of empathy, compassion, and “a deeper sense of connection with the world” (5). They define contemplative pedagogy broadly as the use of introspective and reflective practices “that allow students to focus internally and find more of themselves in their courses” (9). They also provide the reader with a helpful visual, the “Tree of Contemplative Practice” (10), which not only helps readers understand a diverse range of contemplative practices, but can also be used to explain contemplative practice to students. Additionally, they explain the various objectives of contemplative pedagogy (e.g., building focus and attention, fostering a deeper understanding of course material, promoting compassion and empathy, and encouraging the development of greater personal meaning for students) and include data that substantiates the use of contemplative practices to help teachers fulfill these objectives. Finally, they wrap up this section by each narrating compelling stories of their own experiences of implementing contemplative practice in their classes.

In part two, “A Guide to Contemplative Practices,” Barbezat and Bush give a brief overview of mindfulness, or what they refer to as the “essential contemplative practice,” and the one that is practiced most widely in higher education (98). They also give many examples of how instructors have incorporated a focus on mindfulness in a variety of college courses across the disciplines. Most of these examples are categorized into four separate chapters: “Contemplative Approaches to Reading and Writing,” “Contemplative Senses: Deep Listening and Beholding,” “Contemplative Movement,” and “Compassion and Loving Kindness.” In each of these chapters, practical,
replicable examples are given of ways to implement contemplative practice for specific educational purposes. For example, in “Contemplative Approaches to Reading and Writing,” the reader is introduced to the practice of *lectio divina*, (“divine reading”) by a professor of literature at Bryn Mawr who uses it to help her students absorb the “painful truths of the Holocaust, slavery, and apartheid that were revealed through the literature” (113). Other practices discussed in this chapter include reflective journal writing, freewriting, and storytelling. In “Contemplative Senses: Deep Listening and Beholding,” the practices of deep listening, meditation on sound, mindful listening of music, and beholding are explained and discussed. A professor of art history at Holy Cross engaged her students in the practice of beholding by asking them to observe the same piece of abstract art at the Worcester Art Museum once a week (always the same day and time) for the entire semester. This practice of asking students to “simply look” allowed them to focus their attention and become reflectively aware of the changes they noticed in the painting and themselves. In “Contemplative Movement,” the practices of walking meditation, tai chi, yoga, and labyrinth walking are discussed as ways to illustrate embodied knowledge or bodily-kinesthetic intelligence to students. Lastly, in “Compassion and Loving Kindness,” practices are described that aim to encourage students to “reconnect with [their] experience of being intimately connected to this planet and all its residents” (178). Some of these practices are the loving kindness (*metta*) meditation, the “just like me” compassion practice, and the Tibetan *tonglen*.

In their conclusion, the authors describe contemplative pedagogy as a “simple yet radical change” for higher education (198). Indeed, this book offers readers the chance to revitalize their practice of teaching, one small, yet influential activity at a time. For those teachers who feel disheartened by the current state of higher education, and who are looking for a way to make their classrooms truly transformative, this book is worth the read.