

Research Article

## Human Presencing in the Techne of a Contemplative Space

Mary Keator<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English, Westfield State University, Massachusetts, USA

\*Corresponding author email: [mkeator@westfield.ma.edu](mailto:mkeator@westfield.ma.edu)

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**Abstract.** In our colleges and universities, spaces are designated and set aside for specific uses. Students eat in dining halls, not in libraries; they sleep in dorm rooms, not in classrooms. The order and cleanliness of these space, along with the hospitality of the people within these spaces impact the overall experience of those within them. As a contemplative practitioner and educator, I am aware of the importance of creating and cultivating a hospitable, ordered, clean, uncluttered space — both externally and internally to support student learning and development. However, during the spring semester of 2017, an unexpected move from a traditional classroom to a contemplative space within the Interfaith Center for my “Writing about Yoga” course highlighted just how impactful a contemplative space is on student learning. As students learned about the yoga tradition, practiced yogic postures, reflected on and integrated what they had learned and practiced, they not only became more present in writing about their subjective experiences, they engaged with each other in intersubjective experiences. In the process, they became more present and began cultivating a community of care.

**Keywords.** Human presencing, techne, care, hospitality, contemplative practices, contemplative space, intersubjective field, inter-subjective dialogue, digital devices



## Introduction

Recently, I visited New Mexico. I had traveled to southern and central New Mexico before, but had never ventured north beyond Santa Fe. However, during this particular visit I decided to spend some time in northern New Mexico. I flew into Albuquerque, rented a car and travelled north to Taos, a small city of approximately 6,000, situated in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Taos is home to the Taos Indians, who have lived in the area for over 1,000 years. Coming from a small mountain community in the Northeast, what struck me during the drive to Taos was the amount of wide-open space that was visible in every direction. I could see for miles. Driving north along route 25, I witnessed storms come and go in the distance, mountain peaks rising up behind mountain peaks, all while the sun traveled across the big open sky. As I settled into my new surroundings, I felt a sense of relief and release. My mind, tired from researching, writing and teaching, relaxed, expanded and emptied out. It felt good to let go, open up and detach from the hustle and bustle of daily life. I felt a newfound sense of freedom to open, play, explore and discover. Here in New Mexico's ocean of spaciousness, I entered into a space of endless possibilities.

As a contemplative practitioner and educator, I am not new to the power of contemplative spaces. I have been practicing and teaching yoga for more than twenty-five years, lectio divina for fifteen, and have been using these contemplative pedagogies and practices in my teaching at my university for the past ten years. In these practices, I need a quiet, open, welcoming space to integrate the mind, body, heart and soul. I have also published on the value of contemplative pedagogies and practices in the holistic formation (body, mind, heart, soul) of students.

I have written extensively on the ancient monastic practice of lectio divina (2018), on intersubjectivity (2019) and more recently on lectio divina in the development of the soul (Oct 2019). In addition, I have also written on the dangers of technology (2017), specifically in terms of the objectification and subjugation of the human person into what Heidegger

(1977, p. 17) calls standing reserve, meaning “ordered to stand by, to be immediately at hand, indeed to stand there just so that [they] may be on call for a further ordering.” I have witnessed first-hand the power of contemplative pedagogies and practices and how they help the students regain their subjectivity, reconnect to their interiority, and move them into intersubjective dialogue and experiences.

Contemplative practices have traditionally been taught in contemplative spaces for a reason. Contemplative spaces offer protection; they shield the noises and chaos of the outer world to allow the practitioners to go within themselves and search for deeper truth and wisdom. When calling to mind the image of a Christian monk, Buddhist monk, or Hindu yogi, we envision them away from the busyness of the secular world, perhaps in a clean, open, quiet space within the walls of a monastery, sitting by a pond, or on a mountaintop. We do not envision them in a noisy academic building. As Palmer (1993, p. 69) shares in a story from the desert fathers and mothers,

Abba Felix and his fellow seekers left the crowded cities to meet truth in the desert, one of the most open and spare spaces on earth. They went there not only to enter an outer space free of the cities' clutter, but also to open up an inner space of heart and mind, free of inward noise. In desert emptiness the soul is able to settle on truth, to concentrate on that which is central to salvation.

A contemplative exterior space, supported not only the desert monks, it also supports our students and ourselves as their instructors. It supports us in creating an interior contemplative space, one that leads us all into greater wholeness (Greek, *soteria*, to save).

I understand the importance of creating an intentional contemplative space. In my own practices, I not only need these spaces, I thrive in an open and welcoming space, one that is literally open in terms of physical space (clean, ordered and quiet), but also open in terms of emotional and psychic space (nonjudgmental and welcoming). In an open and welcoming space, I feel as though I can settle; I feel there is literally room for me, my thoughts, feelings and experiences. In this open and welcoming space, I can feel my beingness



begin to emerge, what Palmer (2004, p. 78) refers to as “the shy soul,” and present itself.

In my teaching, I consciously work to create an open, welcoming, silent space for my students to slow down, unwind and show up (body, mind, heart and soul). For example, I begin all my classes by greeting my students with “Namaste” (the light in me honors the light in you) followed by five minutes of silence. However, after reflecting on a particular spring semester, I came to realize even more deeply the significance of these quiet, open, welcoming spaces to student’s formation within my teaching at the university. Contemplative pedagogies and practices are indeed important and valuable, but so too the spaces in which these practices unfold. As Palmer (p. 56) points out, “We know very little about creating spaces that invite the soul to make itself known. Apart from the natural world, such spaces are hard to find...” In this article, I focus on the positive impact a contemplative space had on my students in a course I taught called “Writing about Yoga” and consider the importance of and desperate need for constructing contemplative spaces within higher education for contemplative pedagogies and practices.

### **The Classroom Space**

The typical academic classroom is constructed primarily for function, rather than for the development and well-being of the students and instructor who inhabit them. Classroom spaces are set-up and arranged primarily to accommodate a particular number of students, the necessary technology, an ability to view the instructor. Many are dirty, disordered, and cluttered with unnecessary items such as posters and flyers, and although the classroom door may be closed, noises from the hallway and adjoining classrooms often waft into the classroom space.

I am aware of the importance of cultivating uncluttered space - both externally and internally - and its significance to human flourishing and the learning experience. As Palmer explains (1993, p. 70),

Space may sound like a vague, poetic metaphor until we realize that it describes experiences of everyday life. We know what it means to be in green and open field; we know what it means to be on a crowded rush-

hour bus. On the crowded bus we lack space to breathe and think and be ourselves. But in an open field. We open up too; ideas and feelings arise within us; our knowledge comes out of hiding.

This same principle applies to the classroom space. When classrooms are dirty, disordered and cluttered, it sends a message to the students that there is no room for them or their ideas. When the noise and chatter from the hallway and adjoining classrooms seeps into the learning space, it leaves less room for the students’ thoughts and feelings. Yet, when we make space for our students, we make space for their thoughts, feelings, questions and ideas. They can breathe and think for themselves.

When we, as educators, provide our students with a clean, ordered, quiet space, we send the message that we care about them and their ideas. The students begin to feel welcomed, less intimidated, safer, more likely to relate to others, and engage in their learning experience. Whenever possible, I arrange the classroom, repositioning the chairs and desks to face one another, opening up the space to create a sense of community between the educator and the students. Palmer (1993, p. 75) discovered,

When chairs are arranged facing the lectern, row upon row, the learning space is confined to a narrow alley of attention between each student and the teacher. Such an arrangement speaks. It says that in this space there is no room for students to relate to each other and each other’s thoughts; there is no invitation to a community of truth; there is no hospitality. But when the chairs are placed in a circle, creating an open space between us, within which we can connect, something else is said. The teacher may sit in that circle and talk, but we are all being invited to create a community of learning by engaging ideas and one another in the open space between.

I agree with Palmer and have found that when the students feel comfortable in their learning spaces, they are more likely to engage holistically in their learning and begin to dialogue and share ideas with one another. Although, I already had a sense of the power of space noted by Palmer, one spring semester something unexpected happened, helping me to understand - on a much deeper level – the impact



external space had on my students' learning, inner growth and self-development as well as their formation of community of learners. In an open, clean and ordered space my inner intention of hospitality and care was transmitted to my students. They not only felt it, but they benefited both individually and collectively.

### **An Intentional Contemplative Space for Teaching and Learning**

In the spring of 2017, I taught a course called "Writing about Yoga." One of the reasons I created a "Writing and Yoga" course was to introduce students to a contemplative practice that would help them to become more self-aware, and grounded in what it means to be a human person in relationship with self, and others in a growing technological age. Many students were unaware of the dark side of technology, which captures and divides attention and by doing so eclipses the human person's capacity to have a stable sense of self, to be self-reflective and aware, to interact with others in meaningful ways, and create communities of care. Turkle (2015, p. 61) refers to this dark side of technology as a "crisis of empathy" and states,

It is only when we are alone with our thoughts-not reacting to external stimuli-that we engage that part of the brain's basic infrastructure devoted to building up a sense of our stable autobiographical past. This is the 'default mode network.' So, without solitude, we can't construct a stable sense of sense.

Aware of the increase in anxiety, depression and stress on college campuses, I wanted to offer a course that could help students find solitude and begin to construct a stable sense of self.

I felt strongly that in order for my students to write authentically about yoga, they needed to learn not only about yoga, but engage in the practice of yoga, meaning have a first-person experience of yoga. As a certified yoga instructor, I knew the potential transformative power of practicing yoga; therefore, I had the students bring their yoga mats to class so I could teach them the practice of yoga. My hope was that by having the students engage in the practice of yoga, their writing about yoga would flow from the

inside out, infusing their words with authenticity from their lived experience of practicing it. As the student below comments, this firsthand experience was critical to his writing process.

Practicing yoga gave me something personal to write about. I realized that writing came easier to me when I had a first-hand experience to write about. Practicing yoga formed a connection with what I was writing about...I was more interested in my writing. This class made me realize that in order to reach my full writing potential, I needed to write about a personal experience; something I felt connected to. My ideas definitely flowed easier if I was the subject of my writing.

By practicing yoga, the students connected their experiences with the words they wrote, charging them with the power of their lived experience, while also helping them develop confidence in their ability to express their inner experiences in writing. As Bache (2004-2005 p.35-36) points out,

Everyone knows that words not supported by the energy of a person's experience carry much less power to influence others than words which are. This happens, I think, not because the words themselves are different or are delivered with a different inflection, but because when people speak, they unleash a tangible but invisible power into the space around them. The power comes ultimately from our experience and from the energetic access that our experience has created in us. Our words float on this power, like a canoe floating on a rushing stream. Moreover, it is not just the speaker's power that is important here but the power of the mental-emotional-spiritual field of the entire group... In the playful dance of course content and energetic resonance, ordinary learning sometimes crosses a threshold to become Great Learning.

The students were demonstrating this powerful truth. When their writing comes from their own authentic lived experiences, they infuse it with this tangible invisible power that Bache mentions, and ordinary learning crosses a threshold to become great learning.

However, to practice yoga together, I needed to create an open uncluttered space. Therefore, before each class, my students and I moved all of the chair desks to the back of the classroom - my department has an



unwritten policy allowing instructors to arrange classrooms as they see fit for their classes and leaving it for the next instructor to do the same. Yet, my radical re-arranging of the room proved too much for some instructors. They voiced their concerns to the Department Chair about all the desk chairs being moved to one side of the classroom. So, in order to keep peace, the Chair of the Department requested that my students and I re-order the room in an acceptable academic fashion at the completion of each class. At first, this directive from my Chair felt burdensome and, in all honesty, I felt singled out as no other instructor had to shoulder this responsibility of re-arranging all the chair desks after each class. However, the whole incident revealed a deeper truth, this classroom space was not ideal for contemplative pedagogy; it was not ideal for “Writing about Yoga.”

In truth, I was never really happy with the classroom space for my “Writing about Yoga” course. I knew I needed a better space for my students, one that was uncluttered, quiet and spacious. The students struggled to go in, when the noises from the hallway and other classrooms were constantly pulling them out. What I really needed was a contemplative space for my students to learn, practice, dialogue, and write about yoga. So, I decided to speak with the Director of the Interfaith Center, and request permission to use the space for my class. The Director obliged and gave me permission to use the space, since the course was in keeping with the Mission Statement, to “support opportunities for meditation and spiritual exploration.” From the Middle of February 2017 to May 8, 2017 my “Writing about Yoga” classes met in the Interfaith Center every Monday and Wednesday afternoon for one hour and fifteen minutes.

The Interfaith Center, a relatively small building on the campus green, hosts a variety of programs that support the holistic development of the students, faculty and staff. In the basement, there are offices for the various chaplains as well as a common meeting space, a small lounge area, a small kitchen, which is stocked with coffee, teas and snacks for everyone, and another bathroom. On the top floor there is a large open space used for worship services, talks,

meditation and other programs. The space is quiet, open, clean and bright. It also has a constant stream of filtered air circulating through it. The walls are painted slate blue and a blue non-toxic industrial carpet covers the floor. Sixteen cushioned benches, some of which face the center of the room and some of which face the altar, leave an open space in the middle of the room. To the right of the altar is a small organ. Windows line the right and left walls, allowing a cross breeze to flow through the room when they are open. There is also a bathroom in the back of the space.

In addition, the space does not have any technological devices (computers, projectors, etc.); rather, it is free of such devices. As Turkle points out in *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (2015, p. 321) there is a need for “protected spaces,” spaces free of smart technology on college campuses.

Increasingly, there is a demand in the universities for study and lounge space that is WiFi-free. When we wired the universities, every last room of them, we didn’t consider that we were making it harder for students to attend to their peers or their own thoughts...setting aside a space [free of smart phones] communicates that, in this place, people pay attention to each other. They take a breath.

The absence of digital devices is no small matter. Instead of the students having to put their attention onto a device, they could turn their attention within to focus on themselves, their practice and on one another.

For my “Writing about Yoga” class, we occupied the space on the top floor. Students entered the space, took off their shoes, moved the benches and the altar to the sides, and laid out their yoga mats in two rows facing each other. On warmer days, we opened the windows to allow fresh air to flow through the space. Throughout the remainder of the semester, the students continued to comment on the new space in their weekly and end-of-semester reflection papers. Throughout the semester, I began paying closer attention to these comments about the space and the





impact it had on them and their learning. I began to wonder, “What is it about the space that cultivated and supportive student learning?”

Week after week, in their reflection papers, my students offered unsolicited comments on the classroom space. They wrote about the clean, quiet, ordered and hospitable space that was free of distractions.

We began each class by setting up our yoga mats on the floor in two rows facing each other. Everyone put away their phones and sat on [their] mats while we wait[ed] to begin the practice. Phones are put away to allow us to focus on the ‘here and now’ and not worry about anything else that is irrelevant to yourself at the moment. Focusing on the moment is a great stress reliever and allows me to just clear my mind and think clearly (student).

For the students, the ordering of the external physical space, laying their yoga mats down in two rows, putting their phones away and focusing on the present moment created space for them to go in and order their inner world.

In our new classroom space at the Interfaith Center, the students felt safe and free to be authentic. I wondered, “Was this just about the physical space (open, clean and uncluttered), which provided room for the students, or did the physical space make room for the students to experience something deeper within themselves? Was there something about the contemplative space that supported the students to engage in subjective and intersubjective experiences? In what way did this contemplative space encourage the students to grow into a supportive, caring community of learners?” So, intrigued by these questions, I re-read their semester reflection papers to try to find out what was happening within this space that had such a positive impact on them and their learning.

### **A Clean and Ordered Environment**

One of the first things I noticed was the students’ comments on the cleanliness of the Interfaith Center, compared to their previous academic classroom space. “The Interfaith Center is currently our new space after

being able to switch in there for Wednesday’s class. It is much cleaner and quieter than the classroom in Bates Hall” (students). Specifically, the students observed the difference in the floors,

We have now since moved from Bates Hall to the Interfaith Center, which I personally feel is much better. We don’t have to sit on a dirty classroom floor, move all of the desks, and listen to classrooms all around us. The Interfaith Center is calm and clean... it just feels good to be in there” (student).

Not only did the students notice that the Interfaith Center space is calm and clean but their voices contained a deep sense of enthusiasm. One student even described the move as awesome, saying, “it was pretty awesome how we got a new room to do our asanas in the Interfaith Center, which has very comfortable rugging as a floor instead of the gross floor in the classroom” (student). A clean space was clearly important to the students and their overall learning experience. In this space, the students felt excited, perhaps even special, that they had a such a clean space to learn in.

### **A Quiet Environment**

In the hustle and bustle of teaching, we often become desensitized to the constant subtle noises around us and do not realize how these noises such as hallway conversations, buzzing fluorescent lights, noisy air-conditioning and heating units disrupt student learning. All these noises fill up the space, leaving little room for the students’ thoughts and feelings. As Miller shares (200, p. 136),

Our culture is drowning in sound bites and chatter. The more talk, the less we hear...Our education system has too little respect for silence. In silence, we can learn to listen...we can begin to hear other people at a much deeper level... By honoring silence and space, we begin to bring some sort of balance to our culture and our lives.

The students also mentioned in their reflection papers how their experience of quiet in the Interfaith Center contrasted to their experience of noise and constant distractions in the classroom of the academic building. Students commented that “the whole class seems to enjoy using the church [Interfaith Center] because it is



much quieter and peaceful” (student); the space was “very quiet and didn’t have the interrupting noises of the classrooms” (student).

In the quiet external space, the students felt a shift in their attention from the external noises and distractions to an inner subjective experience brought about in the quiet space. As Lichtmann notes (2005, p. 99), “When we invite silence into the learning space, we send a signal that we want our students to reach for their authentic selves, not just to impress or please.” The students were actually able to feel and experience the difference between being in an environment of noise and distraction as opposed to an environment of quiet and openness. In the quiet and open space, the students began to notice their inner noise and distractions.

At least when I’m in that class [Writing about Yoga] my mind is quiet; it probably has something to do with the environment because that space just has a very peaceful vibe flowing from it” (student).

As this student shared, the quiet in the Interfaith Center brought quiet to his mind. He felt the energy, the vibe, within his class in the Interfaith Center and allowed that vibe to flow into him and impact his inner space.

As the students experienced the quiet of the space, they became more present to themselves (body, mind, heart) and began reintegrating their inner world.

One thing has changed a lot in the last week is we changed our classroom location. We no longer meet in Bates, we now meet in the Interfaith Center. I really enjoy practicing in the Interfaith Center because it is a quiet location where it is really easy for me to connect with my inner self and it helps my concentration with yoga. I found that while being in the Interfaith Center, I was also a lot more relaxed. There was no outside noise and it was very quiet.” (student)

This student not only mentioned that the space was quiet, but went even further saying that the space itself facilitated her ability to “connect with [her] inner self and...concentrate.” The quiet within the space in the Interfaith Center supported her willingness to take the risk to go inside her inner space, to rediscover herself,

and be more attentive to her own subjective experiences.

Another student conveyed a similar feeling noting that the clean, quiet space helped her have space to focus, think and be her “inner self.”

Space is extremely important when practicing yoga because you need enough physical space to keep two people from touching but also it gives us our personal space to think. In the beginning of the semester, our classroom was in Bates Hall on the first floor. The floors were dirty and hard; our surroundings were extremely loud which made it hard to concentrate. We then tried practicing yoga in the Interfaith Center because it’s a place we can be our inner self, another perk is that it’s more comfortable; the ground is carpet, it’s a nice temperature, and it [has] a calm surrounding. I thought class was different, I felt like I was more focused because the background sounds weren’t as loud as the classroom. It’s very soothing (student).

In their reflection papers, the students articulated their inner subjective experience of the quiet in their learning space. They became more self-aware and attentive to their thoughts and feelings and the more self-aware the students became, the greater their capacity became for human presencing.

### **The Shift: Moving from the External Space into the Internal Space**

Instead of the students’ attention being constantly pulled away due to external clutter and noises, the clean, ordered, quiet space within the Interfaith Center allowed the students to settle, focus and engage more fully in the contemplative yoga practices. In *Leading from the Emerging Future*, Scharmer and Kaufer (2013, p.1) explain the shift I noticed in my students as the following

This inner shift, to fighting the old to sensing and presencing an emerging future possibility is at the core of all deep leadership today. It is a shift that requires us to expand our thinking from the head to the heart.

What Scharmer and Kaufer note about this inner shift in terms of leadership, I find to be true about contemplative pedagogies and practices, as they are a



way to help students shift from head to heart. The contemplative external space facilitates this shift. Once settled, the students were able to focus on developing themselves - their beingness - their inner techne, and begin to presence to self and others.

### **Techne and Human Presencing**

The etymology of the word techne comes from ancient Greek, meaning “craft or skill.” According to Mitcham (1994, p. 119) and Schatzberg (2018, Pp. 16-26), Plato, in his early writings used “techne and episteme, art and systematic knowledge almost interchangeably” (p. 119). However, according to Plato, techne has a second important feature in that “it seeks the welfare of its object, the physician and the physical trainer seek the welfare of the body, just as the judge and the legislator seek the welfare of the soul (464c)” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Therefore, techne is not just any craft or skill, it is one that seeks the welfare of the receiver. In Plato’s scenario, techne is not object oriented; it is subject oriented.

Later in the twentieth century, the German philosopher and theologian Martin Heidegger highlights another important aspect of techne. In “Building, Dwelling, Thinking” (2013, p. 157), Heidegger links the Greek words techne (technique) with tikto (to bring forth or to produce) explaining,

To the Greeks techne means neither art nor handicraft but rather: to make something appear, within what is present, as this or that, in this way or that way. The Greeks conceive of techne, producing, in terms of letting appear.

What Heidegger suggests, is that for the ancient Greeks techne was an art or skill that allowed something else to come forth, to presence. It was a type of arrangement, which supported a deeper revealing to emerge. In this same essay, Heidegger explains the etymology of the word space, coming from the Greek word “raum” (p. 152), stating

A space is something that has been made room for, something that is cleared and free, namely within a boundary, Greek peras. A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its

presencing...space is in essence that for which room has been made...

Heidegger underscores the connection between a space and the potential for presencing (German, anwesen, meaning to have presence in the present moment) to occur within the boundaries of a space, meaning the arrangement of a space can actually support something or rather, someone to show up within it.

In the twenty-first century, Scharmer and Kaufer (2013, p.19), take up this idea of presencing and offer the following definition,

Presencing is a blended word combining sensing (feeling the future possibility) and presence (the state of being in the present moment.) it means sensing and actualizing one’s highest future possibility-acting from the presence of what is wanting to emerge.

Presencing requires a deep awareness of one’s full being (body, mind, heart, soul) in the present moment, but also an openness and availability to the potential future that is calling one forth. Scharmer and Kaufer (p. 1-2), also point out that one can “lean into the space of the unknown, lean into what wants to emerge...and connect to our highest future potential.”

In light of Plato, Heidegger, Scharmer and Kaufer’s insights, I began to wonder, “How can a contemplative classroom be arranged to support the presencing of the students (body, mind, heart, soul), and engage them in their learning, well-being and in the well-being of one another? Does contemplative pedagogy flourish in a contemplative space? And more broadly, I wondered “Are the learning spaces within higher education set up for the welfare of the students and teachers who inhabit them?” I slowly re-read my students’ reflective writings this time, leaning in a bit closer to listen even more deeply to what they were sharing about the power of a contemplative space.

As I re-read their reflection papers, I discovered that the contemplative space in the Interfaith Center, along with my ability to be present to my students (Palmer, 1998; Rodgers and Raider-Roth, 2006) supported the





presencing of the students and the calling forth some of their potential skills (focus, attention, care and compassion). While the semester progressed, I witnessed the students becoming more self-aware, more integrated in mind, heart, spirit and body, better writers, and more caring. In reality, I witnessed their human flourishing as the students began to presence in the clean, quiet, welcoming space of the Interfaith Center.

### **Hospitality in Human Presencing**

The students not only observed that the space at the Interfaith Center was cleaner, and quieter, they also felt welcome in it, likening it to home, “It felt warm and cozy, like if you were at home” (student). What the students are underscoring is that they felt relaxed and free to be themselves in the clean and quiet space of the Interfaith Center. As Henri Nouwen (1975, p.61) notes,

When we look at teaching in terms of hospitality, we can say that the teacher is called upon to create for [her] students a free and fearless space where mental and emotional development can take place.”

As educators, we know that when student feel relaxed and free to be themselves and share their ideas that they are more likely to engage in their learning. The contemplative space at the Interfaith Center not only encouraged students to bring order to their learning environment, detach from the distractions of their smart phones, declutter their minds, connect to self and other, but as they did, the students began to feel safe to open up their hearts and show care for themselves and their classmates.

Of course, this opening of the students’ hearts was not just due to the space, it was what we did together in that space. It was the holistic contemplative educational approach (pedagogy, practices and space). I consciously welcomed my students (their deeper beingness) and let them know that I care first and foremost about them as human beings. I shared with them that I wanted them to engage in and struggle through the practices of yoga, knowing that this would help them be able to engage in and struggle through writing clearly and meaningfully about their experiences. As Palmer (1993, p. 74) reminds us,

Hospitality is not an end in itself. It is offered for the sake of what it can allow, permit, encourage and yield. A learning space needs to be hospitable not to make learning painless but to make the painful things possible, things without which no learning can occur—things like exposing ignorance, testing tentative hypothesis, challenging false or partial information, and mutual criticism of thought.

In the hospitable space in the Interfaith Center, painful truths did emerge. One student shared her struggle with holding grudges,

I hold grudges and get upset easily but these classes have already made me feel stronger and better at controlling my emotions, letting things go and living in the moment.

Another student shared his issues with anger,

Yoga has helped me a lot with my anger. I barely get mad anymore and when I do, I just bring my mind back to the right state with a few breathing techniques and by laying down... I have gained strength mentally and physically with this class.

One of the ways in which I consciously worked to create hospitality was to begin each class bringing our hands together in front of our hearts, bowing and saying, “Namaste” to one another. This practice was a way of honoring ourselves and one another; it was an intentional way of showing deep respect to self and others. As one student wrote, “Namaste, means I bow to you and [this] is how we greet and say good bye to each other” (student). It may seem trivial, but the ritual of acknowledging each other in the quiet space was important to the students as they felt it enhanced their human dignity, their capacity to care, and their awareness of the interconnectedness of their experiences with the experiences of people from various backgrounds and ways of life.

After greeting one another with Namaste, the contemplative practice was further deepened by the Shāntipāṭha, a Peace chant, from the opening of The Katha Upanishad. The students chanted the Sanskrit chant in unison, sending peaceful energy to the class.

Shāntipāṭha Chant

Om Saha navavatu; Saha nau bhunaktu;

Saha viryam karavavahai;



Tejasvi navadhitamastu;  
Ma vidvishavahai;  
Om Santih; Santih; Santih

Om! May we both be protected,  
(the teacher and the student).  
May we both enjoy protection.  
May we both exert ourselves to find out the true  
meaning of the scriptures (text).  
May we never quarrel with one another.  
Let there be threefold Peace. Om. Peace! Peace!  
Peace!

As the students commented, every class we began the same way, honoring one another and creating an internal space of unity. “Every class we would start by reciting a chant. The chant allowed us to open our mind and body to the community sending out peace and positive energy” (student). Over the course of the semester, the students learned the chant, “I think I finally know the entry [sic] chant by heart which is exciting because it really makes you feel like you are a part of the yoga community...” (student) and began to feel the unifying energetic quality of chanting together.

At first, I was skeptical because I thought the chanting would sound robotic and cult like. But instead it sounded really pretty. We almost were singing and we all sounded in sync with each other. I absolutely loved this. Yoga means union and the chanting made us seem unified, and made us seem as one, instead of class of individuals. We worked to promote a positive message. It was a way for us to come together. I really like it.

As the students chanted the ancient Sanskrit words promoting effort and peace, their minds began to settle and their hearts began to open; they were creating interior space in the supportive environment of the class. As Lichtmann highlights (2005, p.88), “Even if we are attentive and reflective in learning, no deep learning—no wisdom—will occur unless we open our hearts.” The experience of chanting together helped open the students’ hearts to connect within themselves and with each other. In one of his reflections, one student shared a fun moment about leading the chant with another classmate.

[We] led the opening class chant, the Namaste and the Shantipatha. We both knew it so well, that we didn’t need the professor to say it with us. Even after we sang the chant, I told the class to “bow your head to your heart, and release your hands,” which is what the instructor would say, so one can say I nailed the opening part of yoga class.

One can hear the enthusiasm and pride in the students’ voice carried through into his writing. Not only was a community of learners developing, but leadership qualities were beginning to appear.

Of course, the hospitality that the students felt was not inherent to the space itself; rather, it was the people within the space that infused it with a sense of welcome, stability, nonjudgment and support.

When I came to this class, I was welcomed into an environment that promised stability, zero judgment, and friends who I never would have met otherwise. Through the support and advice of every member of this class, I have been able to become much more confident in my writing and yoga practices (student).

For the students, the welcoming, playful, nonjudgmental environment created by their instructor helped the students to relax and feel comfortable.

My favorite part about this class is the relaxing environment that is very judge free, I love that we are able to laugh and have fun and yet the class is still taken seriously and the Professor has so much passion about yoga that infects the room (student).

In addition, the Director of the Interfaith Center also went out of his way to make the students feel welcome.

I want to mention how it feels like a home environment in the interfaith center. Especially when we start class with conversations between [the Director] and other members of the interfaith center. This class just feels different in terms of comfort, i [sic] feel the effects of not being in a classroom’ (student).

Students also discovered that a welcoming space supported both individual growth and communal learning.



As I look back to my very first reflections, I would have never guessed that our class was going to turn out this way. I thought for sure we were going to have to get up in front of the class and perform yoga postures on command for a quiz grade. Instead we quiz together. We learn the positions and we don't judge on someone else's weaknesses. In fact, we help each other. We compare our weaknesses and strengths to form a bond between everyone" (student)

According to the students, the hospitality experienced at the Interfaith Center mattered to them. It made them feel welcome and safe. They selected words like "home," "welcomed," "relaxing," and "nonjudgmental" to describe the transformation that occurred in their inner world in the space.

Through genuine hospitality and concerted effort from both the instructor and the Director of the Interfaith Center, the students began to feel welcome and comfortable to show up and learn within the environment of the Interfaith Center. In a welcoming, nonjudgmental space, the students can relax, turn inward, and become attentive to themselves, their inner subjective experiences, their thoughts and feelings.

### **From Subjective to Intersubjective**

By creating tight external boundaries, cell phones stored away and yoga mats in ordered rows, the students were able to focus on the open space on their yoga mats. Where digital devices can make it easier for students to disengage and disappear, contemplative practices and spaces encourage students to show up and engage in their learning.

We put our cell phones away as soon as we get to class because one of our main goals is to be as in the 'now' as possible, which means to focus on the present, where we are, and who we are with in that moment (student).

By bringing themselves into the "now" moment, the students were strengthening their focus and attention, which not only affected them, but also those around them.

I feel more connected and important in the interfaith center because it's like I am actually in yoga class with others just learning about this community and

practicing it. Where other classes I can just sense myself itching for a decent grade in class. Which goes a long way with a college student, you don't feel that involved and know no one in your class....here everyone at least knows each other's names and feel like they matter to the class. Everyone seems engaged and shows effort to learn and practice the yoga being taught us (student).

As Colier (2016, p.56) points out, "Attention is how we show each other we matter. The gaze of someone who is really with us, not distracted, not elsewhere, but here, is like a gift of the most divine substance."

Untethered from their digital devices also made it easier for the students to be more present and attentive to one another and as a result came to know one another.

The other thing I have enjoyed mostly about this class, is the relationships I have built. I now have more friends and more people I can talk to outside of yoga class than I did before (student).

Since the students detached and disentangled from their smart phones, they had to learn how to relate to others not through a dehumanizing technological device but through human presencing, a process involving personal reflection, interpersonal dialogue and the sharing of their intersubjective experience of the practice of yoga.

With less distraction from digital devices, the students could also settle into the tight, clear boundaries set by their yoga mats. Within these boundaries, the students were encouraged to go deeper into the open space on the mat, connect with themselves, show up and be present. As Palmer (1993), p. 72) so beautifully articulates,

The openness of a space is created by its firmness of its boundaries. A learning space cannot go on forever; if it did, it would not be a structure for learning but an invitation to confusion and chaos. A space has edges, perimeters, limits. When those boundaries are violated-when the city creeps into the desert, or when we return to the city in body or mind-the quality of the space is destroyed....the teacher who wants to create an open learning space must define and defend its boundaries with care.



It is the tight clear boundaries that protect the integrity of the open space and the learning environment. It is these boundaries that guide the students to stay on their yoga mats and go deeper into their interior world. Boundaries, again as noted by Heidegger, “is that from which something begins its presencing.” The tight boundaries helped the students bring their minds to the “here and now,” to be present in the moment and attentive to themselves, their instructor and fellow classmates.

This human presencing began with the students settling into the present moment, into themselves, and then getting to know each other by name. Meeting and connecting with another human being face-to-face can be a transformative experience especially in a technological age that devalues face-to-face encounters. In fact, as the students came to know each other and call each other by name they began to evoke a deeper human presencing and develop confidence to ask for help and speak up.

This class is very different from other classes...I felt very close to everyone and my professor knew my name and that's what made it easier for me to ask for help, rather than just showing up to class where the professor doesn't even know my name. Here in English yoga we engage with everyone such as during our opening chant, practices, meditation and peer edits. We all know each other making this class very enjoyable, [it] also made me feel more confident to speak up in class and ask for help from my peers.” (student)

The simple practice of everyone knowing each other's names, including their instructor, affirmed them and encouraged them to stay present, engage deeper and work towards their full potential. Schneider and Keenan (2015, p.4) have observed that “being known” can have a transformative effect on learning.

Knowledge of the dynamics that generate educational experiences of being known help inform the decisions we make in the classroom and how we integrate our unique ways of being in order to invite students to do the same. Within this intersubjective space, we believe moments of meeting are not only possible, but have the potential to powerfully transform the learning experience.

However, the simple acts of knowing and calling each other by name also did something else. It enhanced the contemplative space, allowing an intersubjective experience to emerge.

As the students began presencing to and with one another, they began opening the intersubjective field (the space between, the relational space, the “We-space”) to share their subjective experiences and grow together through their sharing (Gunnlaugson, 2009; 2016; Bache 2008; Rasmussen & Mishna, 2003, Wilbur, 2000). Colier (2016, p.56) describes the field in this way,

There is a flow of energy, an energetic circle, that occurs when two [or more] people are wholly with each other, undistracted, fully present. In this circle, it is possible for both [or all] individuals ‘I’s’ to disappear; it is possible to discover, a third entity, which is the relationship itself, without separation. Whenever we include our devices in our interactions, we disrupt the energetic circle of intimacy and, with it, the possibility for two [or more] ‘I’s’ to become one ‘we.’

The students began to realize that they were not alone in the space, but in fact were in community with each other and with their instructor. One thing that stood out in reading the students' reflection papers was the amount of times they used the word “we,” instead of using the more common practice of using the word “I.”

Professor Keator used to have to execute a pose in class for us to see and understand how to execute it, but now, she can just say the name of the pose and we all slowly form that pose. It is amazing what repetition can do for the mind. Now, the class can perform sun salutations, a sequence of yoga poses, from memory; whereas in the beginning of the semester, we would have heard sun salutations and thought it was a scientific happening in the sky! Actually, doing the things you are reading about in the classroom can make such a difference in the way students absorb information. Instead of zoning out at a desk and listening to professor Keator lecture about the yoga community, we became a part of the yoga community.





The students obviously experienced feeling a part of the class community. Within this community, they re-arranged the space, put their smart phones, tablets and computers away, set into the open space on their yoga mats, acknowledged each other, and engaged in the practice of yoga.

As the students engaged in yogic practices together, the intersubjective field began to emerge in the open space as they grew together through “inter-subjective dialogue.” As Scott highlights (Gunnlaugson, Sarath, Scott and Bai 2014, p. 337),

The intrinsic value of dialogue as a contemplative practice lies in its ability to create, uncover, explore and develop meaning: to manifest an I-Thou relationship which reveals and affirms self and other; and to serve as a way of being in the world.

They were learning to trust themselves, their fellow classmates and their instructor, share their subjective experiences and receive affirmation.

No longer did the students feel isolated and alone in their learning and shy away from difficulty. Instead, they faced the daily frustrations and learned to work together, lean on the instructor and one another for guidance and support.

When writing, it is important to have guidance. Not only to critique your writing and give you advice, but to help encourage you [when] you get frustrated. In yoga you also need guidance. Trust me I know this first hand that yoga is not easy. Going into it I thought yoga would be a piece of cake. But trust me it’s anything but that. Frustration was a daily occurrence in class. But my teacher and other peers were my guidance-and if it wasn’t for them, I probably would have given up weeks ago. My teacher or as they say in Sanskrit –guru- has been my number one fan. She knows what I am capable of and won’t let me stop until she knows I tried my best. Whether it was actual yoga or my writing” (student).

Student presencing supported a greater emergence through inter-subjective dialogue within the intersubjective field of the contemplative space and called forth a community of care, cooperation, hospitality, respect and nonjudgment. The communal, intersubjective practice of yoga was an integral part of

the “Writing and Yoga” course. It was important for the students to be with one another, practicing and learning. The students needed to experience and understand that they were the subjects of the both the learning and practice of yoga, so they could bring themselves, their meaning and purpose into the learning and practice.

Taking the time to know each other by name not only brought about a deeper self-realization, but also the awareness that each and every human person matters and has hidden potential waiting to crack open our tough outer shells. As one student articulated so beautifully,

We are much like the lotus seed; we may often feel stuck in the muck of labels and separateness. Then, by chance, we may receive a little wisdom. Maybe on an off day, like the tumultuous day on the stormy sea that Vishnu experienced, we hear some simple wisdom that cracks open that tough shell of the little lotus seed. And our journey begins. From there we move through the distorting water of our limited understanding and reach for the light of wisdom, which is always shining on us, if only we could take the time to notice it.

Through the course, the students were learning how to be more fully present to themselves and one another and in the process, of their presencing, they were leaning into untapped potentiality waiting to emerge. They became fully human as they began integrating their body, mind and heart), better prepared to care for themselves and others in a hyper-techno culture where the human person is often objectified/ dismissed/ devalued.

### **Intersubjectivity Towards a Community of Care**

A welcoming, nonjudgmental environment infused by conscious intentions and action contributes to the humanization of the students in a technological age that can diminish human dignity and threaten the capacity for meaningful interpersonal relationships. As the students became more self-aware and in touch with their inner subjective experiences, they became less reliant on the external distractions such as their smart phones and began to relate more openly to the people around them.



I am very self-conscious so I am always worried about people constantly looking at me, judging me, making fun of me, but never anything good. Since we are in this environment where nobody is judging it makes it easier to be yourself. My professor makes it known that everyone is going to mess up and it's okay to laugh at ourselves but not okay to laugh at others who are trying to be stronger. She really helps to bring the class together as one (student).

The quiet space in the Interfaith Center, along with the contemplative pedagogy and practices woven into the course, helped students to become aware of their inner world. It helped them to connect their learning to themselves - so that it was no longer just facts and information but rather, a deeper understanding of their learning – and supported the expression of their inner world and knowing to their classmates.

The focus of the course was on the human person. The “Writing about Yoga” course was taught within a contemplative framework, within a contemplative space, to students living in a technological age, who often feel overwhelmed with life, disconnected from themselves and their classmates, distracted, and overly attached to their smart phones. It taught students how to develop their inner technology; it taught them how to become more human in a distracted, divisive, digital age. As one student expressed,

True learning...comes from face to face encounters and conversations. If I think this is true, how can I learn if I am always on my phone? The answer is I can't...I have had really meaningful conversations and the way that [these] make me feel is ten times better than the way I would feel after I win a video game” (Student).

Turkle (2015, p. 3) would agree with this student's assessment,

face-to-face conversation is the most human-humanizing thing we do. Fully present to one another, we learn to listen. It's where we develop the capacity for empathy. It's where we experience the joy of being heard, of being understood. And conversation advances self-reflection, the conversations with ourselves that are the cornerstone of early development and continue throughout life.

The course provided a counter-cultural experience. It offered students time to slow down and be present. They learned yoga practices, wrote from a subjective point of view and engaged in intersubjective experiences. The students' observations and assessment of the course focused on their individual and social-communal transformation experienced through their time in the course and included: the importance of self-reflection, meditation, dialogue, interpersonal relationships, respect for others, the power of writing, working together in a caring and supportive community. However, some students noted that their time in class extended beyond the class into the wider world. For example, many students articulated that they extended their learning beyond our class, sharing it with friends and family, “I was teaching my family some of the postures that our class usually does. I was like the instructor!”; “I show my mom all the poses I've learned and sometimes she gets jealous and wishes she could learn too! I even tell her the stories behind the poses because I find them so fascinating”; I am starting to show my friends the poses we are learning. I love to show them, and they love to try them.” The students came to own their learning and felt a sense of accomplishment and pride in sharing it with others.

In her final portfolio reflection, one student captured the importance of a contemplative space in her learning how to be more self-aware, engaged in the learning process, and attentive to the subjective experiences of others.

As I entered my first year of college, I never pictured a college course affecting my life so immensely. This is how I have always imagined a college classroom; sitting in metal chairs, a big, bullet-pointed syllabus, a lecture every class, taking extensive notes, and a quiet classroom with not much interaction between students and teacher. Everything that I just listed is the complete opposite of what English 2 Writing About Yoga has shown me. This course has given me a new outlook on what courses really aim to do; which is to learn interactively and become a better student overall (student).



## Summary

As a committed contemplative practitioner and educator, I understand my responsibility to guide students into human presencing through a deeper sense of self and others. I have witnessed in the classroom, on the streets, in the café, and in my own personal relationships the unintended consequences of disordered, cluttered, noisy spaces, and the effects of digital devices used without awareness of the infinite dignity and value of the human person. The dignity and value of the human person is at risk of disappearing in our digital age. The human person, along with healthy human relationships are becoming increasingly more objectified, fractured and disconnected. However, through contemplative education the students are beginning to learn about, develop and embody their inner technological potentials (focus, attention, presence, and care). Contemplative education helps students reclaim their subjectivity, reunite their bodies, minds and hearts to their souls, and thrives in contemplative spaces.

What I learned from my students about the value of learning in a contemplative space was not limited to just their experiences, but has been a reoccurring theme from the students. This past spring semester (2019), many of my students commented once again on the impact of learning in a contemplative space. They noted that they learn better in a technology free space and felt united, one with another.

When I come into the Interfaith Center, I feel a sense of being at ease; it does not look like a traditional classroom and therefore, I do not react to it the same way. In this space I learn better...I enjoyed this space as it became a technology free space, allowing us to become one with one another and be fully engaged with our yoga practice. I genuinely felt it was easier to learn having to use no technology as a main source of learning. This was eye-opening to see how our class succeeded so greatly not having the access to any technology, but rather learning strictly through our environment, professor, and our peers.

They strengthen the bonds they have with one another, even looking to one another for guidance,

Being in the Interfaith Center instead of a traditional classroom does something different that makes us students reply in a positive way; it takes us out of the ordinary classroom setting and puts us in a friendly

and relaxed environment. Just the location of this classroom has bettered my learning and strengthened the bond and comfort I have with my classmates. In class we face each other and just this simple act of facing each other has connected me with my fellow classmates. When we sit looking at each other, I can look for guidance in my classmates...

Finally, they learned the value of developing their inner technology.

Taking the ENGL Composition 102: Writing about Yoga class has taught me both how to, and that I want to write truthfully and use my voice to create change. That beings said, as an Environmental Science major, I know how important funding is for advance technology is, but we sometimes forget that it is also important to put money towards our own 'inner technology.' That is why I appreciate having the Interfaith Center. It harbors respect and unity and promotes interfaith understanding on campus. Respect and unity are what we need more of.

As contemplative educators and practitioners, it is important for us to understand the value of contemplative spaces in our teaching, student learning and in the overall development and flourishing of the human being. Contemplative pedagogies and practices require a commitment to creating, constructing and sustaining contemplative space for human presencing.

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