A Book Review of *Arts-Based and Contemplative Practices in Research and Teaching: Honoring Presence*

Edited by Susan Walsh, Barbara Bickel, and Carl Leggo

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Abstract: This book review of *Arts-Based and Contemplative Practices in Research and Teaching: Honoring Presence* is both a review of the work as well as a contemplation on the work. The reader is invited into the book through witnessing the impact reading the book had on this reviewer. Attention is given to each author's contributions to the publication, noting how each chapter and each Lectio Divina (opportunities for contemplation between chapters) calls us to pay attention.

Keywords: arts-based practices; contemplative practices; research; teaching

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Sometimes a book arrives when we most need it. Oftentimes this happens to me. Such was the case when I received for review a copy of *Arts-Based and Contemplative Practices in Research and Teaching: Honoring Presence*. This book of chapters and what the editors and authors call Lectio Divina, "contemplative path[s] into reflection[s] on…[the] text" (p. 20), is edited by Susan Walsh, Barbara Bickel, and Carl Leggo, with a foreword by William F. Pinar. In this review, I hope to take the reader inside the book to introduce them to authors who are using a variety of artistic and contemplative practices in their works as researchers and as teachers. I will, at times, share connections I felt as I read this book.

To begin with, the wonderful foreword written by William F. Pinar is itself a kind of review of the book. Pinar thoughtfully touches on the work of the authors presented in the book, work that returns him to his undergraduate years when he wondered "how shall I live?" (p. xviii). And this book is, indeed, about living – living as researchers and as teachers, and living with, in, and through our research and our teaching.

Another possible review of the book, although biased as all reviews are, is the introduction by the editors. The three editors, themselves also authors of chapters in the book, set the stage for the performances, and in many ways the chapters are performances, by stating clearly that their intention is to "explore in collaborative and individual ways the contemplative and artistic practices that inform [their] ways of being, knowing, and not knowing in the world" (p. 1). On the same page, speaking for the larger group of authors in the book, the editors identify as "a diverse group of 10 artists, researchers, and teachers, grounded in an eclectic mix of worldviews and spiritual traditions." It is that grounding (or, perhaps, those groundings, because clearly there are more than one) from which the authors speak, and to which the authors invite us as a way (as ways) to understand research and teaching, as well as ways to research and to teach. The "group of 10" (p. 3) are noted to have strong connections with each other – some recent and some spanning years or decades. The connections between the works are also strong throughout the book.

Like in much of the book, there are offerings in the editorial other than textual that draw the reader into the book. As I looked at the photo of Lawrencetown beach (p. 9), taken just over an hour from my own home in Nova Scotia, Canada, a province that claims the highest tides in the world, I was struck by the temporality of the photo and of the glance. We see, in a moment, only "the wave of interest in mindfulness, contemplation, and spirituality…[and/or] a wave of interest in arts-based research and pedagogy" (p. 8). If we sit longer, however, as many before us have done, and many even now do, we can see the constancy of the tide – the in and out movement in a day, in weeks, in years, through centuries and millennia. The arts, as a way of inquiry, and as a way of communication/representation, have been with us, and with our ancestors, for a long, long time. The same is true of mindfulness (attention), contemplation, or spirituality.

Before moving into the chapters, the authors, in a piece written by Mesner, Bickel, and Walsh, invite us to contemplate on/with the chapters using a four point practice called Lectio Divina; these Lectio Divina could be seen as contemplations of an experience (a chapter read) or as preparations for an action (a chapter about to be read). They are also that in between moment of an experience lived and a coming action. Seven of these "contemplative path[s]" (p. 20), what the editors title as Lectio One through Lectio Seven, are inserted between chapters throughout the book; a Closing Lectio concludes the text. The Lectio are either textual or visual, or both.

Following Lectio One, the work by Susan Walsh and Heesoon Bai, Writing Witness Consciousness, is a superb example of transforming the ordinary into a meditative practice, or more specifically a witnessing of, and I would say a support of, meditative practices. Walsh and Bai tell us that,

> there are no specific activities that will necessarily lead to meditative states of conscious [but] all sorts of activities, none of which may look like the usual meditative poses, could lead to contemplative states of consciousness that include a witnessing aspect. (p. 26)

Using e-mail, something that can be anything but meditative, both authors bring us into their journeys by letting us witness the intimacy of their shared journey. "We email our writing across the country and then spend time with one another's words" (p. 29). This practice of spending time with one another, or simply spending time, is a practice that is repeatedly explored in various ways throughout this book.

Recognizing some of her own (past) ways of being in time (impatient, demanding, and commanding) that were not conducive to meditation, and ones that led to an approach that her "own girls used to humourously call…General Bai," Bai is now thankful that, "these days, General Bai is aging and is often unable to clench or focus or execute other stressful moves" (p. 28). This acceptance, with gratitude, of self, and of others, is another repeated theme throughout this book, an acceptance that comes after an acknowledgment that we have not been accepting, but rather, like Walsh, "feeling like [she, and we] will be wanting for not knowing. Not wanting to let Heesoon [or anybody] down. And yet, and yet" (p. 32). And yet, we always do, let somebody (and, perhaps, everybody) down, including ourselves. But isn't that, at least part, of what life is about? Rather than lament it, we could join with Walsh and Bai, and with the other authors in this book, by affirming, "How marvelous to be human and to be able to experience this" (p. 39).

Vicki Kelly, author of To See, to Know, To Shape, To Show: The Path of an Indigenous Artist, the chapter that comes after Lectio Two, is aware of a humanity that stretches back many thousands of years. Kelly writes beautifully not only about doing art as a contemplative practice, but about preparation as meditation:

> In the traditions of Indigenous people you prepare yourself before you do the work of art making; you make an offering to the various mediums or

> materials of your art form before you gather them. In this way the artists begin their work with good hands and minds, sustaining deep attention for long periods of time. They recognize that their work will ultimately enable a profound journey of learning to know. (pp. 49-50)

There is that practice again of making time for, of spending time with, of attending to. “For a few years I have been learning to play the double Native flute,” Kelly tells us, and shortly after that she writes, “Most recently I have begun a two-year apprenticeship in Northwest Coast Art” (p. 51). It is clear from Kelly’s writing that studying is a contemplative practice. The titles of her artwork, her carvings, beautifully photographed throughout the chapter, include such words as *finding* and *transformation*. These are also themes that link the chapters in this book; the authors always seem to be searching for something and finding something, though not always, if ever, what they were searching for, and we witness transformations, sometimes even happening in the very chapters themselves.

Between Lectio Three and Four, we find another example of turning the ordinary into a contemplative practice and/or an example of recognizing the contemplative possibilities in an ordinary act. In the chapter by Celeste Snowber and Barbara Bickel, Companions With Mystery: Art, Spirit, and the Ecstatic, we are witnesses to, even participants in, a conversation between these two colleagues, what they call “a free-form dialogue on the afternoon of the winter solstice in Celeste’s home overlooking the Fraser River in New Westminster, British Columbia, Canada” (p. 68). This is one of the relationships referred to by the editors that has developed over many years, and the reader gets a clear sense of the comfort those two artists have with each other and the respect they hold for each other; the chapter is very much about their years of collaboration with each other and with another artist – Mary Blaze. The conversation is also, again, about change over time and as a result of particular experiences or realizations. “I shifted when the boundaries of the sacred and ordinary broke down, and the ordinary became utterly sacred,” says Snowber (p. 69). Perhaps, in stating this, Snowber is letting us into an awareness of this moment, that this very ordinary activity, a conversation, is utterly sacred. An enormous shift happened for/to Bickel on September 11, 2001:

> I was so outraged with the conventional political response and felt this deep connection to the women in the Middle East. I created a new body of collage work as an outlet for my rage and grief in a few weeks and urgently felt the need to share it publicly. (p. 70)

Some of that work is again shared publicly in this chapter because the photos contained throughout it include some of Bickel’s work. There are also photos of Snowber and Bickel performing/dancing in various settings.

While many moments touched me throughout this conversation between Snowber and Bickel, two moments stand out; one happened during the conversation and one happened some days after I had read the chapter. “In turning this energetic and spontaneous conversation into a chapter,” Bickel says in her closing reflection, “we have at times lost what we both love the most: our playful intimacy of being with each other and the unknown of where the play will take us” (p. 85). This simple, and honest, acknowledgement of the construction of the chapter, the molding of the conversation into something readable and viewable, something publishable, is very much another example of that human reality which permeates this book; there is a genuine humility evident in such an acknowledgement – an offering, which at the same time is a loss. The other moment that stood out for me was in mid-May of 2015 as I walked with my partner and our daughter through Central Park in New York City to view an open air art installation titled Drifting in Daylight: Art in Central Park.[2] My family and I were spending a few days in New York, our first time in that city, to celebrate our daughter’s sixteenth birthday and my partner’s and my thirtieth anniversary together as a couple. Rather than try to make it to a museum or gallery, we decided to go see this installation because it was temporary; it would not be there the next time we visited. One of the installations/performances, titled And all directions, i come to you, brought to the park by Lauri Stallings and the artists of glo, was “a continuous migratory performance of contemplative movement through the North Woods” (Creative Time & Central Park Conservatory, 2015, n. p.). As I watched the conclusion of the performance, not having arrived in that area of the park in time to see most of it, I thought of Snowber and Bickel and their work. The brochure states that the performers are “beckoning the public into the woods” (n. p.). I felt that that was what Snowber and Bickel were also doing, beckoning the reader into the woods of their conversation, to witness their performance and, equally or more importantly I believe, to discover something for, and about, ourselves.

Kerri Mesner’s work, Wrestling With the Angels of Ambiguity: Queer Paths in Contemplative Activism, struck hard at some of the cores of my realities. Mesner’s work is, in part, a “delv[ing] into the intersections (and sometimes collisions) of [her] ministerial, educational, and theological identities within the academy” (p. 890). Having wrestled with my own angels over my years as a closeted and out gay Catholic whose first career path was the Roman Catholic priesthood, and later as an out gay educator and academic, I, like Mesner, find that “coming-out narratives are integral to my spiritual, sexual, and ethical lives” (p. 98). Mesner says, “I understand the call to come out as an integral aspect of my Christian call to ministry, to justice-making, and to right relationship” (p. 98). I recently told a student who, for an assignment in one of her graduate courses, was interviewing me about my experiences as a gay educator, that I believe being out is a moral imperative; given my role as an educator and the power I hold, I believe I ought to be out. Perhaps it is Mesner’s mention of “right relationship” that I am referring to; the need to be in right relationship requires that I assume the responsibilities of my knowledge and power.

[2] For further information about this beautiful installation, Drifting in Daylight: Art in Central Park, visit http://creativetime.org/projects/drifting-in-daylight/.

I was thinking about Mesner's work in early June of 2015 as I stood in the Stuart Clark Garden of Contemplation in the Canadian Museum for Human Rights,[3] a beautiful building in Winnipeg, Manitoba, with powerful content that reminded me of the relationships humans have with each other and with the planet we live on, relationships that are often not right. Mesner's work also reminds me that my right relationship with others, with the world, is as much a performance as it is a reality. Having experienced a verbal homophobic assault while waiting for a bus by another waiting passenger, Mesner writes, "When she finally leaves on her bus, as she glares angrily at me out the bus window, I look at her: I close my eyes and say 'bless you'" (p. 102). But a performance, while perhaps pretending, is most definitely not about lies. This is clear in the integrity of Mesner's next words: "Knowing even as I do that it is more a statement of defiance than of benediction" (p. 102). Perhaps our defiance is a benediction, a benediction for ourselves, initially perhaps, but one that can grow into a benediction for/of others…if we allow ourselves to bless ourselves and to be blessed. This blessing is only possible, however, when we know what we are experiencing, when we are alive to experience it. "When we don't know what is within us, it can kill us," Mesner writes (p. 103), and shortly afterwards wonders if we need to not only know it, but need, with the help of arts-based and contemplative practices, to bring it forth, or we, and the academy, will die. Although troubling, Mesner's work, and the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, does offer hope; the hope is, like the rest, in the choices we make.

In her work, Woman Overboard: Pedagogical Moments of Performative Inquiry, which comes after Lectio Five, Lyn Fels is vulnerable; she is, after all, overboard. It is about this humility to acknowledge how unsteady we are, and perhaps particularly unsteady when we think we are sure, that Fels reminds us. "Thoughtful engagement," she writes "requires that we look again at that which preoccupies us, considering the possible consequences of our choices of action, while understanding that we cannot anticipate nor suspend all consequences of our actions" (p. 114). This is exactly what Fels does throughout her chapter.

Fels is not seeking answers, but better understandings of herself and of her students. Fels notes that, "we engage with our students through moments, one moment unfolding into the next, in our presence and in our absence" (p. 118). In our absence? Yes, we are in relationship even when we are not present; this is a powerful reminder of how little control we really have when we take a real close look at the relationships we are in. Fels calls us to be wide awake to this, and to other realities: "Such moments require of us willingness of integrity, honesty, vulnerability, thought. Patience, reflection, wisdom, and openness must be our guide" (p. 119). Fels, of course, knows that we will not always follow our guide, or guides, but that is also to be acknowledged; nonetheless, we need them or we will be forever lost, and we will not even know it.

[3] For more information about the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, visit https://www.humanrights.ca/.

When I was first heard, in the foreword and the introduction to the book, of Sean Park and Shahar Rabi, and their work, Improvising Vulnerability Through Freestyle Rap Inquiry, which appears between Lectio Six and Seven, I thought they were a same-sex couple who were also parents. I am not sure when, exactly, in the chapter I became aware that my first assumption was not accurate, but, while it did make me realize, again, how my own reality sometimes predisposes me to particular assumptions, it did not diminish in any way the effect of their work on me. In a way, the need to revisit and revamp my assumptions may have strengthened my reading of the chapter. This acknowledgement helps me enter the work of Park and Rabi in a more real way because this "complicated conversation entails 'being real' about our personal experience while simultaneously having a critical, compassionate, and mindful awareness of the ways in which our sense of 'real' is conditioned by past experience, culture, and society" (p. 128).

But these men are gay, at least in the sense that some of my elementary school students used to pretend they meant when I overhead, and confronted, them on using the word pejoratively; they are happy and playful, "finding value even in a fart" (p. 133). They are also mindful, and they invite us into that mindfulness. "Mindfulness," they tell us, "is a way of orienting to life, a commitment that involves moment-to-moment inquiry into reality, and a willingness to stay open and creative even when times are challenging, scary, uncomfortable" (p. 132). Challenging, scary, and uncomfortable are realities we all experience, but they are particular realities for children and adolescents. Park and Rabi offer us ways, playful ways, to encounter those realities and live through/with them.

I met Carl Leggo's work, Loving Language: A Poet's Vocation and Vision, both as a fellow poet and as a fellow Newfoundlander, and, as with other works by Leggo, I was moved. Leggo writes from a deep sense of self and of place. Leggo also writes with vulnerability and integrity, and in doing so he calls us to live vulnerably and with integrity in the world. Leggo's writing is courageous and hopeful, but there is a moment of shock early in this work when Leggo writes, "I am growing less hopeful than I have been. I am growing weary" (p. 144). I wanted to cry, "No, Carl, don't give up," but Leggo is not giving up. Rather, he tells us that he turns to poetry, both reading it and writing it, and that he finds "in poetry a location of wisdom, encouragement, and hope" (p. 145). Ultimately, Leggo is calling us to a deeper understanding of ourselves, because it is only in understanding ourselves more deeply that we can understand others and the world we share with them. Or, is it the reverse? "Perhaps I am really writing about my family," Leggo says, "so I can know myself" (p. 149). Perhaps, in understanding others and the world we share, we come to a better understanding of ourselves.

I write here about Leggo's chapter while sitting in my sister's kitchen in Shores Cove, a Newfoundland outport on the Southern Shore of Newfoundland about a one hour drive south of St. John's, and I am aware of how my growing up in a community close to here, Admiral's Cove, is forever part of me and how I think, feel, live in the world. But, Admiral's Cove, and all the other communities I have lived in and the people who are a part of, or apart from, my life, are not the authors of my life. "We are the

authors of our life stories," Leggo reminds me/us/himself; "Of course, we are authored by many others as well, but we surrender our most precious and sacred gifts if we relinquish our authority to author our life stories" (p. 151). Leggo writes, and his writing encourages me to write, not just for remembering, but also for "forgetting, *for getting* on with the journey" (p. 158, italics in the original). But in order to get on with the journey, "we need to attend to our souls, our psyches, to the breath and life that is in us" (p. 160).

The book concludes with a Closing Lectio, a beautiful found poem written from the first drafts of the contributors' works.

While attempting to finish this review, a piece of work that took me much longer than I expected, I had an opportunity to meet for supper with a classmate from my one year in All Hallows College, the Roman Catholic seminary in Dublin, Ireland, I went to right after high school to prepare for priesthood. Father Edward Terry, now ordained thirty-three years, and I were close friends that year, but after I left the seminary we drifted apart. It had been almost forty years since Ed and I saw each other. We sat in a restaurant in St. John's and shared a meal, ordering the same food we used to order on a nearly weekly basis when we went out for supper on Sundays in Dublin. We talked about our lives, and we both, I believe, came to an even deeper understanding about how right for us the paths were that we had both, separately, taken. Something Ed said that evening, however, was particularly meaningful and will stay with me. He talked about gentleness – gentleness in our interactions with others and in how we treat ourselves; he spoke of the importance of not beating up on ourselves when things do not work out as we hope, even if that not working out is a result of our own doing. "Gentleness. Gentleness. Gentleness," he repeated. "Nothing good comes from beating up on ourselves" (Father Edward Terry, in conversation, July 10, 2015).

Ed's comments reminded me of this book. Academics, and the Roman Catholic Clergy, are not known for gentleness; both communities can be difficult places to live a life. That said, both are communities where much good is possible when gentleness and compassion, rather than beating up on oneself and others, underlie the choices we make about how to live in the worlds in which we have chosen to live our lives. I left my friend that evening feeling more hopeful about the academy and about the Catholic Church, and feeling grateful that our friendship had been reawakened after so many years. I also thought about this book and about what the authors are trying to do in their work, what Ed Terry and Kerri Mesner would call their ministry. They are trying to make the academy a gentler place, a place where we do not beat up on ourselves or each other. I wish them, and all of us, luck. Read this book, and stop beating up on yourself and/or others. Be gentle.

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