

Marilyn Nelson

THE FRUIT OF SILENCE

My understanding of contemplative pedagogy is very simple: I strive to teach not technique, but attitude. I ask my students to explore several ways of listening for, and listening to, silence. I hope they will develop a contemplative attitude, and learn how to hear silence.

My first experience with this kind of pedagogy was the result of the serendipitous coincidence of my receiving a Contemplative Practices Fellowship within a few days of being invited to spend a semester teaching at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. I taught two sections of my new course, “Poetry and Meditation,” to a self-selected group of upperclassmen (and women) cadets there in spring, 2000. The cadets were disciplined enough to sit without complaining for the 15 minutes of daily meditation I asked for. I’ve been less successful convincing civilian university students to do the same, in courses I’ve taught since then. They tend to give up pretty easily, and to make me think my asking them to meditate is a symptom of madness. But I have hopes for the two courses I’m teaching this semester, one of which I will discuss here.

As I’ve said, I do not strive to teach technique. My own background in contemplative practice comes from my interest in contemplative prayer, which David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk, writes can be as simple as lighting a candle with a match, and which another Benedictine author, a hermit nun, writes can be even simpler: One of the prayers she suggests is “the prayer of the loving gaze,” in which all you do is look on everything with love. I owe a great deal of my understanding of contemplative

prayer from a former Benedictine, a Catholic priest who now lives as a hermit and is the friend I've called "Abba Jacob" in many poems. During one of several retreats he gave on Contemplative Prayer during his recent visit to the United States, "Abba Jacob" said contemplation is simply a matter of focusing on a mantra while knowing that one is receiving oneself from and giving oneself back to a loving Creator. He said it's a matter not of how one sits, but of how one listens. He said, "The goal of all prayer is silence." We discussed an interview which appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* during his visit, in which an Episcopal priest was quoted as saying she prays all the time, and that she believes "God listens." "Abba Jacob" said of course God listens, but prayer is less a matter of *God's* listening, than of *ours*.

That being my understanding, it is unnecessary for me to wrestle with a theology, for the contemplative content of my course. All I try to do is help my students understand that there is something valuable, something important, to be found in silence. I try to teach them some ways they can listen to silence.

How can we teach young Americans to listen to silence? The noise of our lives is -- sometimes literally -- deafening. Technology has given us the 24-hour soundtrack, our own background music, our "score." Not long ago in a local small-town restaurant, a family of four ate dinner together at a booth across from mine. At one point the mother turned, removed the earphone from her son's ear, said something into the ear, and put the earphone back. When do young Americans ever experience silence? Perhaps only when they are glaring reproachfully at their parents with their arms folded. We can't force them to pull the plug and discover silence, but it may be possible for us to *show* them that it can be done.

I used my 1999 Contemplative Practices Fellowship to enlist a team of people to help me plan the course I had agreed to teach at West Point (credit for this experiment should be given to Lt.Col. Peter Stromberg, then head of the English Department, and Lt. Gen. Daniel Christman, then Superintendent of the Academy). My team of syllabus planners consisted of an Episcopal priest with a Yale Ph.D. in Medieval Mysticism and years of experience preaching monastic retreats; the founders and director of the Connecticut Writing Program, which stresses writing as “process”; a wise and talented poet who is a serious practitioner of Zen; and two web-designers who put up the course website. Our now outdated course materials are still online at <http://web.uconn.edu/mnelson/course/index.html>. Besides introducing students to the major contemplative traditions, the introductory essay (researched and written by Kathleen Shaughnessy Jambeck, Ph.D., a medievalist and one of the founders of the Connecticut Writing Project and the Institute of Writing at the University of Connecticut) discusses writing strategies that “mimic our internal meditative experience.” Kathleen writes:

Our ultimate goal... is to find the writing strategies that, like meditation, help us tap the intuitive and creative functions of the right brain: to think in complex images rather than in sequential order, to see the whole rather than just the parts, to grasp interconnections, correspondences, resemblances, and nuances rather than the bits and pieces and linear, logical patterns.

The three writing strategies we used in the course, most of them techniques frequently used in creative writing courses, were *journaling*, which focuses and complements the meditation experience; *freewriting*, which comes close to recording “inner speech”; and *clustering*, which taps into the creative, intuitive, right-brain function that lies at the core of mediation.

The contemplative components of my West Point course were: 5-minutes of meditation at the beginning of each class meeting; 15 minutes of daily meditation outside of class; journaling; and various writing exercises. I've continued those requests in the courses I'm teaching this semester. And, borrowing from "Opening the Contemplative Mind in the Classroom," an article by Tobin Hart in the *Journal of Transformative Education* (Vol. 1, No. X, 2003), I've added another component to this semester's syllabus for English 246: "Exploring the Iliad in Poems and Essays." Hart calls this element "The Art of Pondering." He writes, "...pondering big and radical questions...has the capacity of opening to unexpected insight." In my syllabus I call this "*musings*." We rarely encourage students to wonder about things, to *muse*. One of the bits of wisdom collected on the door of my refrigerator is a saying attributed to the Arapaho: "*If we wonder often, the gift of knowledge will come.*" I think it's what I do when I lie in a hammock or on the couch and cloud-gather. It's something I've done all my life. It seems essential to the nature of the poet. I've scheduled "*musings*" in my syllabus, describing them as days when each of us will come to class prepared to discuss a scheduled topic. Being prepared means having done some research: in a minimum of three sources, only two of them online. *Musings* follow no agenda and have no goal, no text, and no ground of reference except what we bring. We agree to be honest and non-judgmental; we will go out on the limb of communal pondering.

Our first *musings* was a 90-minute discussion of Just War Theory. Some questions we pondered were: "Does Just War Theory depend on belief in a Supreme Being? Is it realistically possible to have a just war? Is pre-emptive war unjust? Do non-Christian religions subscribe to the definition of a just war?" Our second *musings* began with a

question: “Is there a war on the environment?” We discussed the philosophy and definition of war, whether “War is the father of all things,” necessary for invention, change, and progress. We discussed the impact of industrialization and globalization on the environment. We discussed factory-farming. We discussed human population growth. We discussed the effects of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Chernobyl on the environment, and – tenuously, because no one could remember what we had all learned about the subject – the half-life of nuclear waste. We discussed other kinds of waste. We discussed the affluence of the West, and research on primate behavior, and Christian fundamentalism’s belief in the coming “rapture.” We related human manipulation of the environment to the manipulation of the human world by the gods in *The Iliad*. At the end of our class time I read four nature poems to them and told them to be aware of the small signs of spring (a crow had cawed close to our open window during our five-minute meditation) for the next poems they would write for the class.

The subjects of our future *musings* will be: “Do other species have wars?” and “Is there a war on innocence?”

In this course as in my West Point course I have offered only very rudimentary instruction in meditation: sit straight, be comfortable, close your eyes, look to the “third eye”; and either count your breath up to five, then start over again; or watch your breath go in and out, or think “here, now, here, now.” If you’re distracted, just bring yourself gently back; think of your thoughts as clouds drifting across the blue sky of your attention. Now, as then, we begin each class meeting with five minutes of silent meditation. And I’m asking them to sit in silence for ten minutes on every day when we do not meet as a class. After the second week of this semester I asked how they were finding the meditation. One student said she

finds it “cleansing” to meditate at the end of the day; she feels the strains of the day washed away. Another student, a commuter, said he meditates in the car as it warms up for his drive to campus, and that he has discovered his mind is like a snow-globe that’s being constantly shaken (he’s married, and they have a toddler); meditation stills it and lets the snow settle so he can see what he needs to do in the coming day. Another student said he sees his mind as a crow flying over a landscape, and that he makes his passing thoughts turn into clouds, which his crow flies through. And this is after only two weeks.

I have not yet collected the journals I’ve asked this semester’s students to keep, but I can quote from some of the journals my West Point cadets kept, because I quoted them in an earlier essay (“Aborigine in the Citadel”: *Hudson Review*, Winter, 2001). One cadet wrote:

Today’s meditation was so great for me, although perhaps it stepped away from the intentions of our meditations. There were so many thoughts in my head and angry, frustrated, stressed-out, mad, sad feelings inside I was having trouble with a focus and keeping my mind “blank” and open minded. So, along with breath awareness, I felt my breath pull all of my negative emotions and feelings from the bottom of my feet to the top of my head and out with my exhale. Then, I followed that breath a little. I saw the clean air enter my mouth and travel through from the bottom to the top and through my lungs and back out all over again. I am disappointed in the way that I am explaining/describing this, but it really helped me relax and feel calm and refreshed and hopeful that things will get better or that a new day will come.

Later in the semester, as, slowly, our practice deepened, she wrote:

In class, we had to pick a couple of verbs from poems that we wrote and make sentences. Kevin made one that I loved: “Swim through a heartbeat of clouds.” Anyway, while I meditated, I thought about swimming through clouds. It was incredible. And over & over in my head, I said the sentence. I don’t know if that was meditation or not, but I got up and felt so wonderfully relaxed. It was like I had been swimming in clouds. ☺

Another cadet wrote midway in the semester:

The Cry of the Seagull

I meditated today down by the river. I watched the ripples in the river and felt the wind in the trees. I did not have much success counting my breaths and keeping my focus, but I felt relaxed afterwards. I was inspired by what I saw and felt. I have recently had trouble understanding the purpose behind human suffering and its relation to the Christian idea of God. However, I enjoyed stepping away, sitting down and focusing on my breathing. Oh yeah, I entitled this entry “The Cry of the Seagull” cause a seagull cried and shook me out of my meditation.

Another cadet wrote:

I have been wanting to focus more on the present than I have been; the predominant West Point attitude is to look a hundred years into the future, deciding everything short of which wallpaper you are going to put on your house. I need to remember, in this gray winter paradise, that we exist for today; if I were to die tonight, would I be pleased to know that the last thing I did was Engineering homework? I doubt it. So, I used “here, now” and it seemed to pretty much focus me on the present.

He later made up his own mantra: “Become the virtue of all that is true.”

One cadet wrote:

I became preternaturally aware of the *silence*. Even the roar of the blood was silence, for I alone could hear it. And I think I hear something beyond the silence, the voices in my head which this meditation spiel is so interested in. They weren't saying anything to me; they were babbling, murmuring amongst themselves. And they sounded happy. The silence in the air and in my head seemed like a clog in the toilet. Or a great big bite of peanut butter stuck in your throat. It was in the way. It obstructed reality. Poets are always so gloomy, but I think it's only the dead silence that's really dark and sorrowful. The unintelligible voices behind it sounded like songs; they sounded like green grassy hilltops in the sun.

Though I am not asking this semester's students to write about war, the course I'm teaching this semester aims to enable them to think about issues of war and peace. Besides Homer, we will read *All Day Permanent Red*, a volume of Christopher Logue's re-imagining of *The Iliad*; and *War Letters*, Andrew Carroll's collection of actual letters from soldiers in modern wars. I've told my students that it seems important that at least

some Americans pay attention to what our soldiers are going through; that we shouldn't change the channel when news of the war comes on, and pretend – as I've read many American college students do – it isn't happening. I've told them that people will be coming home from this war as severely traumatized as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, the great WWI poets who met as they recuperated from shell-shock in a mental hospital. I taught for several years in the 1990's in a summer writing workshop at the William Joiner Center of the University of Massachusetts in Boston. The Joiner Center was founded in 1982 as a response to the initiative of the university's large student veteran population, and provides educational and other services to veterans, conducts research and makes policy recommendations on issues relating to veterans, and encourages teaching and scholarship on the Vietnam War and social consequences. The veterans in my poetry workshops, men my age or older, wrote poems about waking up screaming, thirty-five and more years after coming out of the jungle. A very large percentage of soldiers returning from Operation Desert Storm suffer serious post-traumatic stress disorder. Many families have been destroyed by their violence. I've told my students that we owe it to this generation's soldiers to prepare ourselves to try to understand what they have been through. It is, of course, my hope that my students will take something from the course which will help them make peace within themselves and in the world. But I'm afraid these are wholly unverifiable, though highly sought-for, results. Teachers are rarely given the privilege of seeing results.

But my experience at West Point has given me a glimpse into further possibilities of a contemplative pedagogy and its relationship to inner peace and to peace-making. I loved my cadets, and have maintained contact with several of them, all of whom have

been deployed to Iraq. As I prepared to write this essay I contacted a couple of them and asked whether they continued to meditate during their deployment, and if they did, what meditation had meant to them. One of them said in an email that he had often used *free-writing* and *clustering* as a way of clearing his mind and seeing where and who he was. Another phoned; he said that both he and his wife (they were both at West Point, and now both are Black Hawk helicopter pilots) continued to meditate during their deployments. He said that, although military culture is in some ways the antithesis of the contemplative life, they had both found it an invaluable tool to use in a crisis, especially as officers who must show composure before their soldiers, as, for instance, when one of their soldiers was killed or wounded. He said he camouflaged his meditating by sitting on his cot wearing headphones: Everyone thought he was listening to music, which is cool. But his headphones were silent. He was being in the moment, thinking “here, now, here, now.” He said his wife has continued her practice since they have been transferred back to the U.S., and that they will someday encourage it in their children.

We went on from there to talk about the work they did during their deployments. Both were deeply involved in their battalions’ civil affairs projects. His battalion was put in charge of the University at Mosul; he was in charge of the College of Economics and Administration, as well as the College of Computer Science. He met weekly with deans of colleges, and gave them money to improve their departments by purchasing chairs, tables, telephones. She was the supply officer and civil affairs officer for her battalion. Her civil affairs assignment -- to help several small villages build schools and clinics -- grew into her asking her hometown to invent a little “sister-city” program. By the end of her year-long deployment the people of Hutchinson, Kansas had donated hundreds of

boxes of school supplies, medical supplies, and clothing to a Kurdish village called Augba. Since some of her letters were published in her hometown paper, the *Hutchinson News*, and are posted online, I will quote her words. This is from the last letter Capt.

Katrina Gier Lewison wrote home from Iraq:

I wanted to make one more trip to Augba before everyone left, so I took the new civil affairs officer from the replacing unit for a lunch visit. As we pulled into the village, I kept my eyes peeled for any signs of Kansans' sister-city donations.

It wasn't tough. One of the first kids I saw running up to our vehicle wore a shirt that said "Someone in Kansas Loves You!" I saw that as a sweet sign of success!

I spoke to Yonis, the local businessman, and asked if all the villagers hated us. He said it was quite the opposite. After our hectic supply drop, the families surveyed all the wonderful supplies. Whatever they couldn't use, they traded with their neighbors, friends and families, so that everyone got something. He and a couple of other trustworthy men stayed late the evening of the drop and sorted every last school supply, so that each child got an even amount. It was wonderful, he informed me.

To show their appreciation, a local seamstress made me a beautiful Kurdish dress. They dressed me up in it and had me model for everyone at the lunch gathering.

The men didn't even recognize me as I walked in. They honestly thought that I was a village woman!

That day I also helped the women do all the cooking. They showed me how to make the flat bread, fry the chicken and saute the raisins and dates. It was fun to be part of the preparation, instead of just sitting on the receiving end.

With all the farewells behind us, the main body of the battalion loaded up a week ago and started their trek to Kuwait. Lucky me, I was designated as the trail party, so I had the odd experience of watching all my soldiers drive away and leave me standing seemingly alone in Iraq.

There is only a handful of soldiers from my battalion left here. We're here to support the General Officer's aircraft until the end, which will hopefully be very soon!

It has been an eye-opening experience this past year in Iraq. I've had emotional highs flying out to places like the Kurdish military academy this summer.

I've had emotional lows, losing friends out here to helicopter crashes and enemy attacks. I've had times when my heart beat through my chest as we assaulted into an enemy terrorist training camp, and times that my heart was so heavy because I missed my family so much.

Throughout the entire year, I felt the support of the American people. Packages rolled in for my soldiers and myself at a steady pace all year long. Packages came crashing down around me during the sister-city project! Even though I knew that some Americans didn't support this war, there was never a time that I felt the American public didn't support the troops.

Admittedly, this was a Kurdish village, not a Sunni one, but maybe more of our soldiers should be making bread with people. I cannot, in either honesty or modesty, claim Capt. Lewison's peace-making as an outgrowth of my experiments with contemplative pedagogy. She wasn't even in my class. But I would like to believe there is a relationship between her meditating and her peace-making. My friend "Abba Jacob" suggested in a recent retreat that if people meditate together they can no longer be enemies. There's an image to conjure: armies meditating together. World leaders sitting for fifteen minutes of shared silence. Just think of the fruit that could bear.

Mother Theresa said, "The fruit of silence is prayer. The fruit of prayer is faith. The fruit of faith is love. The fruit of love is service. The fruit of service is peace."