

Stitching Together East and West: A Tale of Two Professors

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Abstract

There is a saying, “There is nothing new under the sun.” While that may be true, what is also true is that there is a newness in combining approaches that already exist into something dynamic and extraordinary. Our work with *lectio divina* evidences this dynamism. We take the monastic contemplative practice of *lectio divina* from the West and stitch it together with the Eastern emphasis on learning as a process of character development and transformation that originates in Eastern traditions. Both *lectio divina* and the Eastern practices that originated in India in the yogic schools emphasize the formation of the whole person (body, mind, heart and soul). Just as yoga is the union of body and mind, *lectio divina* is a part of contemplative practices and pedagogy that knits together mind, body, heart in the learning process and out of this combination, something new is born into the spaces of teaching and learning. This article chronicles the conscious effort to create community between two like-minded professors who were dharmically brought together. In community with each other, they began to realize the value of stitching together Eastern and Western approaches for deepened learning and self-discovery for teachers and students alike.

Keywords: Lectio divina, Yoga, Community, Contemplative practices, Contemplative pedagogy, Formation of the whole person

There is a saying, “There is nothing new under the sun.” While that may be true, what is also true is that there is a newness in combining approaches that already exist into something dynamic and extraordinary. Our work with *lectio divina* evidences this dynamism. We take the monastic contemplative practice of *lectio divina* from the West and stitch it together with the Eastern emphasis on embodied learning as a process of character development and transformation. The Western practice of *lectio divina* combined with the Eastern practices that originated in India in the yogic schools, when combined create a whole new way of teaching and learning that brings a transformational quality back into education. Students begin to feel empowered within themselves (body, mind, heart, soul) because learning is no longer just the memorization of

facts, but rather an ongoing process of self-discovery.

First, the concept of community is explained along with Maureen and Mary’s scholarship on *lectio divina* and how their dharmic connection began to unfold. Then they both share their own unique love and understanding of Indian culture and practices. Each professor characterizes some of their work and views on education and how they stitch together Eastern and Western traditions. One common thread between these two educators is building community in teaching and learning. They seek to build community with each other and also each seek it in the spaces of teaching and learning that create for their students. Next, Maureen invites Mary to her university and Mary describes her preparation for a visit to Maureen Hall’s institution. While visiting, Mary conducts three sessions utilizing *lectio divina* with

students and teachers at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. In the third section, student response data from the sessions is shared and analyzed. To conclude, Maureen and Mary consider some of the broader implications for collaborative partnerships in education.

Why Create Community?

Good teachers create a welcoming space for learning. Without a welcoming space, students will not take academic risks or make themselves vulnerable. A welcoming space supports authenticity. As Palmer (1998) notes in *The Courage to Teach* (p.10), *Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher* (italics in text). Palmer adds that authentic hospitality includes “an open invitation, without a hint of the manipulation or coercion that would scare off the shy soul” (p. 78). The teacher and students can co-create a community for learning where everyone feels valued. Community can be a contemplative space, one that is created out of a web of relationships between teachers and students in the service of deepening learning about the self and others.

Both teachers and students need community in their lives; community provides discourse guidance, connection, and even wisdom. Community can mediate and enrich the complexities inherent in teaching. As Palmer points out, “the growth of any craft depends on shared practice and honest dialogue among the people who do it” (p. 148). Certainly, teachers can improve their practice when working alone. But, when collaborating in community with other colleagues, are more likely to persevere in part because they feel supported in continuing to take academic risks to improve their practice and deepen student learning.

Back in 2005, Maureen defined community in this way: “In the best learning environments, there is a space characterized by

mutual inquiry, a place where teachers are learners and learners are teachers. The teacher and students can co-create a community for learning where everyone feels valued” (Hall, 2005, p. 8). Today, in 2019, these ideas still ring true. When community is created in a classroom, one in which all participants feel valued, learning becomes a living process. In this alive environment of teacher and students, “the activation of the innermost center, the apex or spark...which transcends all division, all separation” as described in Merton in *Love and Living*, (1979, p. 9) can be sustained and nourished. However, today universities in the West have become “depositories of information,” or what Freire describes “the banking concept of education,” where the teacher deposits knowledge into the “empty heads” of the students (Freire, 1970). They have forgotten the fundamental truth that the purpose of education, which according to Harry Lewis, former Dean of Harvard University, is to “help students grow up, to learn who they are, to search for a larger purpose in their lives, and to leave college better human beings” (Lewis, 2006, p.17).

In their conscious effort to create community, two like-minded professors were dharmically brought together and shared their pedagogical understandings for how they each combine Eastern and Western approaches to teaching and learning. Both are professors who teach at different public universities in the United States. Maureen Hall is a professor of education, and Mary Keator is a professor of literature and writing. Although they come from different departments and disciplines, they both view their work as part of what Arthur Zajonc (2013) refers to a “quiet pedagogical revolution.” Maureen and Mary view their work as part of this quiet revolution in the West; however more than that, they work to stitch together the contemplative traditions of both East and West, while attempting to hold the integrity of each. They view this work

as their seva, in the service of improving education on a global level (Zajonc, 2013).

Both Maureen and Mary have published on *lectio divina* as a contemplative practice. *Lectio divina*, an ancient Western monastic practice, weaves together teachers and students into a learning “whole”; the classroom space becomes a web of interactions that bring together cognitive and affective aspects of learning. Through *lectio divina* the educator and student build and strengthen community within the classroom learning space. This article shares the details of a recent visit that Mary made to Maureen’s institution which demonstrates how they are developing and deepening community across disciplines and institutions.

The Dharmic Connection Unfolds

Maureen didn’t meet Mary in person until just recently. Her connection to Mary began with her interest and research on *lectio divina*. Maureen discovered that Mary had written a book on *lectio divina* in 2018 called, *Lectio Divina as Contemplative Pedagogy: Re-appropriating Monastic Practice for the Humanities*, published by Routledge (2018), in which she secularizes this monastic practice for application in the Humanities. Although Maureen had published previously on *lectio divina*, Mary’s book informed the design of some of Maureen’s classroom practices.

Maureen has been writing about and presenting on *lectio divina* for the past four years with a small group of professors from universities across the United States. As a group, they have presented at various academic conferences, including the American Educational Research Association (AERA), Association for the Contemplative Mind in Higher Education (ACMHE), and the International Transformative Learning Conference (ITLC). Maureen, in collaboration with two of the group members, Jane Dalton and Catherine Hoyser, is currently editing a

book on *lectio divina* titled, *The Whole Person: Lectio Divina as Transformative Practice in Teaching and Learning*. This book, published by Rowman and Littlefield Publishers in the United States, will be available in the fall of 2019.

Maureen and Mary’s interaction began in cyberspace with email. After reading Mary Keator’s book on *lectio divina*, Maureen knew that she wanted to seek Mary out and see if she would contribute a chapter to Maureen’s new book. She contacted Mary Keator by email, let her know that she had read and learned many things from Mary’s book on *lectio divina*, and then asked Mary if she might be interested in contributing a chapter to *The Whole Person*. Mary replied that she was teaching a course called “Yoga and Writing” and that she would be happy to write a chapter for Maureen’s new book about how she integrates *lectio divina* into her pedagogy for that course.

After Mary agreed to contribute a chapter, and while Maureen was in India over January 2019, they continued an email dialogue. In one email, Maureen made three offers to Mary: 1) Maureen invited Mary to come for a visit to her university (University of Massachusetts Dartmouth) in the spring to share her approaches with *lectio divina* with students and faculty; 2) Maureen asked Mary if she would be willing to read and review one of Maureen’s chapters on *lectio divina*, for *The Whole Person book*; and 3) Maureen inquired if Mary would be interested in co-presenting at an academic conference.

Although Maureen’s interactions with Mary began with email, their collegial relationship has continued to develop and soon became an embodied interaction. Maureen and her husband have a small studio apartment on the first floor of their house, and Mary was invited to stay with them during her visit to the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth in March. Maureen let Mary know she would have some privacy in the studio and then have her meals with Maureen and her husband. When Mary came to visit, she arrived

on a Thursday, and she stayed until Saturday morning. Maureen had an Indian lunch of dahl and parathas waiting for Mary when she arrived. The Indian notion of “Guest is God” is something that Maureen and her husband subscribe to, and they wanted to make Mary as comfortable as possible during her stay.

After their lunch, Maureen and Mary headed to the University and Mary presented in Maureen’s 200 level course called *Perspectives on Education*. In this course, students were just beginning the module on Contemplative Practices. Although Maureen did give her students some introduction to contemplative practices in the previous class, Maureen knew that Mary’s presentation on *lectio divina* would be a great way to begin this section of the course. Later that same afternoon, Mary accompanied Maureen to Durfee High School in Fall River where Maureen teaches a cohort of in-service teachers. Maureen made clear to Mary that the in-service teachers would really like to see how they might be able to apply *lectio divina* in their own teaching practices, and Mary planned accordingly.

Maureen Stitches Together East and West

Maureen first visited India in the fall of 2010. She had been awarded a Fulbright-Nehru Research Scholarship and spent seven continuous months in India. There was a lot of adjustment for her when she first arrived in India, but after a few months she started to feel at home. Although her host institution was the University of Allahabad in Uttar Pradesh, Maureen was on a research Fulbright, and that afforded her the opportunity to travel to many different institutions in many different Indian states.

It was strange to feel at home in a place that she had never been, and she thought it had something to do with the gracious hospitality of the Indian people that made her feel so welcome. Also, she had a sense that she had been to India many times before---perhaps in her previous lives

or “previous births” as many Indians say. In the same way that Palmer talks about teaching as a “constant act of hospitality,” Maureen felt this as a learner in India. It was a hospitable learning environment, but also a place filled with such diversity and complexity. As a professor in the middle of her career, India affected her greatly over those first seven months.

As of 2019, Maureen has been back to India eight more times since that first visit in 2010. Each time she has gone back, she has deepened her connections with colleagues and visited many institutions. One place that she feels most at home and also part of an extended family is at Dev Sanskriti Vishwavidyalaya (DSVV) in Haridwar, Uttarakhand. In 2014, Maureen was given honorary status as a visiting professor at DSVV. She has organized and been the keynote of the National Holistic Literacy Conference, begun in 2015. Maureen even had a spiritual wedding at DSVV; she and her fiancé Daniel were blessed to have a Hindu wedding at DSVV and then the following year to have a Hindu wedding in the United States. The couple who performed the wedding ceremony in the United States was Sanjay Saxena and his wife Sangeeta Saxena, both of whom are devotees at DSVV but who currently live in the United States. It is hard to overestimate how much India and Indian culture and traditions drew her in and shaped her.

Looking back through some of her files, Maureen found her feedback form from the end of her Fulbright experience. The very last part of that form asked applicants to summarize their Fulbright experience in India in fifty words or less. This is what she wrote in 2011 at the conclusion of her Fulbright and first time in India:

I believe that one can learn so much about oneself through spending time in a foreign country. I learned so much about myself and also about the Indian culture through my research, in terms of how contemporary and ancient contemplative

traditions shape ideas and education. I will visit India again.

Bringing Lectio Divina to India

In spring 2018, Maureen spent a few months of her sabbatical in India. Again she returned to Dev Sanskriti Vishwavidyalaya (DSVV) in Haridwar, Uttarakhand. This time, she planned another conference at DSVV, entitled, “Transforming Education Across East and West: Building Intercultural, Aesthetic, and Interdisciplinary Bridges.” It was at this conference in March of 2018 that Maureen brought *lectio divina* to India.

In collaboration with two of her colleagues from the US, Maureen facilitated a *lectio divina* practice with professors and graduate students from DSVV using the Shiva Temple located inside the Mahakal Mandir. The mandir itself is an amphitheater located at the center of DSVV’s eighty-acre campus. The Shiva temple was the “text” to be read using the *lectio divina* process. On DSVV’s website, more information is provided about the Mahakal Mandir: “To add to the spiritual ambience of the campus, there is an amphitheater at the center of the campus for various activities such as meditation and festival celebrations. A beautiful Shiva Temple is situated in the middle of the amphitheater” (dsvv.ac.in) Through this conference at DSVV, Maureen was able to stitch together the Western practice of *lectio divina* with the Eastern “text” of Shiva Temple with a group of Indian graduate students and professors.

Mary’s Stitches Together East and West

Mary connection with India began early in her life when Swami Kripalu purchased an old mansion and created an ashram in her hometown located in the mountains of Northwestern Massachusetts. Although Mary never studied under Swami Kripalu, her exposure to the Indian concepts of yoga, meditation and the guru principal began to percolate within her. Later in 1991, drawn by the

yogic practices of self-awareness, self-care and the development of the whole person (body, mind, heart, soul), Mary began her formal study of yoga and after years of study became certified to teach.

Although Mary has never been to India, she weaves her love and study of yogic texts, practices and ayurvedic principles into her teaching. This semester, Mary is teaching two courses that incorporate Indian texts: *World Literature: The Search for Wisdom* and *Writing about Yoga*.

In addition, Mary also brings the Western monastic practice of *lectio divina* into her teaching. *Lectio Divina* is a method of reading and interpretation, which developed within the monastic schools during the 2nd - 12th centuries. It is a contemplative formation building practice, composed of four movements: *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio* and *contemplatio* that position students as the subjects of their learning process. Through the practice of *lectio divina*, students move from the objective world of the text to the subjective world of the self. Through the *lectio divina* method, students learn how to read deeply, think critically, dialogue and respond meaningfully to what they are reading in light of their own life experiences. In her experience, Mary has found that the stitching together yogic texts with the contemplative pedagogy of *lectio divina* creates a powerful transformational quality to the formation and education of students.

Drawing from the yogic threads of the East and the monastic threads of the West, Mary stitches East and West together to support her students learning, growth and character development. In both her courses, Mary begins class by creating a sense of community. Mary and her students acknowledge one another and acknowledge their togetherness along the learning journey. Mary places her hands in front of her heart in Anjali mudra, bowing to her students and saying “Namaste.” Her students respond by placing their hands in Anjali mudra and saying, “Namaste.”

Next, they chant the *Shāntipāṭha* chant from the invocation to *The Katha Upanishad*. There is a significance to this chant; Mary selected it specifically to create a sense of community for the teacher and students. It prepares them to engage together (teacher and student) in the learning process; through this chant, they promise to work hard together to understand the texts, to not quarrel with one another, and to create a peaceful learning environment.

After chanting together, they all sit together in our circle quiet and still for about 5 minutes. “Silence,” as Lichtmann notes (2005, p.88), “can create hospitality, though it may bring awkwardness in the door with it. When we invite silence into the learning space, we send a signal that we want our students to reach their authentic selves, not just to impress or please us.” As they sit together in silence, they settle deeper into themselves, allowing their minds, hearts and bodies to reunite. They also settle together within the space of the classroom and learn to be *with* one another in the still and silent space.

In *World Literature: The Search for Wisdom*, Mary’s students read *The Isha Upanishad* and excerpts from *The Bhagavad Gita*. Again, Mary uses the *lectio divina* as contemplative pedagogy for students to read these yogic texts. For example, when they read *The Isha Upanishad*, they read the first line multiple times, “The Lord is enshrined in the hearts of all.” After reading it slowly a few times, she teaches her students motions to the words. She has them raise their arms over head and then bring them together in front of their hearts as they said “The Lord is enshrined in the hearts.”

Then she has them move their hands from their hearts out in front and in a semi-circle saying, “of all.” Slowly, they move from reading the text, to hearing the text, to listening the text, to wondering what it meant. After slow performative reading, the students become prepared and ready to move deeper into the text to search it for

meaning. They continued to read and look at all the ways in which the Lord, the Self, is described such as “bright,” indivisible,” “untouched by sin,” “wise,” immanent,” and “transcendent.” Finally, the text states, “Even that very Self am I.” Slowly students began to make a personal connection. One student wrote in her *oratio* (response),

The Isha Upanishad reminded me that everything I need is within me. I get distracted by the world; I think that I need friends, nice clothes, a nice body, or good grades to accomplish everything I want in life. And yet, this text reminds us that...My purpose is divine-I am a manifestation of life...When I begin to doubt myself, I remind myself that ‘all I need is within me.’ This has become my own mantra.

Through the *lectio divina* practice, the words contained within *The Isha Upanishad* are no longer on the page; instead, the words and more importantly the meaning behind the words, dwell within this student.

In *Writing about Yoga*, the students do not meet in the typical classroom; instead, they meet in The Albert and Amelia Ferst Interfaith Center. Mary sought permission to use this space from the Director. It is important to note that this is the *only* course at her university currently meets in this contemplative space on campus. What follows are three students’ feedback about what learning was like in this contemplative space:

I think the utilization of the Interfaith Center is a great idea because there isn’t really a space for this type of a class in an academic building. I have never stepped foot in this building, but I believe it fits this class because it is a sacred place and yoga is sacred. Yoga is about bringing your whole body together with the mind, heart and soul...I like having class in the Interfaith

Center and I'm happy that the people running it appreciate us being there".

Reflecting back on this class, I realize that the environment we were brought into was extremely important to learning, specifically in a class like this one. The sacredness of the building we were in, the quietness of the room, and the organization of it all really helped me to concentrate and understand the purpose of the exercises we were doing. The more we use the Interfaith Center, the more I want to go back. As soon as I walk in there it is almost as though all my worries stay outside. Being in such a pure sacred space, puts my mentality in perspective and I don't want to be anywhere but in the present...I will definitely be using this center to study and relax, and possibly even meditate".

The learning environment is both physical and spiritual. It is important to note how comfortable students felt in this space; they each use the word "sacred" in their responses to this special place. One student specifically mentions that she is "happy that the people running it appreciate us being there." Once again, the Indian notion of "Guest is God" manifests in the learning space; this sense of welcome and appreciation matters to students and affects their learning process.

For this course, students bring their yoga mats to class. Teacher and students practice yoga together, read myths underpinning the yoga poses, yoga sutras, and yogic philosophy. Mary weaves the whole pedagogical method of *lectio divina* throughout the course to connect the course readings with the yoga poses. Just as students read the myths slowing to deepen their understanding of them, they also practice the yoga poses working to embody this deeper meaning. After reading the myth behind *dandasana* one student remarked,

The last pose I read was about the pose *Dandasana*, the staff pose. This pose represents support and recognition of a good teacher. I believe in our yoga class, I have many great teachers I can learn from. First, are my fellow classmates, everyone has such great ideas and intention in this class. I feel like I learn from everyone and expand off their ideas and this really help me grow as a person.

From their time in a class, this student came to the realization that she was learning not just from the teacher, but from her fellow students, demonstrating that the Indian concept of the *kula*. Mary noticed that students were feeling a sense of community with one another.

As students continued to read and practice yoga together, the community of learners developed; they listened, learned and engaged in dialogue with one another, even in their written reflections (*oratio*). Commenting on her growing understanding of Patanjali's yoga sutra 1.1 *Atha Yoga Anushasanam*, one student wrote,

I can feel a strong and powerful bond being built by our class. It is comforting knowing that the experience and feelings I am experiencing, is very similar to those of my classmates...

For example, in the previous reflection paper, I was touched by the words of Lucy who discussed the realization of *atha yoga anushasanam* and the connection throughout including the mind, body and soul. 'I realized that I couldn't be in bed, I couldn't be doing the homework that was assigned to me the day before, all I could do was sit on the mat and realize that whatever you had planned for class was the things I should focus on...It's all clicking for me that our minds, bodies and souls have so much potential when

they are working together in unison with one another.’ She was able to clearly and simply describe the feeling of understand I was finally able to reach.”

As you will can hear from the students’ responses, their time weaving together Eastern yogic texts with the Western contemplative practice of *lectio divina* was having a transformational effect on them. They were not just engaged in taking in information, they were engaged in a transformational journey.

As the semester progressed, the students began to articulate not only their own learning from the yogic texts and practices but they began to hold themselves accountable to apply their learning to benefit others (karma yoga). As one student noted in her reflection paper,

Last week, I talked about in my reflection paper that I was going to try to spread positivity and relaxation to those around me through the practice of yoga. I have already, a week later, introduced my roommate to yoga and she has been doing it since and has also been to a yoga class here on campus at the fitness center.

By stitching together Eastern and Western practices, Maureen and Mary respect and honor the pedagogical wisdom from both East and West. Both Eastern and Western pedagogical approaches share a common conceptual framework with the Reflective Practitioner at the center. In Indian philosophies, such as those of Sri Aurobindo and Vivekananda, the learner gains understanding by reflecting upon the self, and in Western philosophies, such as those of John Dewey (1938) and Schön (1987), the learner gains understanding by reflecting on the quality of the work they produce and altering strategies to produce better work. Moreover, Maureen and Mary see the potential in exploring ways to and integrate and deepen pedagogical conversations and approaches as they continue to stitch East and West together

to create innovative and compassionate pedagogies that uplift the world, activate a spark for a renaissance in education.

Preparation and Methods

Here Mary’s outlines the preparation for her visit to Maureen’s institution in March 2019. Mary used *lectio divina* in two of Maureen’s courses and also did a workshop called, “Embodying Literature: Contemplative Pedagogy in Practice” on the day after those experiences.

Mary’s Preparation

In preparation for her visit, Mary read through the course description that Maureen had sent to her. Maureen had invited Mary to present in three different milieus: an undergraduate class of students exploring the field of education, a graduate class of existing teachers from various disciplines within the Humanities and in an open forum at her university for which faculty, staff and students. Since Mary was going to be writing these presentations from scratch, she had to figure out a few things first. She asked herself, What is my purpose? What is my message? Who is my audience? Mary’s purpose was clear as Maureen had asked her to introduce her students to the practice of *lectio divina*. As for her message, Mary wanted to demystify contemplative practices and convey to her students and broader university community that *lectio divina* is not only a meaningful and fruitful practice but can bring refocus the students as the subjects of their learning, build community through meaningful dialogue around a story and be introduced to the practice of *lectio divina*.

After reflecting on the above components of the presentation, Mary decided to title the program “Embodying Literature: Contemplative Pedagogy in Practice.” She wanted to emphasize “embodying literature,” since most students tend to read a text and leave the words on the page, not understanding the power of eating the words, chewing the words, digesting the words, and

assimilating some of them into their lives. As the late Russian mystic, Theophan the Recluse so wisely stated “You have a book? Then read it, reflect on what it says, and apply the words to yourself. To apply the content to oneself is the purpose and fruit of reading...” Mary placed these words at the beginning of the booklet she created for Maureen’s classes. As she reflected deeper on the purpose, Mary decided to use two different stories. She chose to use “The Struggle of the Butterfly” (unknown origin) for both education classes, and the Indian Tale “Five Blind Men and the Elephant” for the open forum.

Presentation One: To Education Students

Mary chose “The Struggle of the Butterfly” story for the education students because today in the West many students struggle with understanding the positive concept of struggle. They think and want school to be easy and have lost the sense that struggle can be a necessary and powerful component of learning. In the story, a man sits and watches “for several hours” a butterfly struggling to get out of a cocoon. Yet, when it appears to stop making progress the man takes a pair of scissors and clips the cocoon as a way “to help” the butterfly. Yet, as the story states, “What the man in his kindness and haste did not understand was that the restricting cocoon and the struggle required for the butterfly to get through the tiny opening were nature’s way of forcing fluid from the body of the butterfly into its wings so that it would be reread for flight...” Since, the man disrupted the natural development of the butterfly, it was never able to fly.

Once we read (*lectio*) the story slowly multiple times, we moved into *meditatio* (rumination, memorization and analysis). Students were invited to select a word or verse that jumped out at them, inspired them or challenged them and to slowly repeat this, a type of rumination, to themselves multiple times. Students then shared these out loud along with some reasons why.

Next, students work together to put motions to their verses as way to memorize them. When they performed these verses, one student chose the word “struggle” and performed it with his group. When Mary asked him, “Where the text was now?” He paused and had to think about it. Finally, pointing to himself, he said, “It’s in me!”

When the students had a sense of the text and it had begun to relocate itself inside the students, the class began to move into deeper analysis. Mary began to ask some basic questions of the story such as: What are the man’s actions? What prompted his actions? What were the result of his actions? What is the butterfly doing, asking? Once basic information was answered the questions then moved towards the interior of the students. What is your cocoon? What are you struggling through? Does your struggle always progress smoothly? Is there a productive nature to struggle?

As the students moved through this process, they began embodying story. “The Struggle of the Butterfly” was no longer just a story on the page, it became their story. Both undergraduate and graduate students began to relate to the butterfly, but also to man. The articulated the notion of time (several hours), is this enough, not enough, what is enough time? They also began to dialogue about the man’s intention “kindness” and if his intention had weight. Did his intention matter because the butterfly was never able to fly, as the result of his haste? “What about forgiveness?” one student posed to the class. Slowly, the class began to open us, dialogue with one another as they worked through the contemplative practice of *lectio divina* on the story.

Presentation Two: To the Larger University

In this presentation, Mary followed the *lectio divina* format but selected an Indian Tale, “The Five Blind Men and the Elephant” as the focus because she hoped that this story would provoke

dialogue around the human struggle to see various perspectives, students, colleagues, and academic disciplines. In this tale, five blind men come upon an elephant. The zoo keeper, who is “sitting on a stool, cleaning the elephant’s harness” tells them. Each blind man is positioned at a particular part of the elephant (the side, the tail, the trunk, the ear, the leg) and shouts at the other that his view and his view alone is the right one. No questions. No dialogue. Just shouting continues as they all walk down the road together.

During the *lectio* (reading), after reading it once through for everyone, Mary invited participants to take parts and read it as a play together. Hearing the story in play form helps to bring the story to life through different voices and emotions. As we all entered into the *meditatio* section, participants were invited to move through the same *lectio divina* format. However, once we got to the analysis section, we all moved from basic questions about the story to more interior questions such as: How are you like each of the blind men? How do you experience the educational process? How do you become a “zoo keeper,” one who know the truth, the whole picture? Once again, as we moved through the *lectio divina* practice, participants began to open up.

The room appeared to have grown smaller and more intimate as participants began to share their personal perspectives and dialogue with one another. Students shared their interior posture using the following terms “fear,” “aggressive,” and “scary.” They expressed feeling overwhelmed by parental expectations, student loan debt, and the constant worry or wondering whether or not they will be able to independent when they graduate. Through the *lectio divina* practice of “The Five Blind Men and the Elephant,” participants verbally shared with the group that there are multiple perspectives and too often they do not remember this fact or take it into

consideration. They articulated that sometimes, they too are like the blind men, only seeing life from their limited perspective.

Results

Maureen and Mary collaborated to create a prompt for student feedback after the *lectio divina* experience. Students were asked to answer this: “How did Dr. Keator’s presentation help you to deepen your understanding and value of *lectio divina* as a contemplative practice? What did you like about it? What would you like to know more about? What follows are the emerging themes derived from student responses to Mary Keator’s *lectio divina* presentations at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth in March 2019:

Authenticity

It is important for teachers to remember that they have to embody what they are teaching. Too often teaching is purely a dissemination of information rather than an energetic transmission of lived experience, of wisdom. When teachers share their authentic practices and their authentic selves into the classroom, students are more likely to listen because they feel as though teachers are not just talking about what to do, but demonstrate their own engagement in the work. Caitlyn affirmed the importance of this authenticity stating,

Dr. Keator was able to deepen my understanding and value of *lectio divina*. Seeing how passionate and how she actually models what she teaches. I liked how she brought her journal to even show us that she practices what she’s preaching.

Mary showed students her own journal where she records her thoughts and question to her personal practice of *lectio divina*. Too often, teachers forget to make visible their own practices and genuine struggles as they continue to develop and grow. Yet, by doing so, they model for students the work

they are asking their students to do; they are in community with them, not just as their teacher, but also as a community of learners.

Community

For Jeanne, “lectio divina also opened [her] up to community and slow pace.” No longer was she feeling isolated as a learner; she felt a sense of community growing with the classroom as we all engaged in a *lectio divina* practice together. Alex began to see the communal collaborative aspect of *lectio divina* noting,

Reading, through this contemplative practice, is collaborative, empathetic, informational, and helps to work our minds in a similar way. You are able to read with deeper meaning and also practice metacognition—thinking of one’s thinking.

Stanley not only began to feel a sense of community, but one which felt safe for authentic expression stating,

I found this to be a powerful way in which the classroom could become comfortable and affirm their feelings of safety within the classroom. With a psychologically safe environment, students feel free to speak and less pressure about judgement or fearing mistake...

The contemplative monastic method of *lectio divina* moves students from the exterior world of the text to the interior world of the self. What Toby Hart refers to as a “pedagogy of interiority” and notes that “contemplative practices cultivate interiority directly.” Yet in order to move from the text to the self, students need to feel as Stanley stated, “comfortable,” “affirmed,” and safe” (Hart, 2007, p. 2)

Slow Reading

Lectio divina begins with slow reading. Slow reading is not the same as reading the news, blog posts, twitter or text messages. It is not to skim and scan the pages of a textbook looking for answers to questions. Rather, slow reading is to open up one’s mind to deeply listen to what the text before them is saying. Slow reading is rarely taught or practiced anymore; however, the results can be quite profound. As student slow down to listen to what the text is actually saying, they discover that different points of view and are able to, deepen their understanding of the text before them. Caitlyn discovered,

Usually I’m used to quickly reading through things but reading slowly with other people can show how everyone takes a reading into a different point of view.

Jeanne noticed, I like the slow reading because it helps us understand & when we were discussing, see the different perspectives that people had... We are so used to getting things down quickly, we don’t take the time to slow down.

Rumination and Memorization

Stanley began to see the power of the multifaceted aspect of *meditatio* specifically rumination, memorization as a way to move towards deeper discovery and meaning.

What stuck out to me mostly was the Second Movement: *Meditatio*. I thought this was important for student to learn deeper meaning through the text. Rumination is a component of any contemplative practice that helps the learner to slowly think upon the information and let it settle. Selecting verses and writing them down can help someone in the process of memorization and attach meaning to the info.

Learning as a Transformational Process

Ezra reflecting on his experience of a *lectio divina* practice wrote the following:

I thoroughly enjoyed Dr. Keator's presentation and found it to be a great way to not only engage students but have productive and open discussion. *Lectio Divina* is certainly a great way to engage with reading as it allows the student to actually take the time to interpret the text and identify with what is being said. Too often when students are assigned readings for a class, rather than look at it as an opportunity to learn something new, students see it as just another piece of temporary information. *Lectio Divina* challenges students to really read the text, absorb every word, and reflect.

As important as it is for the teacher to get through to the students, it is just as important for the student to want to learn. During that exercise I found myself wanting to learn more about the text—even if it was just about a man and his failed attempt to help a butterfly. Despite its simplicity on the surface, if you allowed yourself to look deeper, there was more to the story, more to reflect on. This is what *Lectio Divina* calls us to do, and it leads to a great classroom discussion in which we got to hear students' different perspectives and takes on the text (Keator, 2018).

Learning changed for Ezra as he moved beyond the surface, looked deeper, and, as he did there was “more to the story, more to reflect on.” In addition, Ezra identified learning through *lectio divina* as being transformational—not simply transactional. Instead of learning as a way of

taking in “temporary” information, learning became formational. As he points out he got to hear others' perspectives and values that opportunity.

For Taylor, the *lectio divina* practice was also transformative; it was eye-opening.

Dr. Keator's lesson on *lectio divina* actually opened my eyes up to new potential methods of getting through my reading and writing block. Just like the breathing with purpose we do at the beginning of each class, *lectio divina* helps me eliminate any mental blocks that may prevent me from being present, whether in class, at work, or even just doing homework and as a result, performing or participating at my fullest potential (Keator, 2018)..

The purpose of *lectio divina* is to awaken students to new realizations as they move into transformative moments. Their time in a *lectiodivina* practice stirred something, moved something and/or brought something to light for them. This different experience of time unfolding connects with Csikszentmihalyi's (1997) concept of “flow,” where one loses a sense of space and time, where time opens up as one becomes fully emerged in their present activity. This was true for Taylor and other students. The deeper they engaged, the more present they became; they forgot about time and immersed themselves in the discussion. As they did so, they began to enjoy the learning process; they felt energized and capable to begin to “remove blocks” that prevents them from engaging fully in their own learning.

Conclusion

The reality is that there are considerable barriers to finding a community for pedagogical discourse in higher education. As Parker Palmer (1998) makes clear “academic culture builds barriers between

colleagues even higher and wider than those barriers between us and our students.” He talks about how competition keeps colleagues from collaborating because they may be “fragmented by fear” (Palmer, 1998, p. 146), along with the fact that teaching in higher education is often something done solo. We must rise above these barriers and find ways to build community with others who are like-minded; we need to be able to connect with the heart of teaching in ourselves and in others. As evidenced in this article, Maureen and Mary found ways to create community and break through the barriers that Palmer speaks to (competition and fear). They allowed themselves to be open, vulnerable and available to the other and continue to uncover and discover new possibilities.

Maureen and Mary are still stitching; their tapestry is not finished. However, what they have accomplished is considerable. Going back to Maureen’s emails to Mary in December (2018), January (2019), Maureen asked Mary for the following: to write a chapter for her forthcoming book, to review Maureen’s chapter in the same book, to visit Maureen’s university and teach to her students and design a talk to present together at a conference. As of March 2019, Mary has written has written a chapter in Maureen’s book entitled “Writing About Yoga: *Lectio Divina* and the Awakening of the Soul.” Mary also reviewed one of Maureen’s chapters in her book several times and offered feedback, and on March 21-22, 2019, Mary visited Maureen’s institution and conducted three different sessions of *lectio divina* with students and faculty.

Although the tale of these two professors has just begun, what can be noted from their collaboration is the importance of creating, building and sustaining a healthy vibrant community within academia. As Palmer puts it: “Good talk about good teaching is what we need—to enhance both our professional practice and the selfhood from which it comes” (1998, p. 149).

Likewise, Maureen and Mary continue their dialogue about connecting professional practice with their selfhood, and they also continue to look for ways to improve and broaden their pedagogical approaches.

Mary is Maureen’s newest compatriot; in Mary, Maureen has found a kind of academic sustenance that she was seeking. Together, Maureen and Mary continue to create community, building on their common values: the importance of valuing students, their craft and their shared contemplative practices and pedagogies, and also their love for Indian culture. Each has stitched East and West in their own lives; they have brought their stitching to their classrooms, to their writing, and to their developing admiration for one another. They are not sure where this practice of stitching together will take them, but they are open to the journey. In fact, Maureen has invited Mary to accompany her to India next year.

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