

## *Chapter Two*

# **Embracing a Contemplative Life**

### *Art and Teaching as a Journey of Transformation*

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*Contemplative life* and *teaching* are not words generally joined together, especially in academia's oftentimes frenzied and task-oriented obligations. In the current contemporary educational landscape, logic and reason dominate the field, often leading to the devaluing of emotions and sensory awareness as irrelevant. Yet education is a multidimensional venture, one that draws on the full range of human capacities. Engaging in practices that move us toward our own transformation and realization of the totality of our lived experience are at the heart of teaching.

Contemplative inquiry honors the quest for a deeper awareness of the way in which educators interact with content and students, recognizing that knowledge comes through intellect but also has an embodied, somatic dimension (Kerka, 2002). Furthermore, including the arts into one's contemplative practices facilitates transformation, as the arts are deeply embedded with senses and mind-body action and reaction, a knowing and feeling that includes more of the expansive range of human experience.

Beittel (1985) envisioned a change in education and described a need for "meditative thinking, a time to protect solitude, community, ourselves as complete body-mind-spirits, and the living earth and universe" (p. 55). Recognizing the need for "meditative thinking" allows space for receptivity and a level of discernment. Receptivity in both contemplative and artistic practices is about opening to what arises, receiving and discerning what is received, and then letting it transform and deepen one's understanding, ultimately taking these insights back out into the world of action.

Viewing learning from this perspective is a transformative process, one in which people come to deeper understandings of the world in ways that help them to live with greater awareness and connection. Jungian theorists Boyd and Myers (1988) explain that transformative learning “moves the person to psychic integration and active realization of their true being. In such transformation the individual reveals critical insights, develops fundamental understandings and acts with integrity” (p. 262).

This theory acknowledges that a learner moves between the cognitive and the intuitive, the rational and the imaginative, the subjective and the objective (Grabove, 1997), offering insights and transformations shaped not only by the rational mind but also by symbols, myths, and archetypes that emerge from the collective unconscious (Boyd & Myers, 1998).

Embracing a contemplative life coupled with artistic practices blends scholarship and teaching, offering an ongoing cycle of renewal and transformation through symbolic meaning and insights. Dustin and Ziegler (2005) explain that for many artists “the ‘making’ of art is fundamentally an exercise in meditative seeing and doing and for such artists the practice of art was inseparable from the practice of being alive” (p. ix). This chapter aims to make a case for contemplative arts as a transformational tool to create greater awareness of the complexity and depth of the lived experience.

## JOURNEYING

The notion of a journey and the universality of a quest or search is basic and commonplace to humanity; it represents the never-ending seeking for transformation from the old into the new. A Celtic term, *peregrinatio*, is a concept that embraces the notion of pilgrimage or journey. The definition, however, is not traditional in the sense of taking a journey to a holy place and then returning home with a sense of accomplishment. *Peregrinatio* is undertaken because of an “inner prompting on those who set out, a passionate conviction that they must undertake what was essentially an inner journey. . . . [I]t is the ideal of the interior, inward journey. . . . [T]he impulse is love” (De Waal, 1997, p. 2).

Palmer (1999) explains the journey of authentic selfhood as stemming from one’s deepest calling, setting the individual on a path to find authentic service in the world. He expounds, stating, “Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am” (p. 8). The teaching life can be described as a journey, an inner prompting, that compels one into service to enrich the lives of students.

I felt the call to be of service and to teach at an early age. Over time, this journey has expanded, shifted, and altered, but through each turn I was drawn deeper into my interiority, strengthening identity and giving back to the

world through service. The arts have been a central tool in my *peregrinatio*, both as a personal practice but also as a studio art teacher, and ultimately as a preservice art educator preparing new teachers to use the arts as tools for transformation in K–12 classrooms.

In both my personal life and my classroom, the arts and contemplative practice intersect. As De Waal (1997) explained, the impulse that compels and motivates me to share my passion for art and teaching is love; without it, the journey is devoid of heart. Perhaps this is what is meant by the passionate conviction to set out in the world on a journey as *hospites mundi*, “guests of the world,” which involves spiraling inward to our true selves.

### ART AS CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE

In early times, people knew well that dance, song, art, and storytelling were all part of the same process: that of the desire to create, to make meaning, and to express themselves through imagery, song, and movement, merging their inner landscape with the external world. Perhaps the arts were what the German theologian Dorothee Sölle was speaking about when she stated the need for “a language that takes our emotions seriously and gives them real weight in our lives and encourages us to think and be and act differently” (cited in O’Reilly, 1998, p. xi).

Art making is deeply emotional and can offer a way of knowing that emerges when we move our way of thinking from rational thinking and embrace full-bodied knowing. Hart (2000) defines these experiences as an emotional-cognitive process. To engage in full-bodied knowing through art, it is important to let go of the rational thought and the technicality, skill, or product needed for art making and instead focus on process of creation as purely an expressive act.

An expressive arts framework, originally developed within the psychotherapeutic field, engages all the arts for healing and discovery with a focus on process more than product (Knill, Levine, & Levine, 2005). The framework offers an integrative approach that draws upon one’s intuitive abilities as well as logical and linear thought processes, with the aim of facilitating inner awareness, self-expression, and higher states of consciousness.

Engaging in expressive arts practices with contemplative inquiry provides a bridge between my work as artist, researcher, and teacher educator. These practices (meditation, visual arts, music, and poetry) restore divisions between cognitive and affective ways of knowing, blending and balancing personal and professional identity.

Through a contemplative and creative engagement with materials and concepts, I engage mindfully with the process and experience of making art, opening to self-inquiry through images, colors, and sensations. Furthermore,

contemplative arts experiences offer opportunities for understanding and working with the ever-evolving self that is continually constructed and reconstructed through interactions with contexts, experiences, students, and colleagues.

Art is a change agent. It is “an essential form of expression and communication, an expansive and diverse language fundamentally connected to experiencing and engaging in the world around us” (Polster, 2010, p. 19). Over the years, I have witnessed within myself and through observing others the transformative power of the arts; when “doing art,” something happens that is both inexplicable and touches upon both my inner and outer world.

Artistic expression gives voice to our authentic selves whether visually, theatrically, and/or verbally in stories or poetry. When people begin to engage with art processes, they understand that what they are doing is somehow important on both an intimate and a personal level. It may be what Brown (2010) describes as “letting our true selves be seen” (p. 49).

Practicing and teaching art through a contemplative and mindful lens—which I define as creating and paying regular, focused attention to the present moment, materials, and process, and letting the outcome be guided by receptivity and intuitive knowing—offers tools for the journey within. Rosch (2004) explains, “Both meditation and the arts tap into basic intuition . . . meditation and art can illuminate each other and can do so beyond particular artistic styles or practices” (p. 38).

Mindfulness is about direct experience, and in the arts this is not only relevant but essential to the interaction of ideas, materials, and maker. Approaching making with nonjudgmental awareness of the present moment aids the mind in observing thoughts from a compassionate stance without berating or shaming; it is the ability of the mind to observe without criticism. In the arts, this allows the maker to take a balanced interest in things exactly as they are in the moment through receptive engagement with inspiration and imagination. This is what the ancient Greeks called *poiesis*, which translates as “to make” (Whitehead, n.d.).

Whitehead (n.d.) explains

*poiesis* as bringing about a transforming encounter between the artist and [their] work in the unfolding conditions of art-making itself . . . working with the raw materials of the imagination (ideas, concepts, schemata) and those of the material order (paint, clay, or stone), constitutes a means of renegotiating our sense of place.

Understanding the concept of *poiesis* from a contemplative stance illustrates how the artist and process yields insights to create a unifying and transformative practice, thereby strengthening interiority. Each experience with making, no matter the size or materials, is in essence an inward journey, a *peregrina-*

*tio* undertaken because of a fervent conviction to let your life tell you who you are.

## FINDING INSPIRATION FROM MONASTIC PRACTICES

The work of Hildegard of Bingen, a twelfth-century Benedictine abbess, provides a source of inspiration for art as a contemplative path. She possessed an immense creative power that was revealed in art, music, and poetry, but also in her work as an herbalist, healer, and spiritual director (Painter, 2016). She believed in what is called *viriditas*—the central creative life force that exists within each moment and that is continuously at work.

*Viriditas*, a metaphor for spiritual and physical health, is a guiding theme in Hildegard's work and translates as greening, freshness, vitality, fruitfulness, life-force, or growth (Hildegard of Bingen, n.d.). She saw the lushness and fecundity of nature as a reminder of divine power and interconnectivity accessible to everyone; it was not just symbolic, but a state of being that offered growth and renewal. I contend that it is also transformation.

Additionally, the monastic path of Hildegard of Bingen relied on the need for silence, sacred rhythms, and the creative arts as practices for expressing *viriditas* and connection with the divine. Most importantly, she believed in moderation and balance. In our frenzied contemporary world, I draw inspiration from the monastic path she presents, recognizing the need for balance, moderation, and creative pursuits encapsulated in moments of silence and solitude.

In these practices, the contemplative way embedded with art nurtures my interiority while simultaneously cultivating spaciousness and time for reflection and introspection. Engaging in creative acts affords a window through which I can look both inwardly and outwardly at a slow, mindful pace that does not compete with the oftentimes frenetic pace of daily and academic life.

Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk of the Benedictine, offers a reminder of the dangers and perils of a life bombarded with busyness and excess:

The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything, is to succumb to violence. . . . It destroys the fruitfulness of our own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful. (1968, p. 81)

The words and practices of Hildegard of Bingen and Merton are reminders of the need for balance that includes moderation, silence, and creative pursuits.

By balancing academic work with creative art practices and nurturing the inner life as counterbalance to day-to-day outer demands, I remain connected to a creative source that is authentic, life-affirming, and “greening”; in turn, the benefits of these practices ripple outward into the classroom as I prepare preservice teachers for their journey ahead.

### LECTIO DIVINA AND ARTISTIC PRACTICE

In the busyness of academic life, finding ways to engage in art making remains a challenge, yet finding time for creative engagement with small and intimate projects affords contemplative opportunities for personal growth, renewal, and transformation. I have adapted the Benedictine practice of *Lectio Divina* to a contemporary context, where through creative expression I bring together words and imagery with the aim of using creative expression and sacred reading to inform, inspire, and transform.

*Lectio Divina* was designed for sacred reading of scripture. This practice involves reading or listening that opens gradually to contemplation; it is considered a path of the heart (Lichtmann, 2005; Paintner, 2011b). Through a four-step process that is slow and reflective, the mind is drawn away from the preoccupations of the moment by being fully present with the words revealed on the page. *Lectio Divina* aids the movement of awareness from the rational and analytical toward a greater wholeness by including the intuitive and emotional ways of knowing.

Saint Benedict explained this process as “listening with the ear of your heart” (Paintner, 2011a, p. 18). This, of course, is not the literal ear but the center of our being, our heart, where we make meaning through a deeper connection with our inner life and the world in which we live. Rainer Maria Rilke offers a secular description of the practice to illustrate the contemplative nature of the reading: “He does not always remain bent over his pages; he often leans back and closes his eyes over a line he has been reading again, and its meaning spreads through his blood” (quoted in Lichtmann, 2005, p. 22).

Paintner (2011a) provides an adaption of the *Lectio Divina* process that extends the traditional practice and includes a visual art response. I use this model, letting words and imagery transform my way of experiencing and responding to words. Every experience is unique, and the expressive art response revelatory, oftentimes transformative, and always deeply renewing. I approach the *Lectio Divina* process similar to how I practice meditation: with nonjudgment, openness, and receptivity. I read silently from a variety of texts—poetry books, inspirational quotes, sacred prose—with focused attention on the text, allowing the images to unfold in my imagination, and then later respond artistically. No two experiences are the same.

The process of reading slowly, savoring and allowing words to be “felt” or embodied, is counter to the pace of academia where the emphasis may require grasping new ideas and concepts, oftentimes superficially skimming literature. Balance is necessary in the hurried pace of academic life; the contemplative practice of *Lectio Divina* with an artistic response provides a mindful experience, connecting me with something beyond but also within.

We learn by practice. Whether learning to be an artist or a teacher, the principles are the same. By definition, *practice* means to do something again and again in order to become better at it; to do (something) regularly or constantly as an ordinary part of one’s life (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). When I embody these practices, they become central to my daily life, seamlessly integrating the personal and the professional and the inner and the outer. In turn, these practices shape my habits of being and strengthen interiority.

There are four primary movements of *Lectio Divina*: *lectio* (attention), *meditatio* (reflection), *oratio* (receptivity), and *contemplatio* (transformation) (Lichtmann, 2005; Paintner, 2011b). The following sections offer personal examples of each of these steps using a contemporary and artistic approach.

### Reading (*Lectio*)

In the initial movement of reading, the aim is to cultivate the ability to listen deeply, what Saint Benedict previously described as hearing “with the ear of our heart.” This quality of attention, I contend, is mindfulness—a focused attention on word(s) that speak to the present moment, connecting my inner life with the world I inhabit. As I begin, I establish a creative, inviting space surrounded by art materials: colored pencils, paint, glue, and collage materials.

I center myself with eyes closed and a focus on my breath, slow and deep, silencing the chatter of my mind. Selecting a verse or phrase, I intuitively let myself be drawn to words that jump off the page, are illuminated, and feel significant in the moment, as if they were meant just for me. Lichtmann (2005) describes this phase of *lectio* as attention, “an abiding energy of the mind that is a just and loving gaze upon reality” (p. 12).

As words resonate and connect with my lived experience, I can hold the paradox of life, not seeing it as simply black and white but remaining open to possibilities. I have discovered through this process that wisdom is not about learning solely through the intellect, but by letting the words shape me with an open and receptive heart.

### Reflection (*Meditatio*)

In the second movement, *meditatio*, words are allowed to simmer and ruminate in the embodied experience, letting them unfold and reveal insights. I

read the text a second time and allow what is “felt” or embodied to spark imagination. Lichtmann (2005) describes this step as “turning over and mirroring from different angles of the subjects that we attend to” (p. 12).

This step requires silence to let the words expand in awareness, allowing images, symbols, or colors to unfold in my imagination, encouraging me to go slowly and dive deeply; I use all my senses. This is what the Quakers call hearing that “still small voice within . . . the voice of our intuitive heart, which has so long been drowned out by the noisy thinking mind” (Dass & Gorman, 1992, p. 191). Reading and repeating the word or phrase that illuminates on the page and letting this interact with my thoughts, memories, or desires invites dialogues with the deepest levels of myself, allowing insights and inspiration.

### **Response (*Oratio*)**

In the third movement, I begin to integrate knowing with lived experience, allowing for change and transformation. Lichtmann (2005) describes *oratio* as receptivity and relatedness, “that inner openness allowing us to be moved and changed by what we attend to and reflect upon, making transformation possible” (p. 12). This approach aligns with transformative learning that moves the person toward integration and realization of their true being.

In this movement, my practice is to respond with visual images using a mixed-media approach. Images are either hand drawn or cut from magazines and collaged onto paper that is either plain or previously painted. Opening to intuition and discovering symbols, shapes, and colors of what was felt and embodied in silence and reflective reading offers a complementary way of knowing, expanding the written word through visual language. With each image, I journal to recall the experience, recollecting insights, sensations, and interpretations of meaning and purpose that connect with present-day experiences.

### **Rest (*Contemplatio*)**

The final movement, which is Latin for “contemplation,” represents the culmination of the three previous movements. In this final step I return to stillness, integrating the experience more deeply and allowing both the words and the images to touch the deepest parts, transforming me from within. In this deep silence, I can discover what needs to be heard without the bombardment of distraction. I let the words and images reveal themselves through the eyes of the heart, expanding awareness; it is in this place that I can embrace my growing wholeness.

This movement is a counterbalance to the activity of *oratio*, bringing me back to the present moment. Paintner (2011b) explains that in this movement



“we are called to remember who we are without focusing on what we are to do” (p. 124). In *contemplatio*, we move more deeply inward, release the need to do or achieve an experience, and simply receive.

The four movements of *Lectio Divina* are not fixed rules of procedure but guidelines that offer a transformational tool to support and strengthen interiority by listening with the deepest level of our being. A mixed-media example and reflection follows that illustrates the use of *Lectio Divina*. Each creative illustration uses a combination of paint, collage, colored pencil, or markers on a 5”x7” white mixed-media paper.

### LECTIO DIVINA: A PERSONAL PRACTICE

“To be a feather on the breath of God means to yield oneself to the divine current, to let yourself be carried by grace rather than force of personal will” (Paintner, 2016, p. 165).

I read this passage several times slowly, ruminating on the words and finding the word *grace* illuminating for me. I reflected on how busy my life can become; oftentimes an overloaded calendar exceeds my capacity to function with awareness and presence. Ignoring my body and my heart, I force personal will to complete my “to do” tasks, despite signs of fatigue or stress. I become oriented toward goals and making things happen, pushing against the very loud messages I receive to pause.

Merton (1968) describes the rush and pressure of modern-day life as a common form of innate violence; committing to the multitude of conflicting concerns and demands is to cooperate with the violence. In contrast, *grace* is defined as a “special favor or privilege: disposition to or an act or instance of kindness, courtesy, or clemency: a temporary exemption or a reprieve” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Grace can be a reminder to embrace emptiness and meaninglessness, opening to spaciousness and receptivity.

As I reflected on the word *grace*, I was reminded of a practice offered to my students at the beginning of each semester, whereby each student receives a “grace pass.” At any time during the semester, the student can use this pass to turn in a paper late, take extra time for a presentation, or arrive late to class without a deduction; the pass can be used at any time, no questions asked (Dalton & Fairchild, 2004). I realized that the forgiveness I offer my students is the same forgiveness I also should grant to myself.

Considering my own teaching practice, I realize I often favor the organic nature of learning over legalism, giving breaks firmly but lovingly, engaging in an intuitive dance, sensing when grace might help a student and not be taken for granted. For preservice teachers who eventually will be in classrooms of their own, I have found this practice teaches empathy and compas-



**Figure 2.1.** Jane Dalton, *Lectio Divina*, Mixed Media, 5" x 7"

sion. They realize their need for grace may be the very gift a future student will also need.

What would happen if I stepped away from the task list on my calendar and surrendered to grace, allowing a reprieve from busyness? What would

emerge from the void that might otherwise be missed? Grace in my life is a reminder to be gentle with myself, just as I am with my students, allowing space for the unexpected and letting *viriditas* to flourish. Engaging in these small creative practices such as *Lectio Divina* affords me such grace. In the *lectio* response, the butterfly and the flower are reminders of ebb and flow, of active and still, of opening and closing and spaciousness and receptivity.

## CONCLUSION

As a critical practitioner of the human experience, a teacher navigates several worlds—the inner realm of his or her personal life and the outer worlds of his or her classroom, students, and school. Creative expression draws upon the vast resources of our inner landscape and allows each of us to imagine new possibilities; without it life becomes barren. Having an arts-based contemplative practice ensures I stay in touch with the gifts of the artist: paying attention to detail, keeping connected to the ordinary moments of life, pausing, looking, sensing, and making.

These transformative experiences quiet the mind, awaken creativity, and deepen awareness by expanding the emotional depth that allows for the knowing of the self through words and symbols. These symbols and gestures provide a private language and way of speaking that nurture personal transformation, heighten sensibilities, and strengthen interiority. In turn, these insights can aid the professional life by teaching more meaningfully and compassionately, and with greater self-awareness.

As an academic, I find the following definition by Merton most fitting of the *peregrinatio* of the teacher: “The purpose of education is to show a person how to define himself authentically and spontaneously in relation to the world—not to impose a prefabricated definition of the world. Still less an arbitrary definition of the individual himself” (Merton & Cunningham, 1992, p. 358).

The *peregrinatio* undertaken because of an inner prompting is an ongoing journey that can be supported through creative expression, poetic acts, and *Lectio Divina*. In turn, this awareness and these insights are shared with preservice teachers who have begun the journey of the teaching life. The spiritual practices of *Lectio Divina*—*lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio*, translated into attention, reflection, receptivity, and transformation—belong to those who teach as well as to those who are being taught (Lichtmann, 2005).

## ESSENTIAL IDEAS TO CONSIDER

- Contemplative art practices reduce the fragmentation of academic life, restoring divisions between cognitive and affective ways of knowing.
- Artistic practices, when engaged with mindful awareness, offer tools for personal transformation that strengthens interiority.
- Monastic practices, such as *Lectio Divina*, offer a practice that speaks directly to the lived experience in that moment, offering insight and a depth of connection.
- Teaching is a journey, *peregrinatio*, and personal practices can offer tools for deepening awareness and strengthening authenticity.

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