

Fall Retreat for Academics

November 12 – 15, 2009

Marconi Conference Center, Marshall, CA by *Beth Wadham, Academic Associate*

This year, the Center responded to requests from members of the West Coast network



and offered its fourth retreat for educators in Northern California. The tranquil setting of the Marconi Center, overlooking Tomales Bay, was perfect for creating retreat conditions. The group of professors that came together represented a wide range of experience with contemplative practice, personally and in their classrooms, but at opening circle they all expressed openness to sharing a reflective space and practicing together.

Over the weekend, Arthur Zajonc and Mirabai Bush offered introductions to mindfulness-based practices and contemplative inquiry techniques that can be used in classroom settings, but Mirabai emphasized at the first meeting that what is most important is that educators practice themselves, to focus their own awareness and develop their own responsiveness, capacities that are critical for teaching and learning. While examples of what others have done are helpful in exploring possibilities, practice brings an awareness that applies to everything we are called upon to do in our lives and is part of a way of living and being that is relaxed and alert.



On the first morning the group explored sitting and stilling practices alternating with mindful walking. The winding pathways through majestic trees offered a particularly welcome setting in which to practice this tradition, drawn from Asian and Western monasticism, in which one becomes conscious of all the sensations that arise through the simple movements. At the morning's end, the group prepared for and entered a time of silent practice, which they would share through the next 30 hours. Silent practice also derives from monastic traditions and, in secular application, has value for quieting the mental activity that goes along with conversation, allowing greater access to inner perception. It is a challenging practice, however, especially during activities such as meals, when sociability is often in the foreground. The thoughts and feelings that arise during the time one is dedicated to silence are an opportunity to

notice what's going on outside and inside and to cultivate a sharper awareness of the whole environment.



In the afternoon, Arthur Zajonc introduced exercises that extend contemplative awareness to include contemplative inquiry. The four-stage process, which alternates between focused and open attention, explores how ways of knowing can be extended beyond the discursive, logical inference of ratiocination to include introspective methods that lead to new discoveries and insight. Throughout the period of silent practice, Arthur and Mirabai responded to written questions submitted by the participants. They addressed questions about the ethical foundations of practice, how to create a personal practice, and why mindfulness takes so much effort.

By the second day of silence, the sitting meditation sessions had become very still. The contemplative exercises that Mirabai and Arthur guided felt more refined, and participants took up the opportunities to look inward and to explore nature with greater focus and engagement. When the time came to break the silence in the afternoon, Mirabai suggested that "silence is the beginning of mindful speaking." Practice with silence develops the ability to ask oneself, before speaking, "Is this helpful? Is this true?" One may find one doesn't need to say so much. As a way back into the speaking world, participants first wrote for five minutes, finishing the prompt, "During the time spent in silence, I learned that..." before turning to a partner to engage in mindful listening practice. The speaker spoke for five minutes as the listener listened without interruption and then related back to the speaker what he or she heard.



The final evening of the retreat was given to conversation, as the educators spoke in small groups about the relationship of contemplative practice to teaching, learning and knowing. Sharing their experience and questions and offering their ideas to help one another, the participants found many points of convergence and recognition. These supportive and stimulating conversations, many of which continued during breakfast on the final morning, are a wonderful feature of these contemplative gatherings. Somehow, it always seems that just the right people have come.

At the closing circle, many participants shared how they were able to find very particular personal and professional value in their retreat experience. Doing anything with contemplative awareness, such as changing the dressing on an injured patient or climbing a rock face looking for the next handhold, is experienced more fully. Arthur referred to the words of George Dreyfus, who says that, in a sense, enlightenment is freedom, and we are not free in our attention when it is constantly “solicited” by external agents. Mirabai read *At This Party*, by Hafiz, reflecting the feeling in the room that the group had created, as the participants prepared to return to their wider circles of connection with renewed openness and gratitude.

At This Party

I don't want to be the only one here
Telling all the secrets
Filling up all the bowls at this party
Taking all the laughs
I would like you
To start putting things on the table
That can also feed the soul
The way I do.
That way
We can invite
A hell of a lot more
Friends.

The following institutions and departments were represented at the retreat:

Universidad de Quintana Roo	Language and Education
Seattle University	Communication
St. Martins University	English
University of Victoria	Nursing
UC Berkeley	Spanish, Portuguese
Syracuse University	Health and Wellness
Trinity Christian College	Psychology
California State University	French
Arizona State University	Dance
Gustavus Adolphus College	Classics
Vassar College	Italian
University of Massachusetts	Teaching and Learning
Dartmouth	Social Work
San Jose State University	Language and Literature
Fairmont State University	Undergraduate Education
Evergreen State College	Nursing
University of Victoria	Religion, East Asian Studies
Wittenberg University	Stress Research Institute
Stockholm University	Social Work
University of Michigan	Nursing
California State University	Humanities
Prescott College	Social Work
California State University	

