The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series
When I think about the reforms needed if higher education is to serve our students and our world faithfully and well, I think there should be a litmus test for every project that claims to strengthen the mission of our colleges and universities. Does this proposal deepen our capacity to educate students in a way that supports the inseparable causes of truth, love, and justice? If the answer is no, we should take a pass and redouble our efforts to find a proposal that does.

Of course, many college graduates go on to do socially constructive, occasionally noble, and sometimes heroic things with their lives. But when I look at the malfeasance of well-educated leaders in business and finance, in health care and education, in politics and religion, I see too many people whose expert knowledge—and the power that comes with it—has not been joined to a professional ethic, a sense of communal responsibility, or even simple compassion.

The reasons for this are many and complex. But one culprit is easily named: the objectivist model of knowing, teaching, and learning that has dominated, and deformed, higher education. Objectivism begins as an epistemology rooted in a false conception of science that insists on a wall of separation between the knower and the known. This, in turn, leads to a pedagogy that keeps students at arm’s length from the subjects they learn about. And that, in turn, creates an ethical gap between the educated person and a world that is inevitably impacted by his
or her actions, a failure to embrace the fact that one is a moral actor with communal responsibilities. When this trickle-down effect is at its worst, it contributes to the process by which “scholars, artists, lawyers, theologians and aristocrats” end up not just doing wrong but actively collaborating in evil.

These chilling words from Konnilyn G. Feig (1979) are never far from my mind:

We have identified certain “civilizing” aspects of the modern world—music, art, a sense of family, love, appreciation of beauty, intellect, education . . . [But] after Auschwitz we must realize that being a killer, a family man, and a lover of Beethoven are not contradictions. The killers did not belong to a gutter society of misfits, nor could they be dismissed as just a collection of rabble. They were scholars, artists, lawyers, theologians and aristocrats. (p. 57)

This book is important because it offers a powerful corrective to the chain of philosophical errors that has loosed too many amoral and even immoral educated people on the world. That corrective involves “contemplative practice,” a phrase some faculty may find odd or even off-putting in the context of academic culture. Contemplation may sound like something that belongs in the mystical world of religion and spirituality, not in the empirical, rational world of the academy.

But as Daniel Barbezat and Mirabai Bush explain with care—and with the credibility that comes from years of scholarly research and classroom application—the contemplative practices described in this book will deepen, not damage, academic culture. The pedagogical elements found here help students focus more intently on subjects ranging from physics to literature, connect as whole persons with what they are learning, and feel more keenly their responsibilities as educated persons in the larger ecology of human and nonhuman life. These are outcomes that all good teachers strive for and that this book can help teachers in every field achieve.

The contemporary movement to bring contemplative practice back to higher education is now some twenty-five years old. I say “bring contemplative practice back” because contemplation is nothing new in the academy. It was once part and parcel of the intellectual life, a legacy of the monastic schools of the early Middle Ages that are among the ancestors of modern higher education.

At the heart of contemplation is the same quality that is at the heart of all great scholarship: profound attentiveness to the phenomena that one is trying to
understand. This is the kind of attentiveness practiced, for example, by Nobel Prize–winning geneticist Barbara McClintock. As Sue V. Rosser (1992) has said, McClintock, who studied maize en route to her breakthrough discoveries related to genetic transposition, “gained valuable knowledge by empathizing with her corn plants, submerging herself in their world and dissolving the boundary between object and observer” (p. 46). Rosser might as well have said that McClintock was a contemplative scientist par excellence, which is exactly what she was.

The philosophers of ancient Greece are also among higher education’s ancestry, not least Socrates with his famous dictum, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” Here, too, is a lost element of higher education’s legacy that can be recovered through contemplative practice, and recover it we must: people who choose to live an unexamined life almost inevitably live in ways that do damage to themselves and to others.

In the Socratic formulation, the focus of contemplation is not McClintock’s maize or another subject of study. It is the self of the scholar or the student, the inner dynamics of those who teach and learn—and then, for better or worse, deploy their knowledge as power in the world. Students whose minds and hearts have been formed by contemplation of self as well as world are much more likely to become the kinds of ethical actors we need at a time when basic human values—values the academy arose, in part, to protect—are so widely threatened.

If you are a long-time advocate of contemplative practice in higher education, you will soon find that this is a breakthrough book in the field. If you are an academic who wonders if “contemplation” and “higher education” belong in the same sentence, you may find that this is a breakthrough book for you professionally.

Wherever you find yourself along that continuum, please read on. This is a book that can help thoughtful teachers transform their pedagogies and the lives of their students in ways that will contribute to the transformation of the academy and the making of a better world.

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