

Please help me



PHOTOS BY PETER CUNNINGHAM

learn who I am.

BARRY BOYCE talks to teachers about how contemplative practice can transform the meaning of education

IT'S A HAPPY TIME—playful, carefree, innocent. Such is the commonplace about childhood. And while there is some truth to it, it's an incomplete picture. It's doubtful childhood was ever so rosy as all that—we've always known about its darker side—but the picture you get today, from talking to the people who spend their lives working with children, may ask you to pay more attention to the inner lives of children. Many teachers will tell you that the average child in America leads a life that can be as stressful and fearful as it is materially luxurious. And those without luxury, they say, face even greater pressures. As children enter adolescence and teenagehood, the social, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual challenges escalate, often to a painful and even suicidal (and homicidal) degree. Growing up is very hard to do, and most of it happens in school, a place many of us would like to forget.

When you consider the number of people involved in educating and being educated in kindergarten through twelfth grade in America it's hard to take the state of our schools for granted. After health care, education is the most significant domestic policy concern. Each day in the U.S. and Canada, the equivalent of the entire population of Italy (approximately 60 million) attends school in K-12, and they are taught by a cadre of teachers equal to the population of Ireland (4 million). What should they teach, and how should they teach it? Each generation of teachers—and the administrators, university education departments, governments, and gurus that support and bedevil them—asks that question all over again.

One hears all kinds of answers—educational theory is an ever-burgeoning industry—but some of the freshest voices today are talking about, and trying out, methods that go beyond transmitting information and training in cognitive skills. In having children pay attention to their breath, to their walking, to the world around them, and to their own emotions and those of others, they are trying to include all parts of the



child, and all parts of the teacher, in the process of education. Beyond that, they are fostering a nurturing and caring climate in the classroom, and even expanding the object of study to include the workings of the mind itself. Some call it “contemplative education”; others are reluctant to name it anything just yet. The common thread that runs through the comments of all of the educators I spoke with, though, is that school can be a place of tremendous discovery, and real discovery requires all the resources of body, mind, and spirit that teacher and student can muster.

THE GARRISON INSTITUTE in Upstate New York was founded in 2002 “to explore the intersection of contemplative and spiritual experience with engaged action in the world.” One of its initiatives is called Awareness and Concentration for Learning, and over the next three years, it will “promote the research and implementation of contemplation-based interventions in the American public school setting.” The focus on the public school setting is a key part of the initiative’s goals. Many teachers will tell you that lots of wonderful “contemplative” work has been happening in small, private schools for a long time—including Montessori, Waldorf, and Quaker schools, to name a few—but for a wide-reaching impact to be made, methods must be proven effective by research and free of any special belief system, and they must speak to needs identified by teachers and administrators. Only then can they be adopted by the school systems that educate most of the children in America.

The initiative’s new director, Patricia (Tish) Jennings, founded a Montessori school in Napa Valley, California, and

trained Montessori teachers at St. Mary’s College in Moraga. She now holds a faculty research appointment at the San Francisco State University Department of Child and Adolescent Development. According to Jennings, “It’s vitally important that what we introduce in public schools is secular, not associated with any kind of religion. Scientific evidence is very important right now, because the only evidence we have at present that contemplative techniques work in educational settings comes from spiritual traditions. School districts will not and cannot blur lines between church and state. We need to be sure that the language we use is scientific and secular, and that the techniques do not require any kind of belief system to work.”

When I asked Jennings, who has been meditating for thirty years, if the line between spiritual and secular was not fuzzy at times, she readily agreed. But she also said it is possible to find in secular contexts the same truths and discoveries that come out of a religious tradition such as Buddhism. For example, the work of psychologist Ellen Langer points to our propensity to overlay past knowledge on current experience, leading us to believe that things are other than what they are. In other words, it would be

healthy for us to recognize that things are always changing, not solid and continuous. “The fact of the matter is,” she said, “that everything is impermanent, and you don’t need Buddhism to tell you that.”

In a sixty-five page “mapping report” on contemplation and education, Garrison surveyed programs that use contemplative techniques and created detailed definitions of what is encompassed by this field. Contemplative techniques, the report said, “include attention training

ABOUT THE PHOTOS: Peter Cunningham traveled to schools in Brooklyn, Harlem, Manhattan, and New Jersey in November 2005 to photograph students participating in The Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, a coalition of teachers, administrators, academics, and writers that provides “professional sustenance and hope” to literacy educators. Lucy Calkins, the project’s founding director, works with schools and school systems both at the administrative level and in the classroom. “Lucy’s programs teach skills for expressing the wonder of being alive,” Cunningham says. “I have seen children in her programs beg not to go out for recess so they could continue writing their stories.”





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and refinement practices, secular meditation, and yoga. Increased self-awareness, mindfulness, self-reflection, emotional intelligence, and social skills are among the outcomes associated with these techniques." In a statement that was echoed by everyone I talked to, the report said that these programs "share a common set of outcomes with mainstream education ... enhancing students' learning and academic performance, improving the school's social climate as well as promoting emotional balance and pro-social behaviors." It goes on to say that the programs also aim to develop "noble qualities such as peacefulness, internal calm, compassion, empathy, forgiveness, patience, generosity, and love."

"Contemplation" and "contemplative techniques" are not terms you are likely to hear when you're standing at the bus shelter, and some teachers find them too arcane or Eastern-religion-laden to be accepted into mainstream schools. Garrison finds the term

"contemplative" helpful, relying on a definition provided by Tobin Hart, author of *The Secret Spiritual Life of Children*, as "a third way of knowing that complements the rational and the sensory." While experts may disagree about what to call it, all seem to want to bring that third way of knowing into American classrooms.

LINDA WALLACE TEACHES at an elementary school in Colorado. She has taught every grade level of elementary school for close to thirty years and is also a long-time practitioner of contemplative techniques. In the past few years, she has been using exercises where children "focus on their breathing, their thoughts, their eating." She says, "This has had more impact than anything I've seen in my whole teaching career." First off, it helps the students academically, because they can focus their attention better and deal with all the tests they have to take these days. Life is often hectic and unfocused



for children, she says. “Students are multitasking, sitting in front of TVs and videogames. They are often very distracted. Very simple things like starting each class with a bell and having students focus on their breath help train their ability to attend to a task and can help transitions be much smoother.”

The variety of exercises and practices Wallace uses—including body scanning, paying attention while eating, visualizing a safe place, and generating thoughts of loving-kindness for relatives, friends, and others—also bring children physical and mental health benefits. “Children today have a lot of stress and a lot of problems with overeating,” she says. “There is more and more being written on the negative effects of multitasking on attention and learning. With these techniques, we can actually train children to notice tightness and pain, how stress shows up in their body. They can learn to slow down and notice their bodily sensations, including actually noticing when they are eating. It also helps with their meta-cognition, their ability to stop and reflect on their own thinking. They are learning that they are not their own thoughts.”

Other programs, Wallace says, “told kids to stop and think, but the kids did not have the resources to stop their thought pro-

cesses or their rapidly rising emotions. Contemplative practices help them to stop and get a different perspective, and then make a choice. Rather than imposing any belief on them, as some people might believe these practices do, it is quite the opposite. It asks them what their beliefs are and teaches students how to access them.”

Many programs that Wallace has tried in the past, with names such as “refusal skills, bully-proofing, and silent majority,” amounted to “teachers telling students what steps to follow, working from the outside in.” By contrast, Wallace says, “Contemplative practices provide a missing component, a perspective outside their regular thoughts and emotions that allows students to focus and center and ground and calm themselves, so they can access their inner knowledge.” She quotes a student who was afraid of forgetting during a test saying, “My mind went blank, so I used my breathing and then I could remember,” and another who felt embarrassed about her own body: “I used my anchor breath today because this boy always calls me ‘bunny ears.’ I calmed down and said to myself, ‘These are the ears God gave me and I’m going to keep them.’”

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THE ONE MILLION STUDENTS, 80,000 teachers, and 1,400 schools of The New York City Public School system form one of the largest, oldest, proudest, and most beleaguered school systems on the planet. A city within a city, it's a legendary place, regularly depicted in books, movies, and TV shows. It is also a very real place. In the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks in 2001, the trauma experienced by young people was felt most acutely in New York City's classrooms, particularly in Lower Manhattan. For Linda Lantieri, a prominent education activist who founded a post-9/11 schools program, "This horrible crisis was also an opportunity to acknowledge that both

Schools with Spirit; Nurturing the Inner Lives of Children and Teachers, which came out in the fall of 2001, Lantieri was turning a corner. "Having first included the heart in education, through all the work with social and emotional learning," she says, "I gradually moved further to wanting to include the spirit, so that all of a child's self could show up in the classroom."

Project Renewal—Tides Center is currently focusing on the twelve schools as demonstration sites for a variety of progressive techniques. It is widely acclaimed as an important pilot project that will provide valuable research to support approaches that aim to educate the whole child. Lantieri feels that "contemplative" is



teachers and children have an inner life, and that their inner life needed to be nurtured to bring them to recovery." Project Renewal: Building Resiliency from the Inside Out (a project of the Tides Center, which provides infrastructure for non-profit programs) started in the spring of 2002, with the goal of equipping "school staff and parents with the tools, skills, and strategies to strengthen their inner resiliency in order to take positive action in the face of grief and trauma and to model these skills for the young people under their care." Its target population was twelve schools in and around Ground Zero.

Lantieri defines resiliency as "not only bouncing back, but finding a state of well-being beyond our normal experience," and her concern for inculcating it in children radiates far beyond Ground Zero and crisis management. She has been an educator for thirty-eight years, and a daily meditator for even longer. She taught for many years in a middle school in East Harlem and went on to become an assistant principal, a school director, and a college teacher. She co-founded the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program, one of the most widely adopted social and emotional learning methodologies. When she put together the anthology

often simply equated with "meditation" and may often carry a religious connotation. Even though she acknowledges that "mindfulness is well on its way to becoming a secular term," she is reluctant to have a module with that name. She prefers to think and talk in terms of "nurturing young people's inner lives, which includes activities that we might call 'contemplative' and 'mindful,' but it can include a lot more. One of the challenges of this developing field is building common ground and finding a common lexicon for discussing students' and teachers' ultimate questions about meaning and purpose, the spiritual dimension of learning, and the connectedness we have that goes beyond our own mind and emotions. This work includes what we might call 'contemplative' techniques for quieting the mind, but also the arts, storytelling, and spending time in nature, and I've certainly noticed that it is not at all difficult to get children excited about this kind of work."

Lantieri stresses that academic performance is important but that it should come in the context of a new and broader definition of what it means to be educated. "A child who doesn't have a sense of meaning and purpose, a child who is fearful and anxiety ridden, is a child who can't learn," she says. "A bigger vision of

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education includes a wide range of skills that people need to be successful as they grow up and integrate into society. They will not only need to be academically intelligent but also emotionally, socially, and spiritually intelligent.”

Above all, Lantieri says, students, teachers, and school systems must have approaches, supported by sound research, that allow them to choose for themselves and to see what works in their own context. “You have to be able to let go of your preconceived notion of how you think it should happen,” she says. “If you are too narrow, thinking that what schools need is your particular program from a particular tradition—perhaps because it worked so well for you—that may not be something that is developmentally appropriate and can be widely adopted. In fact, people have asked for our program for their schools, but I am not ready to do that. We need to learn much more and provide basic knowledge and skills to teachers, parents, and principals, not simply offer a program.”

DAVID FORBES HAS ALSO worked within the New York City school system. His focus has largely been on high school, a time, many educators agree, when habits have become deeply ingrained and transformation can be difficult. Forbes’ focus is also on counseling, a natural fit for someone who hopes to bring contemplative practices into high schools. A long-time meditator, he teaches school counseling in the School of Education at Brooklyn College/City University of New York. His latest book, *Boyz 2 Buddhas*, focuses the lens of contemplative practice on an issue that has been widely discussed and debated since the massacre at Columbine and other violent incidents: What to do about troubled boys and what Forbes calls “mindless masculinity”? As horrific as these incidents were, Forbes was heartened by the attention they brought to the plight of young males.

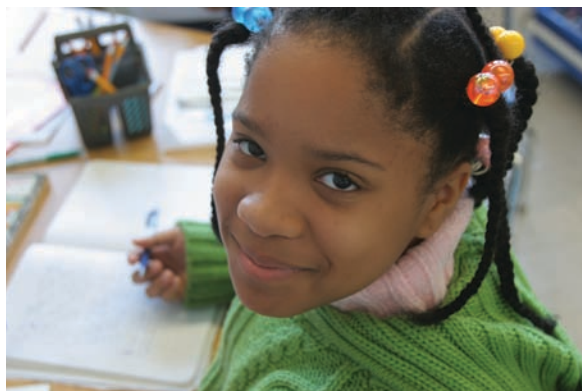
Like most counselors, Forbes feels that it is necessary to engage students by working within the world they know, “to promote youth development and culture, by working both to expose its destructive, unhealthy aspects and to tease out its transcendent possibilities.” He zeroed in on sports as an area that offered

simultaneously a breeding ground for “mindless masculinity” and the possibility of discovering a “neglected inner dimension.” He was inspired both by teachers of meditation (mainly Buddhist) and a wide variety of educators who were “applying holistic, transpersonal, and spiritual approaches toward higher human development.” He decided to try out some of what they were saying on the football fields of Brooklyn.

Forbes obtained permission to spend roughly an hour a week after school with members of a varsity football team. They discussed things that were on the students’ minds “to unload them so they could play football with better focus,” and practiced meditation “as a way to feel what it’s like to be in the zone.” Although the carrot dangled before the players was “the zone,” Forbes told them in the first session that “Meditation is not just a means to get whatever you want, but it is part of a wise tradition that helps us realize what is really important.”

Boyz 2 Buddhas is not a miraculous redemption story—the students were often antsy and found meditation quite difficult—but it does show how meditation offered the opportunity to notice and discuss feelings more openly before it began to leak over into other parts of the boys’ lives. As one young man said, “I do feel I have more awareness of my thoughts and feelings now than before I learned meditation practices. I feel it in football a little, but mostly in my life and in how I put things in perspective.”

Although Forbes continued to work with high school students directly, including a group of troubled girls and a group of dropouts, his experiences inspired him to focus on the larger issues of how to train counselors and create a school environment conducive to what he calls “contemplative urban education.” He feels the claustrophobia and chaos of the urban school environment provides a wealth of lessons that could be drawn out through contemplative practice: “the interdependence of everyone, the necessity for all of us to get along, the appreciation of difference, and the realization of underlying similarities.”





In Forbes' work, he uses terms such as "mindfulness," "bud-dhas," "bodhisattvas," and "vipassana," which may be less than secular, but he falls far short of religious indoctrination. He is excited that more research and more publications are demonstrating the power of contemplative practice and speaking to teachers' and administrators' needs, but he is also concerned that "if we are too eager to simply respond to what principals are anxious about—test scores, attendance records, behavior problems—we may get co-opted and lose the essential meaning. As so many have said, what we need to do is transform the meaning of education. In many cases, school sucks. It is an alienating experience that is only supported by externally applied reasons for being there. A large part of that comes from the educational dichotomy: teachers teach content; counselors can deal with the affective stuff. The contemplative breaks down that dichotomy, and that's what I want to teach counselors to help out with."

FORBES IS NOT ALONE in wanting to dissolve dichotomies. In Parker Palmer's best-selling book, *The Courage to Teach*, the oft-cited educational theorist points out the folly and the danger of try-

ing to take the person out of teaching: "Knowing myself is as crucial as knowing my students and my subject. When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are." Likewise, Arthur Zajonc, who is the academic program director for the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, one of the most prominent groups trying to disseminate contemplative practices, says, "Knowledge, from the point of view of any contemplative tradition, is not primarily object-oriented. It is epiphany- or insight-oriented. It's not good enough to know *about* reality; you need to change how you see reality. Real education is transformation."

While Zajonc's comments can apply to education at any level, his work is concerned with transforming the university. A UCLA study published in 2003, "Spirituality in Higher Education," described the dissatisfaction many college students have with lack of commitment to deeper meaning and purpose on the part of their professors and schools. Reports like that inspired Tom Coburn, president of Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado, to establish the Center for the Advancement of Contemplative Education. Coburn sees contemplative education as returning to the

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spiritual power that universities founded by religious institutions offered—but adapted to today's context. "Contemplative education recaptures a roundedness that has been missing from higher education in the West for probably 300 years," he says. "The enlightenment and the scientific revolution emphasized the brain and the cognitive mind. Focusing on the external world has been a very important dimension to work with. But it has also turned higher education against its legacy of working with the inner person."

Richard Brown, chair of Naropa's Contemplative Education Department, merges the concerns of K-12 teachers with the concerns of post-secondary educators. Brown trained and worked as an elementary school teacher. Feeling something lacking in his conventional teacher education, he came to Naropa in the early seventies, eventually teaching in Buddhist-inspired schools. In 1990 Naropa formalized its training in contemplative education with its Early Childhood Program, and in 2001 it started offering a low-residency, online master's program for working teachers. The program, Brown says, is now able to "bring contemplative perspective and practices to teachers from pre-kindergarten to higher education."

Brown feels it is important to expand on the view of "educating the whole person." Contemplative education, he says, "is not limited to practices to improve the person. It must also be about the content. Parker Palmer talks about the subject as the center of the classroom. It's not about the students or the teachers. It's about how a subject is explored and how the entire atmosphere contributes to that exploration. We are not autonomous units that learn and develop separately. We learn in an interconnected way that transcends ego. The knowledge and wisdom exist in the situation itself. That's the contemplative viewpoint."

The program is committed to staying true to its founding tradition. "We're based on the Buddhist teachings, but we do not

teach Buddhism *per se*," Brown says. "We extract Buddhist principles and practices and adapt them for contemporary public and private school systems. It's very organic. For example, one of our teachers, who is a foreign-language teacher, started her classes with a gong, and had her students pay mindful attention to sound and to silence. It helped them to learn language, but they never would have considered it Buddhist."

Likewise, Brown says, educators are developing completely non-sectarian techniques that have contemplative power, and Naropa includes them in its program, and at times expands upon them. "For example," he says, "there's a technique called 'the three-second wait' that asks teachers to wait three seconds before calling on a student during a class discussion, which leads to more students taking part than just the ones who are Johnny-on-the-spot. We take that a little further and ask the teacher to be mindful and explore what's going on in their own mind and body during that time. That way, the teacher becomes more of a listening presence, and they can also undercut some of their ambition to have things go perfectly. The relaxation and availability of the teacher has a tremendous impact on the classroom and how students learn. That is the fundamental thing we teach in our program: we ask teachers to pay attention to what's going on in their body and their mind."

Tish Jennings feels that teachers' abilities and interests hold the key to the future of contemplative education. Lantieri would agree. A major focus of her program has been training a group of thirty-five teachers to work with themselves first, before teaching the curriculum. Jennings is currently conducting research to "examine how greater emotional competence among teachers may translate into improved teacher-student relationships, increased student pro-social behavior, a more positive classroom atmosphere, and improved student academic performance." The teacher's "own social-emotional competence and presence and awareness are vital today, and nobody is really looking at that," she says. "We need to see how con-

templative practices can help teachers."

The next phase for contemplative education and for Garrison's initiative, Jennings feels, is dissemination. "We need to continue to learn about things that are happening out there, find research showing some evidence of success, and then disseminate that to teachers and administrators." But there's a right way and a wrong way to communicate with teachers, Jennings says. And getting it right will make all the difference.

"I know teachers," she says. "In general, they are caring people, altruistic people, but they face many stresses and are not well paid. They can get stuck and burned out. The turnover is huge. Teachers are also very skeptical of scientists, especially psychologists, who are not tuned into what it is like in the classroom, who come in from the outside and tell them what to do. They are well-meaning, but what the teacher hears is another person telling them they are doing a bad job. In telling them about contemplative education, I want to tell them, 'We care about you and we know you came to teaching because you love kids. We care about what you are doing and we want to help make it easier for you to do what you want to do.'"

What do teachers want to do? "Teachers do not go into teaching to become disseminators of information," Jennings says, "but to engage students in a state of awareness." That awareness will inevitably include being honest about a world full of war, terror, scarcity, and environmental degradation. That means teachers will need to help children uncover the deep inner resources that will enable them to work with the difficult world they will inherit—in Jennings's view, "to save humanity by changing how we are with each other."

"It's the spiritual dimension in education that we have been most frightened of, and yet the dilemmas of our times are deeply spiritual," Lantieri concludes. "As children take their place in the world, whatever skills we can offer to help them connect to their own inner teacher will help them reach out and respond to what our world needs now—with spirit." ♦