

Gently Riding Waves in the Ocean of our Humanity: Embodying Contemplative Practices

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Abstract

In the tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology, this paper highlights contemplative practice vignettes that emerged from our interpretive, participant-centered inquiry. Each unique vignette provides an autoethnographic exploration into being an academic, a teacher, a musician, a poet, a gardener, and a swimmer, while at the same time reflecting multiple identities within ourselves. We share how we each embody contemplative practices in different ways and with(in) different contexts through poetic expression, musicianship and being nurtured by earth and sustained by water. Yet, at the same time, our experiences interlock and intersect to reveal our shared humanity. As participant researchers, we are reflecting on our sense of well-becoming through our narratives of humility and gentleness that surface while riding the internal/collective flow.

Keywords: *contemplative practices, humanity, self-care, wellbeing, Autoethnography*

Entering the waters

As academics, teachers, musicians, poets, gardeners, swimmers, reflecting multiple identities within ourselves, we share how we each embody contemplative practices in different ways and with(in) different contexts. Through these practices, we cultivate self-care and self-love, exploring holistic approaches to stillness and flow, both for ourselves and others. We reflect on our sense of well-becoming through our narratives of humility and gentleness that surface while riding the internal | collective waves.

Water moves constantly, even if ever so slightly. The flow, movement, depth, subtleness, gentleness or thrashing, crashing, and smashing are all represented. We connect with the metaphor of riding waves. For us, this imagery gleans the perspective to be gentle on ourselves and each other with a common humanity, compassion and love. We consider water as healing and awe-inspiring (Keltner, 2023). We hold respect for it, knowing it can change form at any time. We are fascinated with how the flow of water can replicate, represent and allow a rethinking and repositioning as we engage with

our multiple identities. As a poet, shaping the flow of words on the page invites moving in and out of an emotional responsiveness that is evocative and vulnerable, much like waves lapping at the edge of a rock pool. As a musician, the flow of rhythm invites movement as one embodies playing and listening, much like water moving with a current. As a gardener, being connected to earth, caring for life by watering, invites a rawness in connecting to our senses. As a swimmer, the act of being in water, surrounded and immersed facilitates a recalibration from head, through body to align with spirit.

As we enter water, we connect with Jon Kabat-Zinn who in his mindfulness teaching talks about how 'you can't stop the waves, but you can learn to surf' (Kabat-Zinn, 2013; Seritan et al., 2021). This quote reminds us about the dynamic nature of life and what we can and cannot change. It speaks about the challenge of coping with stressors in our lives, while acknowledging that acceptance and finding balance through acts of self-care is an alternative choice to resistance. We are learning how to surf for our individual/collective wellbeing and at the same time we recognize that:

... some of us have not entered the water, or cannot find the water, let alone explore how to ride the wave or even be aware that we can ride the wave in different ways. Reading the surf is required. Learning how to do this is one thing many of us are not taught how to do. We might be lucky to have a mentor or leader who teaches us, guides us, and jumps in the surf with us. But many of us have not had this. (Lemon, 2022a, p. 4)

What might these surf lessons look like? How might we enter the water? What happens when we are in the water? Our vignettes offer windows, frameworks, and pathways for further exploration,

serving as a means for gentle unearthing and a natural flow of attunement.

Our lens

Hermeneutic phenomenology (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) drives our interpretive (Erickson, 1986), participant-centered inquiry in which we highlight vignettes of contemplative practices (Davidson & Dahl, 2017). Our investigation places its emphasis on the unfolding of emergent and contingent phenomena. In applying sociocultural frameworks (Tobin, 2015), we seek to explore the humanizing aspects of being academics by acknowledging and examining with curiosity the nature of who we are. At the same time, autoethnographic exploration (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) serves as a worthy tool to unearth and cultivate a holistic sense of what it means to be human. In the pursuit of authentic inquiry (Tobin & Alexakos, 2021), we adopt a multifaceted approach that fosters reflective and reflexive practices aimed at promoting both individual and collective well-being which is often neglected in higher education contexts (Lemon, 2022b).

In the next section of this paper, we share vignettes of how each of us embody contemplative practices in different ways and with(in) different contexts.

Gentle leadership

In this section I engage with poetry as both a contemplative practice and an embodied action of creative expression. Poetry serves as a means of representation for the fluctuations of life experiences, both positive and negative, allowing for a nuanced discussion that touches both the writer and reader (Fidyk, 2016). Poetry provides a

powerful method for capturing and examining experiences, leading to a compelling response (Faulkner, 2019; Hoyser, 2019; Lemon, 2021b). This engagement with poetry is embodied in both the act of sharing and in the reactions elicited, serving to enhance, transform, and touch the hearts of those who partake (Faulkner, 2019; Leggo, 2018). Through creative expression, poetry leaves its participants enriched, allowing for the processing, shifting, or accepting of ideas (Faulkner, 2019; Hall et al., 2016), while serving as a source of healing and a site for dwelling, reflection, and contemplation (Leggo, 2008, p. 167).

The raw nature of poetry enables the sharing of personal voices, eliciting curiosity and inviting engagement on both an emotional and cognitive level (Lemon, 2021a; 2022c; Januchowski-Hartley et al., 2018). A response is called upon one. The rawness, captured in a vulnerability and courageous curiosity, allows for a heart and mind connection. In the context of this paper, poetry allows for an exploration into gentle leadership in the context of higher education. A tuning into what it means, but also what happens when you are confronted, othered for this style that triggers something in someone else that has you questioning what it is you do, how, and why. I take you on a journey across two poems. heart / mind intersections is the first poem representing the interesting battle between heart and mind as one becomes attuned, aligned, and aware. The second, named embracing gentleness, and as title itself facilitates the movement towards a groundedness in being. A delicateness in the words, flow presented with an emerging confidence to truly listen to who one is, is in becoming through transformation.

leadership, leading is not about you
 isn't about just you
 it's about others', who you touch
 mentally
 emotionally
 spiritually

it's about being real
 facing what is real
 being in the moment

listening, holding the space, being present with heart and mind
 it's not head
 just head
 that's a disconnection
 to true self
 to the moment
 to each other

leading is not about being perfect, being right, having all the answers, control, one voice

you ride the waves
 ups and downs
 connect
 feel
 effort / effortless
 courage
 leaning into the present
 leaning into the real you
 holding the space for each other

expanding possibilities
 growing
 helping
 guiding
 calmness
 centredness, a grounding
 nurturing

being real
 aware
 deeply connected to true self
 gentle
 a gentleness that ripples through you, others', each other
 a presence with compassion
 kindness
 appreciation

truly listening
 a depth intertwined with vulnerability
 rawness
 honesty
 trust
 respect
 hope
 transformation

Figure 1. heart / mind intersections (poem)

care, compassion, empathy
a gentleness
soft words speak louder than the roar of thunder
soft word spoken with heart, gentleness, empathy
 respect
trust
 guidance
 listening
 guiding with kindness and wonder
 curious together
 inquiring and bring out the best
 always learning with and from one another
leading with heart, showing the way
gently they speak and hearts they open
compassion and understanding they foster
care they model
a stillness present, ever so present in amongst the complexity of others
guiding, not forcing,
suggesting with openness
encouragement, setting the tone, always seeing possibility
 seeing, feeling, embodying the gifts we each bring
the gentle leader is never alone
equality and respect for all
the gentle leader nurtures,
 fosters
kindness and understanding for the weary and worn
the gentle leader guides us through the ups and downs
 guiding, interrupting control, command, top down
 embracing a wholeness
embracing a groundedness to center one, all, each other
bringing an intentionality for all

Figure 2. *embracing gentleness (poem)*

Becoming a jazz musician

The collective structures of playing music with others provide a means to attunement – both with the self and with others. Through a holistic education lens, this vignette presents an account of returning to playing in musical groups.

Recently returning to playing music with others has been an enriching and enlightening

experience that has enabled me to look back on my perhaps self-limiting thoughts over the years about becoming a musician. What is special about now is my fortunate location in a supportive community of jazz musicians at different stages of becoming, underscoring the words of the jazz great, Ornette Coleman, ‘music is a verb’.

The launch of a new jazz education course for adults coincided with a wave of local activities as we emerged from the first New Zealand (NZ) COVID lockdown in July 2020. I leapt at the opportunity to start playing the clarinet again after a two decade hiatus. Although I had played “jazz” in a work band I soon realized that was a generous description of our albeit enjoyable activity. Embarking on becoming a ‘cat’ overlapped with a time when jazz musicians along with everyone else were faced with closed borders. Overseas touring bands could not visit and those who had been overseas returned to NZ. With this restricted movement of musicians, there was a solidarity in our island nation– ‘being there for others’, a collective self-care. A generosity of spirit pulpitated amongst people coming together around music, with venues keen for business supporting the cause. It became a moment for jazz which more easily accommodated the pandemic restrictions of table-service in small venues. In their chapter on the use of the visual arts for contemplative self-reflection, Kwah and Fellner (2021) point out the capacity of arts-based methods to “access embodied or otherwise implicit aspects of experience” (p. 174). For me, this time engaging in music-making provided an opportunity to engage in self-care through the embodiment of jazz.

George Gershwin’s 1930’s jazz standard, “I’ve got rhythm, I’ve got music”, reminds me of one of the first things we learned on our course; the three T’s of jazz - time, tone, tune in that order. With my

only music education being classical, I was surprised to learn of the relative lesser importance of playing the right notes. Rhythmic language was new to me as I developed my musical literacy; the flow of the music, the tension and release within a tune and the idea of letting the tune breathe - essentially an energy flow through the tune. Learning that one of the aspects of playing that sets players apart in interpreting jazz standards is phrasing or shaping a sequence of notes is particularly pertinent to jazz. Radical or close listening of phrasing has transformed the way I experience music after decades of 'being audience'! I'm now fully immersed in the moment with a sharpened awareness of the music. As part of our classes, whether listening or playing, we were invited to just "be with" the music and embody the experience. After closely listening to different versions of a tune multiple times, one can remember the feeling it engenders. This feeling transcends time and place. Understanding rhythm is ongoing whether listening or playing.

Learning to play with others was an important focus of the course. We were encouraged to watch closely and communicate with our bodies and our instruments - the only way possible, of course, when playing a wind instrument! We felt fully immersed, or in the zone, a sense of collective flow through the music-making. Improvising was new to most of the group. From the first session we were required to solo, even if it was only one note but following the rhythm. To say that this did not cause great alarm and consternation would be misrepresenting the moment. It catapulted us into a musician zone of being. The idea of holding space for others to take a turn to solo reminded me of a childhood skipping rope game in which you watched the turns of the big rope in judging when to come into the center of the rope for your turn at skipping. I was also struck by a sense of

wonderment that the group was providing backgrounds just for my playing and how special that felt. We learned that a soloist held the floor for as long as they wanted provided they exit according to the form that is at the end of a set number of bars - typically 16 or 32. That sense of vulnerability during soloing generated attunement with fellow players, in which we can hold and allow ourselves to be held by others.

Knowing the history of the genre very quickly became relevant to becoming a jazz musician. The contested label of jazz is fundamentally captured by the legendary jazz singer, Nina Simone, who preferred the term black classical music to jazz which she sees as a white person's label and a reminder of the hegemony of European classical music. In fact, one of the first jazz groups I joined during the pandemic introduced me to 'Trad' or New Orleans' jazz as a subgenre. While I knew some of the tunes, I was curious to learn how little had been written down, with charts being a more recent custom. How could I have attended two AERA conferences in New Orleans and missed the opportunity to listen to local musicians playing traditional jazz! Similarly on my many trips to New York over the past two decades I privileged classical music, amassing around fifty live opera performances at the Met, yet I stayed within walking distance of the Village Vanguard and Smalls jazz clubs! Always on my list, but never quite achieved.

Earth and water

In our vignettes, we (Linda and Malgorzata) share our habits of being nurtured by earth and sustained by water as self-care practices that support our friendship and professional partnership as co-teachers/ co-researchers (Noble

& Powietrzyńska, 2021). As teacher-educators we embrace contemplative practices which research has shown can support personal, communal, and societal well-being (e.g., MLERN, 2012). In this dialogue around the river of humanity, we self-reflect and lean into the possibility to disrupt toxic structures and systems in pursuit of empowerment, liberation and joy (Muhammad, 2023). Our methodology resembles an Autoethnography understood as “the coproduction of a duoethnographic text by two writers, often separated by time and distance,” (Denzin, 2014, p. 23; citing Diversi & Moreira, 2009). Centering the story of the self and focusing exclusively on narrations and descriptions of personal experience are typical to autoethnographic studies and may often be used to study the self as an educator (Hughes & Pennington, 2017). In reflecting on moments of awakening to our emotions, and the intersectional relationship of our lived experiences, we embrace the identity of Ubuntu translated “I am because we are,” which asserts that the individual’s existence is contingent upon relationships with others (Ladson-Billings, 2003, p. 398). By situating the wholeness of self, we can embody a sense of mutual belonging as a foundation for our contemplative pedagogy.

Earth

Those who dwell, as scientists or laymen, among the beauties and mysteries of the earth are never alone or weary of life. (Carson, 1956, p. 48)

Growing up in Poland, I (Malgorzata) was fortunate to have spent many summers in a small village helping my grandmother grow organic produce and tend to small farm animals. That intergenerational gift of respect for and

connection to the land is alive in me today as I continue the tradition of caring for what has become a micro-ecosystem of local flora and fauna in my NYC backyard. Gardening, which has been found to provide substantial human health benefits (Soga et al., 2016), is a grounding practice that reminds me of being one with the natural world. It is an ongoing, interactive and vastly participatory “biology lesson” in awe-inspiring perpetual life cycles of birth, growth, decay, death, and rebirth (Keltner, 2023). When in my garden, I bear witness to Thích Nhất Hạnh’s teaching on interbeing (2017); on how interconnected all life is. In a dialectical relationship (Tobin, 2015), I am both a parent and a child as I care for the land and it cares for me. When standing barefoot on the ground, I experience a quieting of my ego and a vanishing of my default self (Bai et al, 2017). I dial down my tired, task-oriented thinking and my rumination-prone mind; instead, my senses are activated through the smells, sounds, sights and textures in the collective sanctuary I help to co-create. The aromas and pastels of flowers I have planted attract the smallest of our winged friends. I watch in wonderment the buzzing busyness of bumblebees, petal landings of bright-colored butterflies, and an occasional imperceptible fluttering of hummingbirds. In an aerial dance, they all gather sweet, fragrant floral nectar while doing the life-sustaining work of pollination. In spring, I delight in observing nature’s beaky architects gather sticks and twigs and use them to construct elaborate nesting homes for their young. These expert musicians gift me soothing sounds of their songs, calls, and cries which are a welcome departure from the cacophony of city noise. When sitting outside on a warm evening, I may get a surprise visit by a racoon family who, in their search for food, skillfully navigate tops of fences as they march between the neighboring plots. On occasion, I

catch a glimpse of a female opossum; a precious litter of multiple babies hanging on tight as they ride on their mama's back. In fall, the gray, bushy-tailed squirrels hurry in search of acorns that they then foresightfully bury in the ground for winter storage while unknowingly aiding regeneration and dispersal of oaks (University of Richmond, 1998). In my attunement with the beauty around me, and in an act of self-care, I experience a sense of ecological belonging and wholeness.

Many parallels may be drawn between gardening and education. As gardeners we guide and nurture our students to grow, bloom, and mature. We help to shape them and, in turn, they shape us. In the process, just like in the garden, we seek and often find joy. Indeed, in her recent book, Gholdy Muhammad (2023) calls for "unearthing joy" that has been lost in many classrooms. Drawing on the wisdom of Black ancestors, she posits that by applying pedagogies of equity and excellence, by digging into the ground, uprooting, and bringing to the surface what has been pushed down and concealed, we can move students and educators toward the sun: to genius, justice and joy.

Water

Highest good is like water. Because water excels in benefitting the myriad creatures without contending with them and settles where none would like to be, it comes close to the Way (Laozi, 1989, p. 11).

Being submerged in water has afforded me (Linda) a kinesthetic sense of letting go and at the same time a source of deep ethical insight into the direction of my life's purpose. As an urban dweller, I enjoy a visceral connection to the beauty and wonder of water, half-naked, in the local public

pool. Being immersed in water I begin the process of recalibration from my head, through my body, to align with my spirit. Swimming has measurable benefits by reducing the level of my anxiety to enhance my well-being by literally washing away the fire in my head from the high-impact stress of my daily grind. Through my ear plugs, the water's flow overshadows the numbing of digital noise. As noted by Dacher Keltner (2023), "the sounds of water can lead to awe-related vagus nerve activation" (p.127). Passing across my goggles a film of water blurs the movie of a life snapped one frame at a time that I tend to name as the existence of self, a false self that dictates how I live and behave. Woo Myung (2013) writes, "The real world is already complete, it is already enlightened. Only man is dead for he lives in a world of pictures," (p. 14). Water rising and falling over my entire being holds me and asks only that I breathe. Breathe in, breathe out, breathe deeply, hold breath. The rhythm of my breath and my aquatic movements become one with water's flow. Often, out of nowhere the shadow of another water creature, a swimmer, catches my gaze. I remember that we are interconnected. I consider how to negotiate the dynamics of a shared space. Being mindful of how the water and energy flows within and between our half-naked selves is a transforming experience. This mirrors my wonder about my classroom, how without words my students and I negotiate and compassionately hold space together as we learn to interpret silent behaviors or habits that signal needs to be held. So often in the pool, I notice a bottleneck that threatens to disrupt the rhythm of our flow. To avoid building up traffic at one end, I turn and circle back without completing the full lap and in doing so open up a space between us. Increasingly, I find joy in this circling rather than in mindlessly pushing forward in one direction. Similarly, in my classroom, I combine what I know

universal traits of well-being and well-becoming
(Bai et al., 2018).

We offer the poem, Just am. May these words
touch you as they touch us.

flow, groundedness, back to authenticity
removal of ego
back to just is
earth, water, sounds, soul, peace
quieting of mind

moving in and out
like waves
rhythms of being
exploring
listening
centredness
calm
grateful

trust in self
create and cultivate space
kindness
true self

just am
one

Figure 5. Just am (poem)

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