

# Contemplative Pedagogy for Health and Well-Being in a Trauma-Filled World

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This article argues that we are living in a climate where trauma is taxing students and teachers alike. In order to teach and learn in this moment, we recommend and explore a variety of contemplative practices to help teach awareness and kind attention. Some of these practices involve writing and others don't, as writing itself can be a source of anxiety and stress. We outline practices and share personal anecdotes regarding an approach toward teaching writing that redefines terms such as rigor and success in more compassionate and health-focused ways.

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## Introduction

Buffalo, Uvalde, Tulsa. A hundred days of war in Ukraine, not to mention civil wars in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and Yemen, and culture wars in the US. Year three of a global pandemic, and over 6 million deaths worldwide. People whose skin is black or brown are targeted, attacked, and disproportionately killed, often by the institutions purported to protect them. Civil and reproductive rights are diminishing, while hate crimes are on the rise. This is all so traumatic to live through, let alone stand in front of a classroom and be OK, or to look to our students and expect them to be OK. It is exhausting. We are exhausted.

As college teachers of writing, we struggle to align our core values of engagement and curiosity with the multiple needs of our students and ourselves in a traumatic climate that can overwhelm us all and breed disengagement (Field). In “A ‘Stunning’ Level of Student Disconnection,” Beth McMurtrie writes, “*The Chronicle* recently asked faculty members to share their experiences with student disengagement this academic year. More than 100 people wrote in to describe a disconcerting level of disconnection among students, using words like ‘defeated,’ ‘exhausted,’ and ‘overwhelmed.’” When our students and ourselves are struggling, how can we be both compassionate and effective teachers? How can we find ways to be both supportive and rigorous—for our students and ourselves?

**Angela:** In my own First Year Writing Seminar, I saw full attendance only once all semester, most classes had at least two out of fifteen students missing. The emails I received from students all explained the same reason, “I’m sorry professor, I just needed some extra sleep this morning, I am exhausted.” How could I blame them? Most mornings I felt the same way.

**Paula:** This year I have accompanied students as they faced the death of loved ones, endured illnesses and injuries, faced racial aggressions on campus, witnessed a roommate’s overdose, quarantined, and struggled with depression, anxiety, hopelessness, fear. I am facing my own devastating loss and personal challenges. How do I purposefully teach and learn in a state of overwhelm?

The latest Healthy Minds survey shows that mental health problems such as anxiety and depression are at a record high of 47% among students, and an outstanding number of those students are reaching out to their professors for support (Eisenberg, et al.). For many of us, business as usual is not an option. We can no longer succeed by sticking to the syllabus and try to tough it out. Yet, we teach because we care deeply about writing and teaching and the students with whom we work. But many of us feel unprepared to weigh into “heart-pounding” conversations about mental health and well-being with students (Field). How can we find a proper balance between support for our students and setting expectations for meaningful engagement and rigorous learning?

There are many possible answers to this question, as this special issue of *Composition Studies* demonstrates. Our answer in this essay focuses on incorporating contemplative practices, which can include writing activities and exercises to help one feel ready to write, into our classrooms. Our approach begins with a grounded, compassionate relationship with our feeling bodies. In other words, we believe, as Christopher Uhl and Dana Stuchul assert, “We are not just brains on a stick” (16). Our brains cannot learn if our feeling bodies are experiencing direct or vicarious trauma, existing in a state of dysregulation related to the fight-flight-or-freeze stress response. Since our bodies are not abstract but exist in time and space, we recognize that stress and trauma can be distributed disproportionately among members of subordinated groups (King). High levels of stress hormones negatively affect learning and make it difficult to be open to the level of risk and vulnerability needed to grow as a writer. Our classroom teaching includes specific moments, exercises, and assignments designed to help students and ourselves find ways to regulate our bodies in order to engage our minds more meaningfully. By moving our focus

downwards from our heads into our bodies we give ourselves “the opportunity to settle and regulate” (Chari and Singh).

Anita Chari and Angelica Singh define “trauma-informed pedagogy” as teaching practices that bring awareness to our overstimulated autonomic nervous systems by addressing “the dysregulation that is *already present for almost everyone*, to acknowledge it, and to create resiliency and connection in the midst of it.” They help us understand trauma-informed pedagogy by beginning with what it is not: it is not asking professors to step into the role of therapists, especially those of us who are not trained clinicians. In a faculty roundtable at Boston College on Trauma-Informed Contemplative Pedagogies, Professor Oh Myo Kim expressed a similar sentiment: “Class time is not therapy but can be therapeutic.” She went on to say that it could be therapeutic not only for the students, but for the professors as well.

In order to become more resilient and ready to learn, Chari and Singh suggest beginning with a pedagogical approach of “grounding” to help regulate one’s autonomic nervous system. They write, “Often when we are activated or in a rev, our awareness moves upward in our bodies, like steam from a boiling kettle. Slowing the nervous system by bringing your attention downward in the body gives you the opportunity to settle and regulate.” By pausing and paying kind attention to our bodies, even for a few moments, we can help cultivate “the skill of tuning into the inherent capacity of the nervous system to regulate itself” (Chari and Singh). Feeling secure in our bodies creates the preconditions for openness to learning, new experiences, and challenging conversations. In a time of upheaval, “the conversations we have with our students can have immense potential for changing our students’ lives and society” (Chari and Singh).

### **What Is a Contemplative Practice?**

Our trauma-informed pedagogy relies on using a range of contemplative practices in the classroom. According to Daniel P. Barbezat and Mirabai Bush, authors of *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education*, contemplative practices have a broad range, yet “all of them have an introspective, internal focus” (5). These practices are not necessarily yoga or meditation, though those things can be considered contemplative; “the critical aspect is that students discover their own internal reactions without having to adopt any ideology or specific belief” and they “place the student in the center of his or her learning so that the student can connect his or her inner world to the outer world” (6). Through such inner and outer world connecting, the student is invited to integrate what they are learning in the classroom with how they operate in the world at large.

The Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education (ACMHE) offers a helpful “Tree of Contemplative Practices.” The tree has seven branches that demonstrate the general categorization of practices: stillness, generative, creative, active, relational, movement, and ritual/cyclical. It stands grounded by two roots: communion and connection and awareness. This image is a great place to start when trying to understand the baseline for contemplative pedagogical practices. Many practices, such as meditating, invoking ancestors, *Lectio Divina*, Qigong, Aikido, and Yoga derive from Eastern, Western, and Afro-Caribbean religious traditions, but other practices are more secular, such as quieting the mind, volunteering, deep listening, and walking. The big takeaway here is that it is not what you do, but rather the intention with which you do it that determines whether the practice could be considered contemplative.

In composition studies, contemplative work often takes the form of writing, including metacognitive and reflective writing. First year writing classes typically focus on the writing process, asking the students to reflect on their own processes, behaviors, and habits as they approach writing. In *Writing as a Way of Being*, Robert Yagelski advocates for centering pedagogy on the activity and process of writing (more so than the products of writing). This tool helps students move beyond dualistic views that separate themselves from others and the world. In *The Prolific Moment*, Alexandria Peary foregrounds the present moment as central to composing. We admire both books greatly and believe their approaches and pedagogies warrant deep exploration. In differing ways, both scholars frame writing itself as a contemplative practice and help writers focus on the present moment in order to engage writing more fully. We include writing exercises among the contemplative practices we use in our classes.

In addition to writing-based practices, we make a point to include non-writing contemplative practices as well because we recognize that the act of writing can itself induce stress: writer’s block, procrastination, imposter syndrome, trauma from negative feedback, fear, and uncertainty when engaging new writing projects. Just as it can be a source of presence and mindfulness, writing can be a source of dysregulation and stress. For us, that means that in addition to mindful writing practices, we introduce students to a range of other contemplative practices—from simple breathing to walking, to longer sitting sessions—in order to help them regulate their nervous systems that can be dysregulated by the task of writing itself.

In what follows, we share some classroom exercises that can introduce ways to practice awareness and kind attention (Shapiro).

### *Arrival*

We rush to arrive on time for class. And while our bodies might land in a classroom on time, or even a few minutes early, our minds might not fully be

there yet. We might still be ruminating over what happened before class or worrying/anticipating what will happen next. An arrival activity can ritualize the act of becoming fully present in a class, framing arrival as a process of body and mind, helping students become focused and ready to work. A simple arrival practice can be as short as three breaths: On the first breath, one envisions everything going on before arriving in class, all the worries, conflicts, and stressors. On the second breath, one calls to mind everything awaiting after this class: to-do lists, deadlines, long hours at work, plans for fun. On the third breath, we mentally invite ourselves to arrive fully in this moment, right here, right now, and to be present for the short amount of time the group has to work together, today. One can invite students to close their eyes or soften their gaze. We slowly do the three breaths together. Then we can say, “Welcome to class. Let’s begin.”

### *Short Silence*

The topic of sound and silence is fascinating to discuss with students. Three minutes of silence can be a simple low-stakes contemplative practice to introduce into class. When I (Paula) first did this in a first year writing seminar many years ago now, I invited students to clear their desks, either close their eyes or soften their gaze, and sit in silence for three minutes. Afterwards, I asked students for their reactions. One said that they never knew how long three minutes could be. Students laughed. Another said that this was the first silence they had experienced since they arrived on campus. This response surprised me, as it was the second week of the semester, but several other students weighed in with similar views. They reported being constantly around noise—the dining halls, our dorm floors. And when it was quiet, they usually had headphones in and were always listening to music or podcasts. Several students admitted to needing distracting noise for sleeping. For some students, silence is not yet a common or comfortable space. Practicing silence, and helping students become more comfortable with quiet pauses, even short ones, is a small step that can help build comfort and the ability to consider other contemplative practices.

### *Brain Dump*

Julia Cameron’s best-selling book *The Artist’s Way* asks blocked artists to begin every day with what she calls “morning pages” (Cameron, 9-18). The morning pages are intended to be thirty minutes of stream-of-conscious writing. She says these pages “are not meant to be *art*. Or even *writing* . . . Pages are meant to be, simply, the act of moving the hand across the page and writing down *whatever* comes to mind” (10).

The Brain Dump is adapted from this practice and is meant to be a type of arrival practice in the classroom. For the first five to ten minutes of class, simply ask students to write whatever it is they need to write in order to be fully present. Writing by hand is preferred, but not possible for every student, so ask them to choose whichever option is best for them. Prompt the students by telling them, “You can write to-do lists, grocery lists, write about an issue that is top of mind, something that is frustrating you or something you want to remember later. It doesn’t matter what you write, but you will keep writing for the next five minutes without stopping. If this means you repeat, ‘I don’t know what to write,’ that is perfectly fine.” While the students write, write with them. Joining them in the practice shows that the teacher is part of the classroom community. During that time, sit in silence or put on some classical or ambient music, whichever the community prefers. It is a great way to start a writing class and allow the students time to get out what they need to be present and ready for class.

### *Breathing*

In 2015, Emily Beals, Jen Cansilio, and Jeremiah Henry presented a Conference on College, Composition, and Communication (CCCC) panel on mindful practices in the writing classroom entitled “Better Breathers are Better Learners.” They introduced various mindfulness-based practices for the writing classroom, including taking a few minutes for breathing—and they connected it to better learning outcomes. Sensing bodies, closing one’s eyes if possible, and paying attention to the in and out of one’s breath, to notice it, become aware and monitor it: am I breathing shallowly, rapidly? What happens if I slow down my breathing? Perhaps try inhaling for four counts, hold for three, and then exhale for six counts. Repeat if there is time.

Focusing on “better breathers are better learners” can sidestep a campus culture or set of students for whom the idea of contemplative or mindful practices might be off-putting. Emphasizing engagement with short breathing exercises can help increase focus and decrease anxiety (Bullock). This practice can remind students—and teachers—to spend the final moments before any stressful experience not frantically reviewing one’s mind for a last piece of knowledge, but instead, breathing.

### *Simple Stretching*

As we have discussed, stress and trauma require us to come back into our body. Simple stretching exercises at the beginning or in the middle of class are a good way to shift the focus from mind to body, while also giving the students a well-needed stretch. First, ask students to stand up from their chairs and become aware of their feet on the ground. Next, ask them to allow their

chin to fall gently to their chest, and feel the stretch at the back of the neck. After a few seconds, ask them to slowly raise their chin parallel to the floor, without straining, as if nodding their head “yes.” Have them repeat this action a few times, and then ask them to bring their head back to neutral. Finally, ask them to bring their fingertips to the top of their shoulders, as if making wings out of their arms. Then ask them to slowly draw circles with their elbows, first in one direction and then in the other, while involving their shoulders in the motion. Have them bring their hands back down to their sides and slowly return to their seats.

*Walk (Even in Small Space)*

For some, contemplative practices based in stillness can increase anxiety rather than reduce it. Sometimes a contemplative exercise in quiet movement can be useful. In the space of a classroom or hallway, ask students to spend a few minutes walking slowly and carefully, paying attention to how their feet come in contact with the ground. If they notice their minds wandering, as minds do, invite them to gently bring it back to the act of their feet walking. This can be a silent practice or it can involve acknowledging others, as contemplative writing teacher Stephanie Briggs suggests. She instructs students to walk around (or look around if the space is too tight). When they encounter another person, make eye contact, and say, “I see you.” She describes this as a simple practice that allows students to acknowledge each other as a basis of forming a community (Briggs).

**Angela:** There is one thing in my life that never fails me, coffee. My love for coffee started early. My mother used to serve me coffee and buttered toast every morning before school. I would take a sip or two and then dip the toast in the coffee allowing the crevices to become filled with the liquid. Dunk, eat, repeat.

As an adult, my love for coffee grew as I learned more about the work it takes to grow and harvest the beans, and the level of specification that is required to make the perfect cup. It seemed to me

**Paula:** I find myself most grounded when I am outside, often walking my dogs. Our big dog, Marv, (probably a mix of Pitbull and boxer) is the embodiment of joyful, goofy presence. He loves every moment, whether he is sniffing, running, licking someone’s face, or lounging in the sun. When he chases a ball, sometimes he catches it. But more often, first, he will miss it, run past it, trip over it, or kick it further away. No matter how many fetches he does, he never seems to get ‘better’ at catching a ball. But what’s remarkable is that it doesn’t matter. Whether

that to honor the labor that went into the making of this delicacy, my approach to its making should match in respect and tradition. So a ritual was born.

My mornings are sacred because I take time to consciously create my perfect cup, to sit and enjoy it, and then do some writing. Though I would never bring all of my coffee tools into the classroom to introduce my ritual to my students, I do think the sustained time with precision, attention, reflection, and joy is both necessary and useful to our students, and to me as their instructor. Without this moment I would not show up to class calm, poised, and ready. Therefore, I think it is only fair to give my students an opportunity to arrive fully in the same way. This takes different forms over the semester, but whichever activity I choose, I make sure that the first five to ten minutes of class begins with a moment of consciousness.

I think it is important to also admit that though I am romanticizing this morning tradition, it does not always go as planned. In the same way, class activities are sometimes met with resistance, and those times can be a good reminder that nothing is infallible.

he catches it on the fly or kicks it halfway across the field, Marv grabs it and runs back with the same unbridled joy, drops the ball, and waits for someone—anyone—to throw it again. He truly embodies Jon Kabat Zinn’s definition of mindfulness, “being aware of the current moment, nonjudgmentally, as if your life depended on it.” Every moment for Marv is the best moment. He is a good teacher.

Outdoors, when I am walking, it is easy to become fully immersed in the moment. The large swaths of conservation land near my house offer familiar trails with plant life and a brook that changes by the season. “Right here, right now,” I repeat to myself as I gaze at the trees, today heavy with green leaves, the path narrowing from their abundance. “Right here, right now. This is life.” That phrase and that practice help calm me and allow me to marvel at everything around me. A simple walk can be my day’s most precious gift. That—and as Angie says—coffee. My first sip every morning is a moment of pure joy.

## Practicing with Authenticity

Barbezat and Bush say it most plainly: “There is no effective way to teach contemplative practices without practicing them yourself” (67). That is not to say that everyone must spend years becoming an expert before trying contemplative exercises in the classroom. One way to begin is to imagine where and how you are already contemplative: you may already have your own version of a contemplative practice that you could easily bring into your classroom with confidence. Perhaps, for instance, you use an attentional anchor to listen deeply to someone. Or perhaps you wash the dishes with quiet presence and care. Perhaps you are interested in being a student alongside your own students in trying something new together. However you proceed, approaching these practices by choosing those that you feel comfortable trying will strengthen your commitment to repeating them on your own and give you more confidence in leading your students.

**Angela:** I don't typically get nervous before leading or instructing meditation. This time was different. I was standing in front of a group of college seniors in a capstone course on “Mindful Storytelling.” Sure, each of them chose this course, but in the back of my head the story that I was telling myself was that they selected it because it sounded like an easy “A,” they needed a blow-off course, and they were all internally eye-rolling at me as I explained the benefits of meditation. In fact, I thought this because I was once one of them. Before my first yoga class I told my friend, “If they ‘om’ at the beginning of this, I am out.” But they did ‘om’ and I did not leave.

So I began.

I explained to them first the history of the mantra. I moved on to discuss what a pranayama

**Paula:** I consider myself a student of contemplative practices, not yet (or maybe not ever) an expert. I tell my students that I am a co-inquirer with them on contemplative work because it's something I recognize that I need in my life. I take to heart Shauna Shapiro's definition that mindfulness is about “kind attention,” and that we cultivate what we practice. That means that for my students and myself, I try to offer a low-stakes sampling of contemplative practices to practice and try. Some involve sitting, some require movement, some involve writing or drawing or even eating. I use variety and normalize that some practices might feel better than others and that our moods and needs change.

When I am anxious, a walk is better for me than simply sitting and breathing. When I am

is and how breathing can have an impact on the sympathetic nervous system. I looked out at their faces and desperately tried to read them. They were all awake, they seemed “with me.” I handed out 108 bead malas to the class and explained that we would use these to keep track of our mantra and breath. I asked them all to put away their laptops and phones, to sit with a straight spine and close their eyes, holding their malas loosely in one hand. I turned off the lights and scanned the students, they were all so peacefully sitting out there in front of me, and I hadn’t even begun the meditation practice yet.

We started our meditation by simply “watching the breath” flow in and out at the nostrils, not controlling it in any way, but just observing. We moved on to use the mala to keep track of our “So Hum” practice, each bead would be a full breath movement. On the inhale, we mentally chanted “so,” and on the exhaled “hum,” slowly and deeply. We moved onto the next bead and again, “so hum,” and then another. Finally, I let them continue to practice without my guidance, I asked them to continue at their own pace. I finished a twelve-bead set, which takes about five minutes, and opened my eyes. There was a peacefulness lingering in

tired, a body awareness guided meditation (using a recording so I can just receive the teaching) is a gift. I try to introduce contemplative practices as tools or options, useful at different times in different ways. But rather than what the practice is, I try to emphasize kindness as the foundation. Kindness to self, and when one is able, sending loving-kindness and gratitude to others is a precious gift. I think many people reject meditation or other contemplative practices because they believe there is a right way to do it, and they are not doing it. Instead of being present, we judge ourselves as inadequate and practice loops of self-recrimination. Or we expect our minds to be empty, still, calm, focused, instead of welcoming whatever arises, even if they are unkind thoughts. To notice our self-judgment is a contemplative act. It creates a small space between the thought and our noticing self. In that way, I try to emphasize to students that noticing with kindness and gentleness IS what contemplative work is all about.

Even with my careful framing, some students resist certain contemplative practices or find little value in them. I try to make space for that possibility too. Since the goal of contemplation is awareness, being aware that

the room, each student's face was calm and glowing, so I continued. Five minutes later, I opened my eyes again. Still. The class was still. I let them go for a total of thirty minutes, which would be considered a long time for a brand-new meditator. I gently guided them out of the meditation and asked them to "come back into their bodies."

I was anxious to start the debrief, wondering if I had pushed them too long, if they felt restless and I just didn't see it. However, the responses were encouraging. One student said she felt a "renewed sense of energy and focus," many others simply stated, "I really needed that." I told the students they could keep the malas if they felt they would use it, and most of them did.

My instinct tells me that most students did not leave the class and immediately become meditators, and that was not the point. But they were open to it, despite their fears and trepidations, their different spiritual or religious beliefs, and most importantly their restless state of mind. The time in meditation proved to me and to them that they could do it, which is important to not only set them up for further contemplative opportunities, but for any activity that may be unfamiliar, or uncomfortable, or (dare I say it) potentially uncool.

one is made anxious or irritable by a practice is as valid as being calmed. I myself had a strongly negative reaction to a meditation class I took in the late 1990s. It was shortly after the death of my mother, and I believed that the teaching suggested that our minds controlled every aspect of our bodies. The practice, which was meant to be calming, hit my body hard, tightening my chest. The words registered as an indictment of my mother, that she didn't use her mind well enough, which caused the autoimmune disease and her untimely death. In hindsight, I'm fairly certain the practice neither intended nor implied such a message. But as raw as I was to be without either parent in my twenties, I rejected that meditation practice. "It's not for me," I said. And it wasn't, at that time.

Still, something inviting from that class remained with me—a desire to have a relationship with my thoughts, to connect my mind and body more deliberately. And over the years I have studied and read and slowly developed my own ad hoc, imperfect contemplative practice. My favorite practices now are often simple ones: stopping in a moment and fully appreciating all that is happening in and around me. Walking, being fully present as my feet connect to the earth. Breath exercises. Mindfully eating a clementine. Meditative reading. Practicing gratitude. Writing.

Whether the contemplative practices in the classroom are new and shared or a comfortable tradition, it is important to honor the origins of the activity in the classroom. It is important for students to understand that this practice should not be solely identified as one's own; it is, in all likelihood, borrowed from a tradition that has deep roots. In other words, though the practice might adapt well to the writing classroom, it is not to be claimed. In the same way, students are not being asked to shift their own beliefs in order to participate in these activities; rather, they are being asked to be open to the practice in this isolated moment (Barbezat and Bush 84-85).

### **Maintaining and Redefining Rigor**

Navel-gazing. Solipsism. A flight from political engagement. Touchy-feely. Performatively woke. These are a few terms skeptics use when referencing contemplative pedagogies. The essence of what these critiques suggest might be that if teachers lean too far into kindness, they move away from rigor, mastery, challenge. In other words, these skeptics fear that contemplative pedagogies will become “the grace and compassion police, who insist faculty shouldn't demand very much from students” (Cohan). Such a critique works from a narrow definition of rigor, one that privileges students who arrive in our classrooms already able to “mimic school-based standardized, essayist literacies, only further recycling race and class privilege” (Kynard) and those “who are already adept at managing higher education's unofficial rules” (Jack and Sathy).

The term rigor found its way into the English language via late fourteenth century French, and like so many other words has gone through a number of slight shifts in meaning. This word was intended to convey “hardness, harshness, cruelty, force, and stiffness,” specifically when “dealing with persons” (OED). Of course, in academia, it now somehow conveys that our courses are worth taking and that, if a student makes it through the course unscathed, they will somehow have proven themselves. This idea largely coincides with the militaristic and capitalistic rhetoric that runs rampant in contemporary culture. That doesn't mean rigor needs to be thrown out completely; instead, it is time it goes through another shift in meaning. For instance, scholars, teachers, and contemplative pedagogies might redefine rigor in ways that allow us to meet all students where they are while also coupling high standards with teaching practices that are inclusive, multicultural, and anti-racist (Au; Contemplative Pedagogy Network; Jack and Sathy; King).

In a recent article by Beckie Supiano on “The Redefinition of Rigor,” she asks us to consider, “What does rigor mean in a college course, exactly? Why do some professors put so much stock in it? And are rigor and compassion really at odds?” Supiano's explorations brought her to consider “students'

take on whether they were challenged,” adding that the National Survey of Student Engagement added the question, “During the current school year, to what extent have your courses challenged you to do your best work?” (qtd in Supiano). This important reframing of rigor from the students’ perspective and set of standards gets at the heart of what contemplative pedagogy aims to accomplish: introspection.

Contemplative classroom practices expect commitment, discipline, vulnerability, and acceptance. Including contemplative practices in the classroom is not “submitting to the students,” but rather asking them to focus, direct their attention, and own their internal processes, while also offering them tools to cope with stress, trauma, exhaustion, and overwhelm. When students are asked to apply their own view of their current performance and pair it with their own expectations of themselves, the student becomes more invested in their learning outcomes. This can be especially true in a writing class; if a student is writing about something they care about, the stakes naturally become higher. Contemplative practices in the classroom can provide students with tools to navigate their inner worlds to determine what is important and why. In addition, these practices can provide a framework for both a more empathetic and critical engagement with world issues in their writing. Contemplative pedagogies is not a retreat from the world, but rather working on ourselves, individually and collectively, to more fully engage the world. In addition, such work can orient us toward healing:

We need to begin with the healing of trauma—in dark-skinned bodies, in light-skinned bodies, in communities, and the law enforcement profession. Social and political actions are essential, but they need to be part of a larger strategy of healing, justice, and creating room for growth in traumatized flesh-and-blood bodies. (Menakem ix)

Contemplative pedagogy requires compassionate rigor, as it is in essence a call to internal and social healing. These practices ask us to attend to our own wellness so that we are prepared to decrease suffering in ourselves and others. Therefore, we propose that academic rigor be understood as a disciplined responsibility to our own well-being, a radical acceptance of our privileges, vulnerabilities, and influence in the world, and an active readiness to participate in the world consciously. This definition will challenge students’ learning and understanding of ideas, while also engaging introspection and social action.

### **What Is Next**

Since we began work on this essay, an average of 110 Americans have died each day due to gun violence, with Black Americans 10 times more likely to

be victims (Everytown). Televised panels on the January 6<sup>th</sup> Insurrection detail evidence of ongoing threats to our democracy, and the Supreme Court has radically restricted reproductive autonomy and tools for combating climate change. A dive in the stock market has, according to the *New York Times*, led experts to forecast a recession due to “greedflation” (DePillis). Waiting for things to let up is not an option. Teachers and students can’t wait to crash or burn out. Teachers, if they hope to continue showing up and teaching with a clear-eyed sense of the world, must forge a healthier way forward for ourselves and for our students. Teachers and students must also be present right now while caring for ourselves and each other in the process. In addition to adjusting pedagogies at this moment, teachers also need to be resilient. Not bootstraps resilience; rather, teachers must maintain awareness and kind compassion for ourselves and others in the face of pain and suffering.

In her book, *The Gifts of Suffering: A Guide to Resilience and Renewal*, Polly Young-Eisendrath combines the theories of Carl Jung with Buddhist methodology to discuss the work of resilience. She says, “To stay relatively free of suffering is to stay very awake and conscious of our tendencies to create it . . . What seems to work best in holding onto this awareness is some kind of practice or belief that returns you again and again to compassion and connection with others. This produces a different kind of attitude about pain, loss, and even death” (59-60). Adopting contemplative pedagogies in the classrooms supports instructors, while showing students that they can do something meaningful even in times of hardship. Contemplative pedagogies actively demonstrate to students that awareness, compassion, reflection, and focus are not simply words for a temple, mosque, church, or psychologist office, but are necessary tools for survival and proactive involvement in the world.

Therefore, in addition to introducing the health and wellness benefits of contemplative pedagogy, this essay acts as your call to action. What will you do to better take care of yourself in times of trauma? How can you help your community heal? How will you prepare yourself for the ever-daunting task of instructing our future leaders in the classroom during these challenging times? How will you inspire them to introspect, empathize, focus, and act?

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