

Reflectivity, Creativity, and the Space for Silence

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ABSTRACT *This paper examines the practice of meditation as a basis for reflecting on the importance of silence and separation from the dominant preoccupations of the ego and the social world in order to foster genuinely critical thought and creative expression. A central argument of this paper is that while educational discourse pays considerable theoretical attention to critical reflection and creativity, the working reality of everyday life in many educational settings seldom affords the kind of ‘space for silence’ that allows them to be nourished or extended.*

Introduction

A few years ago, I joined a meditation session called ‘The Deep Silence.’ Once a week, for an hour at noon, I and an eclectic group of other educators and busy urban professionals would gather in a basement room of a downtown social center to sit in meditative silence. As a newcomer to meditation, I was astonished by three things: first, by the noisy persistence of the mental clutter lurking behind my closed eyes; second, by the sheer unfamiliarity of simply sitting still for any length of time; and third—much later—by how necessary I came to see this quiet time, not just in my personal life, but also in my work as a writer, researcher, and educator. I came to rely on it not only as a respite from the cluttered hubbub of the daily world, but also as a much-needed source of creative and intellectual energy and renewal.

The Central idea I want to explore in this paper is that the kind of ‘deep silence’ fostered by meditation, among many other contemplative practices, is a necessary requirement for deep thought and self-knowledge which, in turn, are essentially creative in nature and are of vital importance in enhancing both intellectual and artistic pursuits. However, far from creating conditions that foster and encourage silence of this sort, in most contexts of educational practice—as with most contexts of contemporary life everywhere—the dominant mode is primarily of noise and haste, rather than of space and silence. One of the biggest challenges facing educators today is how to create the necessary conditions to foster the kind of contemplative silence that nourishes the creative impulse lying at the heart of all significant learning and living.

The structure of this paper proceeds along three separate but related strands. I begin by looking at certain aspects of how my experience of the ‘writing and reading’ side of everyday academic life have shaped, and continue to shape, my interest in the theme of silence, and my growing sense of its importance as a condition for independent and creative thought. I then introduce some of the literary resources—primarily works of poetry, fiction, and hermeneutic philosophy—which have shaped my thinking about this theme. I then turn to the concept of critical reflection, which I see as one area of the adult education literature that explores the linkages between creativity and critical thought, but attends little to the idea of silence as a necessary condition in which the reflective process can flourish. Or, let me put this another way, grounded in the context of my own experience: I often find myself talking *about* critical reflection and identifying it as a core element of my calling as a writer, researcher, and teacher. Yet—and this, ultimately, is the core issue I want to explore—I seldom find myself in work situations where opportunities to meaningfully *engage* in critical reflection are easily fostered or nourished.

Everyday life in the Academy

As a university professor, I am expected to be as much a writer as a teacher. I put a high value on the writing side of my vocation, yet I am the sort of writer (and thinker) who comes to clarity slowly—the process of preparing this paper, for instance, being fairly typical. It required, firstly, finding a central focus among multiple strands of ever-changing thoughts, and secondly, gathering my loose thoughts about that focus into a linear and ordered structural format. For me, it usually takes a few false starts (in this paper it took four) before finding a way to begin, followed by several rounds of revision, before the whole paper actually begins to gel and cohere. The initial start-up phase of paper-writing I often find myself going through seems to have certain parallels with the process that many dogs go through—pawing and circling, pawing and circling, pawing and circling, to get things just right before settling down. My analogy for the revision phase is more akin to fishing than to the pre-sleep fidgeting of a fastidious dog. It often feels like wrestling with a huge, deeply submerged, reluctant fish pulling at the end of the line. Reeling it in takes time, and proceeds in fits and starts—periods of clarity, when the words cooperate and come together, interspersed with periods of vexation, when they skitter out of control and refuse to do my bidding.

After several years of this, I have come to recognize that—at least for me, and I suspect for many others—these skirmishes, struggles, and false starts are a necessary and unavoidable part of the thinking and writing process. Writing well and thinking clearly take time, persistence, concentration, and patience. It takes a certain kind of mental space to know what the right words are, and to know when to chase them, when to wait for them to present themselves. However, I have also come to recognize how very circumscribed and restricted the opportunities for such space generally are. A colleague recently stated that she typically needs about three straight days of uninterrupted time in order to get a solid start on writing a journal article. However, in most academic settings, three straight days for writing—and for simply *starting* to write at that—are a rare commodity. Even three straight hours are hard

to come by, in the midst of the usual busy round of meetings, emails, telephone calls, and other action items on the ever-increasing 'to do' list that seems to be such an unquestioned component of contemporary academic life. The time for writing typically comes, not in long stretches but in snatched moments during the working day, or in raids on the supposed leisure time of evenings or weekends.

It is not only the space for prolonged writing which is at such a premium. The space for careful reading is also pushed into a far corner. I have noticed a growing tendency in my reading habits to busy myself in the process of *acquiring* books I'm eager to read, but not knowing quite where or how to begin when it comes to actually sitting down and *reading* them. My standard mode of reading has become skimming and grazing, and getting by on the essentials. The sensation of sinking into a book, of immersing myself in the deep well of words and meanings, seems like an unadulterated, and almost guilt-inducing, luxury. Not only is finding the time an issue, it is also a matter of having the capacity to pay attention. To be deeply reading one book means not to be reading all those others (and so, where to start, where to start?); moreover, it also means not to be attending to all those other things clamouring for my action and attention.

These are the conditions under which my arrival in the 'Deep Silence' meditation group took place. I did not think of it, when I first showed up, as having anything to do with my academic life. However, it was not long before I started to notice how such experiences of deep silence were in such stark contrast with my working life, and how much I came to see them as a source of creative and intellectual enrichment in my academic work. It was not simply that these sessions were restful, and I came away feeling refreshed and invigorated. Indeed, the experience was often far from restful, as my muscles ached and twitched from the unaccustomed rigours of sitting still, and I as struggled to quiet the incessant chattering of my conscious mind. The value, as I came to see it, was not in achieving untrammelled repose or mystical Zen-like calm (hardly!), but simply in feeling slightly more *expanded*, so that the thought and attention required for careful reading and writing might have a bit more space to grow.

Literary Resources

There are numerous sources, in the literature of many disciplines, which refer to meditation and contemplation as vital to the pursuit of mental clarity and self-knowledge (Dunne, 1993; Merton, 1989). The eastern religious traditions of Buddhism and Sufism, for instance, are commonly associated with the concept of 'mindfulness' as a form of heightened awareness of oneself and one's being-in-the-world (Hanh, 1987; Helminski, 1992), and of the practice of meditation as a means of attaining a greater sense of mindfulness in the present moment. Meditation, from this perspective, is viewed primarily as a means of moving away from the overly-critical, overly-analytical thought patterns associated with the western world since antiquity (Main, 1989; Tarnas, 1991), so that the silence of meditative practice is seen not so much as a space for critical self-scrutiny and coming to know one's own mind, but more as a means of self-forgetting and coming to relinquish the sense that

one's mind is worth knowing at all. This, at least, has been my own assumption about meditation in the past, viewing intellectual rigour and contemplative silence as quite opposite and unrelated processes.

I have learned, however, that silent meditation and contemplation have equally strong associations with the religious and philosophical traditions of the west as well as of the east. I have also come to see my earlier view of meditation as an overly simplistic dichotomization of different, but ultimately interwoven, dimensions of what it means to think and to know. With regard to the western heritage of contemplative silence, it has been identified as an important aspect of certain historical approaches to Christian prayer (Main, 1989; Keating, 1992). It has also been identified as an important feature of the philosophical traditions of Greco-Roman antiquity. According to Hadot (2000), for many of the ancients, a form of spiritual discipline—or contemplative practice, broadly defined—was required to heal the soul, hone the mind, and transcend the delusions and obstructions that limit our capacity to perceive the world as it is. Among the different schools of ancient philosophy, Hadot identifies various types of spiritual exercise, 'from the mobilization of energy and consent to destiny of the Stoics, to the relaxation and detachment of the Epicureans, to mental concentration and renunciation of the sensible world among the Platonists' (p. 101). Consistent among them, however, is the central attention to the quest for wisdom, lucidity, and knowledge of ourselves and the world, attained through disciplined attention to inner stillness. In this respect, the practice of meditation from a classical perspective entailed a combined emphasis on both the training of thought and the detachment from passions, which were often entangled with the preoccupations of a thinking mind. Attending to the 'deep silence,' in this context, involved some form of removal of attention—as a daily practice or total break from the mundane world—from the dramas, preoccupations, and diversions of the everyday.

Although meditation itself has not, to my knowledge, been a regular practice or topic of discussion in more recent philosophical developments in the western tradition, there are many elements of hermeneutic and phenomenological philosophy which entail a dimension of contemplative inwardness which has many parallels with meditation, and the spiritual exercises of the ancients as described by Hadot. Within these traditions, there is a central emphasis on the nature of human experience, and on the lifelong process of coming to understanding, which is seen as immersed in uncertainty and clouded by unknowing (Gadamer, 1991; Heidegger, 1968; Bachelard, 1960; Ricoeur, 1992). Like meditation, the goal of phenomenology and hermeneutics is, in part, to 'situate awareness in the present' (Bachelard, 1960, p. 4), in order to draw one's consciousness away from the received and reified 'truths' of the dominant worldview, and approach the task of thinking afresh. According to Heidegger (1968), the dominant conception of rational thought is misbegotten and awry. What we call thinking, he proposes, is typically *not* thinking, since thought—from the perspective he approaches it—is not orderly, or easily apprehended. The nature of thought, for Heidegger, is enigmatic, evasive, confounding, and mysterious—it *withdraws* from easy or immediate apprehension. The approach to thought requires time, patience, and if not silence at least the capacity

for listening more closely, past the “one-track thinking” which has established a dominion ‘so vast today that our eyes can barely encompass it’ (p. 26).

Both Heidegger’s view of the need for close listening and his purposeful use of ‘one-track thinking’ as a metaphor to critique the dominant mode of (thoughtless) thought, have strong parallels with elements of T.S. Eliot’s (1944) poetic opus *Four Quartets*, which is deeply contemplative in tone and theme. The image of the ‘track’ that occurs in *Four Quartets* appears variously in the form of the London subway, a passenger train, and the wake of an ocean liner—in each case signifying the ‘metalled ways’ of the mundane world, ‘distracted from distraction by distraction, filled with fancies and empty of meaning.’ Contemplative silence is an equally recurring theme of the poem, as the only approach to meaning that has any significance. In Eliot’s case, it is not so much the Heideggerian ‘thought that withdraws’ but the withdrawal from thought that matters. In a passage drawn from the work of the medieval mystic St. John of the Cross in his treatise on the dark night of the soul, Eliot urges us to

... be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.

Here, we are back in the terrain of detachment from passion, similar to that espoused in the spiritual practices of the ancients and the meditation traditions of the east. Yet in each case, the aim of ‘waiting without thought’ is not to become thoughtless and give up the project of thought altogether, but to achieve a greater capacity for thoughtfulness, more grounded in self-knowledge and less subject to the whims, fancies, and driving concerns of the present day.

It may seem that, in these brief reflections on such an eclectic array of literary sources, I have wandered rather far away from my earlier confessions about my restless-dog-followed-by-fishing-expedition approach to writing, and my hunter-gatherer approach to (not) reading, as I experience them in the current context of my academic work. But, in fact, I find the views put forward by these various authors to be validating and reassuring in at least two important ways. First, I am encouraged to wonder if the elusiveness of meaning that is such a key part of my struggles with the written word might be a small taste of what Heidegger means about thought as something that constantly retreats from our grasp. Second, I am reaffirmed in my sense that the driving-train reality of academic working life is deeply at odds with the yearning for deep thought that has drawn me into the kind of work that I do (in my reading, writing, and teaching), and seriously restricts the conditions under which that work is possible. What struck me most, in my initial experience of meditative silence, was my sense that these opportunities for contemplative stillness are essential to meaningful and critical thought, but that the space for such stillness has been seriously eroded by the frantic culture of overwork that is now taken for granted, or grudgingly tolerated, as the natural mode of working life in academic and most other work settings (Schor, 1991).

Critical Reflection and Creativity

Most of my comments have so far been focused on the lack of space for contemplation in the current context of academic work. But how does it pertain, more specifically, to the themes of critical reflection and creativity? As suggested earlier in this paper, the concept of critical reflection is an area of the adult education literature which has important resonances with the themes I am exploring in this paper. The term critical reflection has been defined variously (Brookfield, 1994; Cranton, 1996; Mezirow, 1990), but in broad terms refers to the interpretation of experience involving the ‘critique of assumptions upon which our beliefs have been built’ (Mezirow, 1990, p. 1). As such, it can be seen as a direct descendant of the philosophical project of Greco-Roman antiquity to strive for self-knowledge through rigorous scrutiny of personal habits and social prejudices. It also has strong associations with phenomenology and hermeneutic philosophy in its emphasis on meaning-making and interpretation (Gadamer, 1991; Valdes, 1991), and even with the theme of *Four Quartets*, which one author has described as essentially being about the process of learning from experience and coming to knowing reality (Grant, 1990). Recent authors have also discussed the spiritual dimensions of critical reflection (English & Gillen, 2000), which further locates it within the convergence between philosophical and religious traditions discussed above. However, there is little attention, in the actual practice of adult education—within the academy and beyond—to the central need for contemplation and quiet time, in order for the reflective process to be genuinely nourished and fostered. To be busy to the point of distraction is the dominant *modus operandi*. Critical reflection—like thought itself, as Heidegger would have it—takes time, space, patience, discipline, and close listening to engage in meaningfully. Yet, if my own experiences, and what I hear and see in the experiences of many others, are anything to go by, the conditions in which we all labour as academics, students, and education practitioners seem almost antithetical to these requirements.

The connection with the arts, in all of this, is central. Although some have challenged the inclusion of creativity as a part of the process of critical reflection (Jarvis, 1992), the basic tenets of phenomenology and hermeneutics, from which the concept of critical reflection descended, point to creativity and aesthetic awareness as essential dimensions of human thought and consciousness. In particular (especially vis-à-vis *Four Quartets*), poetic language has been identified by many philosophers in the phenomenological/hermeneutic tradition as ‘enjoy[ing] a particular and unique relationship to truth’ (Gadamer, 1991, p. 105). From this perspective, poetry and many other forms of creative expression express an idea of truth that encompasses the mystery, wonder, joy, and anguish that are part of the human experience. Yet the ‘metalled ways’ of mundane life typically obscure and occlude our full perception of these truths of existence. The role of creative expression, as with the role of critical reflection, is to uncover them, and help us understand them more deeply. And creativity, like thought, takes quiet time and a sense of space to encounter it with our full attention. In the same way that critical reflection is a central concept in adult education, creativity is a central component

of our capacity for critical reflectivity. As educators, writers, readers, artists, and/or poets, our task is to honour and cultivate these aspects of the human experience, and encourage our students to do the same. Yet the space in which such cultivation might happen is so congested that we face the risk of forgetting that ‘the deep silence’ is even a notion, much less a possibility. This is one of the most problematic aspects of contemporary working life, in educational institutions and beyond; part of our responsibility as academics and educators is to *remember*, and try to find, and open, whatever spaces we can. I have, regrettably, no easy prescriptions or suggestions for how to this might be done. For myself, although I have moved from the city where the ‘Deep Silence’ sessions were held, I still look for silence wherever I can find it, read more poetry than I used to, write more patiently (or try to), and encourage my students to make space for ‘fallow’ time in their study agendas, and in their ongoing engagement with critical reading, writing, and thought. It’s a small step, but even to listen closely for a little while is better than not listening at all.

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