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# Towards an Embodied Social Justice: Integrating Mindfulness Into Anti-Oppression Pedagogy

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INTEGRATING  
MINDFULNESS  
INTO ANTI-  
OPPRESSION  
PEDAGOGY

TOWARDS AN EMBODIED  
SOCIAL JUSTICE ©Berila 2014

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Contemplative Mind in Society, June 5, 2014

# + Who is joining us today?

- Experienced with Contemplative Practices—how to use in diversity classes
- Experienced with diversity classes—unfamiliar with contemplative practices
- Unfamiliar with both



# + My plan

- HOW and WHY we would use contemplative practices, specifically in Anti-Oppression classes.
- Practice
- What might emerge when we do use these practices in the classroom
- Some tips for handling those situations





# Part of my larger book project on Embodied Social Justice



- HOW and WHY contemplative practices (CP) are critical in Anti-Oppression pedagogy.
- CP as embodied wisdom and inquiry; cultivating embodied empathy for ourselves and those around us.
- Mindfulness as a tool for understanding and UNLEARNING Internalized Oppression; cultivating compassion
- “Resistance” as Dissonance and Discernment: Having productive Dialogues
- Potential Pitfalls—how to handle what can emerge with CP

# + My definitions



- Feminism
- Feminist Pedagogy
- Oppression/Anti-Oppression
  
- Mindfulness
- Contemplative Practices

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# Mindful Learning

Ellen J. Langer



- “Openness to Novelty
- Alertness to Distinction
- Sensitivity to Different Contexts
- Implicit, if not Explicit, Awareness of Multiple Perspectives
- Orientation in the Present” (23).

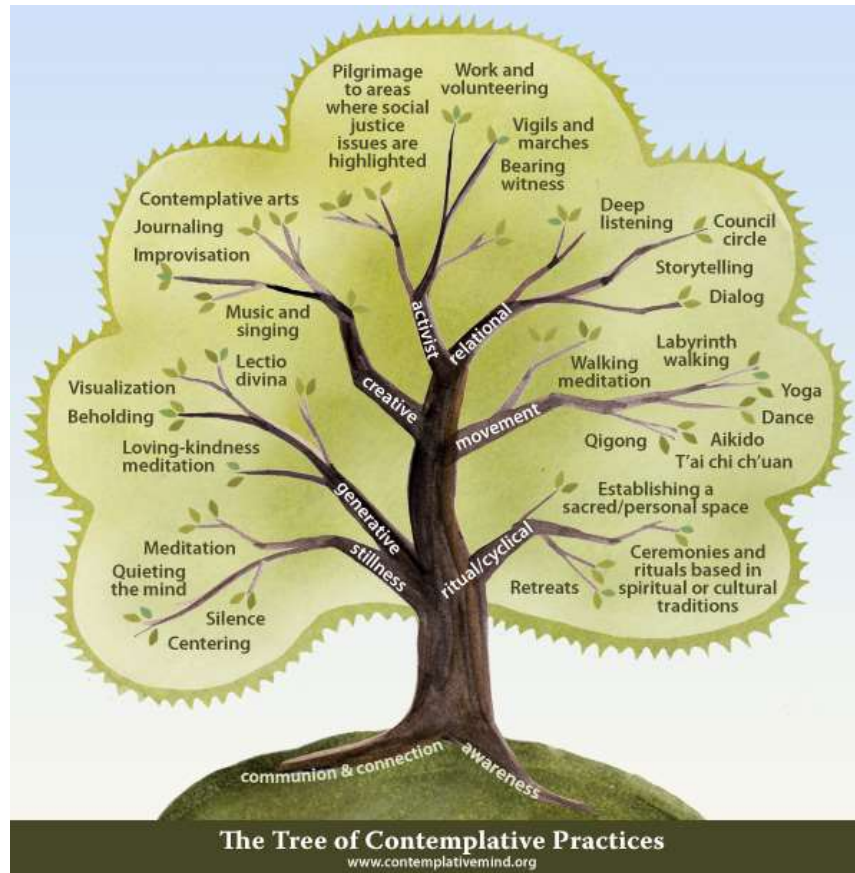




# Contemplative Practices Tree

Center for Contemplative Mind in Society

<http://www.contemplativemind.org/practices/tree>





# Why Integrate Mindfulness?

What does it offer to Anti-Oppression Pedagogy?

- Oppression does not operate on merely an intellectual level. It is painful and embodied.
- Conversations about oppression are hard, if they are real.
- Students, in any given classroom, will be coming from a variety of positionalities.
- This results in a variety of experiences.
- Students will be at different levels of awareness in processing of these issues.





# Apply learning to their lives



- Do we teach them how to understand what they are experiencing?
- Do we teach them how to understand *why* they might be having those reactions? And why other people, with different identities, might have different ones?
- Give them a language for understanding their responses: both intellectually and in an *embodied* way.
- Give them tools for processing and sitting with those reactions.

# + Compassion and Empathy



- Mindfulness as embodied self-reflection
- Unlearning internalized oppression at the very cells of our being.
- While we condemn oppression, we do more violence to ourselves and others if we don't bring compassion to our experience.
- Mindfulness teaches us compassion for self and others.

# + Oppression is held in our bodies, hearts, *and* minds.

- If we only ask students to learn about oppression at a conceptual level, we're missing 2/3 of the journey. I don't think we can effectively unlearn oppression if we don't engage that first 2/3 of the journey. I certainly don't think we can dismantle systems of oppression without engaging that first 2/3 of the journey.
- Mindfulness helps us do that.





# How does mindfulness do that?



- Cultivates the Witness.
- Teaches us Perspective.
- Helps us GET BIGGER than the experience
- Detachment (not disassociation)
- Nonjudgmental awareness
- Teaches us to accept what is---accept our responses, not the oppression itself.

# + Understand from different perspectives



- Emphasizes our connection with others without minimizing differences of identity and experience.
- Understanding how their experience and perspective shapes their actions and understandings.
- Avoid demonizing others
- Helps us learn to HONOR the experience (our own and those of others)



# Mindfulness helps us learn....




- Contextualize/situate
- Teaches us Discernment
- Discernment, in turn, teaches us adaptability
- Helps us create options
- We can be more empowered when we have choices.




# + The Holy Pause\*

- Helps us act more *intentionally*
- (Moving stimuli from the limbic system to the prefrontal cortex)
- Discernment and Strategic Action
- What will serve us in this moment?

\*(Miller, Yoga teacher training)



If we don't give students **TOOLS**  
for navigating these hard  
conversations, they will either  
+ shut down and avoid the  
discussions or lash out at each  
other.



+ Mindfulness is a **SKILL** that  
can be learned and  
a **PRACTICE** that builds  
resilience.



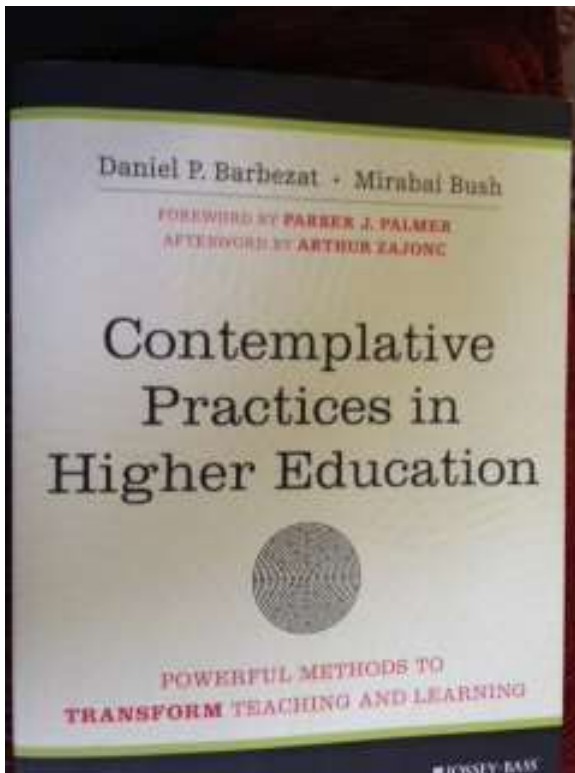
+ Critical for AUTHENTIC and  
Compassionate DIALOGUE  
about oppression.

# + A complex process that....

- Not going to happen in a semester.
- Identity development
- Plant the seeds



# + HOW to use Mindfulness in the classroom?



- The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society
- <http://www.contemplativemind.org>



# Practice

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# What happens when we integrate mindfulness in the classroom?



- Our students have complex lives.
- The classroom is an institutional space that is not safe for many people.
- Students come in at different levels of identity development and self-understanding
- Faculty deal with these issues, too.





# Scenario #1

- *Jennifer is an Asian American woman who was recently sexually assaulted by a male student with whom she went out on a date her second week on campus. She has not told anyone about it because she feels so ashamed. No one notices that she has gotten more withdrawn and quiet since the event, because few people on campus knew her before the incident. She has simply shut down, keeping her eyes downcast and wearing baggy clothing. In the seventh week of her Sociology class, the teacher begins to lead them through a body scan, telling them that this meditation practice can be a helpful way of handling the stress of the upcoming midterms. The professor turns out the lights, which makes Jennifer suddenly feel afraid. But she decides to give it a try, figuring she could use some help with stress.*

(Scenarios excerpted from my article, “Contemplating the Effects of Oppression” in *The Journal of Contemplative Inquiry*)



# + Scenario #1 (cont.)

- *As she listens to the Professor's voice and begins to drop into her body, the fear gets stronger. Her heart rate increases, she begins fidgeting, and her body tenses up. By the time the Professor has moved to the hip and pelvic area, Jennifer wants to crawl out of her skin. His voice grates on her and she wants to run from the room. When the exercise is over, she is shaking, and though the Professor says goodbye to her when she leaves, he doesn't notice that she shies away from him and doesn't come to class the next day. She spends the rest of the day in her darkened dorm room.*



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# Tips for Integrating Mindfulness into Anti-Oppression Pedagogy



- 1. *Assume that someone in the room has suffered from trauma.*
- 2. *Prepare the students for these possible reactions beforehand.*
- 3. *Offer the option of opting out.*
- 4. *Provide support resources.*
- 5. *Hold the space.*

*(Berila, “Contemplating the Effects of Oppression”).*



“You can't dominate people without separating them from each other and from themselves. The more people get plugged back into their bodies, each other, the more impossible [it] will be for us to be dominated and occupied. That's really the work right now.”

■ --Eve Ensler in *On Being* Interview



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