



Advancing a Contemplative Studies Program in the Southwest

Andrew Osmun Fort, Religion, Texas Christian University, a.fort@tcu.edu

This article describes the ongoing development of a contemplative studies (CS) initiative in the Southwest, specifically at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas. This piece is meant as both a description of CS's growth in one setting and an opportunity for readers to reflect on ways they might build such a program in their location. An important part of the inquiry is balancing our commitment to the critical reflection of the liberal arts with a broader focus on promoting the value of contemplative exercises for overall human flourishing and alleviating the stress and anxiety endemic to university life.



Introduction

I began working in the field of contemplative studies about a decade ago. Contemplative studies (CS) is an emerging interdisciplinary inquiry into, and critical reflection on, the nature and significance of contemplative theory and practice. Its concerns range from enduring religious traditions to modern neuroscience, and from classical to contemporary practices. When I started, my particular focus was trying to articulate a vision of the integral relationship between traditional liberal arts education and this emerging field. I wrote an article on this topic in 2013, which included thoughts on the value of teaching and learning various ways of knowing offered by CS, classroom practices, and ethical issues raised by contemplative pedagogy.

In 2016, I followed this article with one about starting a CS initiative in the Southwest, specifically at Texas Christian University (TCU) in Fort Worth, Texas (Fort 2016). I wrote the article as I was retiring from the Department of Religion, happy with the program's trajectory and believing that I had left it in the good hands of my colleague Mark Dennis and others on the steering committee.

The primary purpose of this article is to be a continuation of that prior one. I will describe how our initiative has advanced at TCU up to 2020, when my colleagues, also this special issue's editors, will pick up the story. Our project, now renamed CALM for "Compassionate Awareness and Living Mindfully," has spread into many new areas of the university and the surrounding community.¹ We often describe this growth as a wave—a local manifestation of a national phenomenon. Like my previous articles, I see this piece as both a description of CS's development in one setting and an opportunity for readers to reflect on ways they might build such a program in their locations.

TCU Contemplative Studies: The Early Years

As described in my article "Creating Contemplative Studies in the Southwest," we began in fall 2012 with a meeting asking, "What is contemplative study and practice, and what is its place at TCU?" This is an inquiry we continue to investigate, both formally in the classroom and informally, exploring contemplative practices as a personal resource in life for all members of the university community. An important part of the inquiry is balancing our commitment to the critical reflection of the liberal arts, which is the mission of the university but not of interest to many contemplative practitioners, with a broader focus on promoting the value of contemplative exercises for overall human flourishing and alleviating the stress and anxiety endemic to university life.

Since the fall of 2013, we have had on-campus and off-campus meetings of many kinds and have brought in a major speaker on some topic relating to contemplative

studies every semester. Examples of activities include multiple panels on student and faculty personal contemplative practices, panels on contemplative practices in Christianity, talks on counseling and contemplation, contemplation and diversity/social justice (including a discussion of the unsettled status of TCU DACA students and a *metta*, or loving-kindness, meditation dedicated to their wellbeing), cognitive neuroscience and meditation, and numerous discussions of contemplative practice and integrative medicine. Additional activities included a session on “contemplation in motion” in a dance studio, contemplative walking at a labyrinth and elsewhere outside, a contemplative poetry competition for the student literary magazine, and screenings of various movies, such as *Doing Time*, *Doing Vipassana*, *The Dhamma Brothers*, *Samsara*, and *Kumare*.

During this time, major guest speakers included prolific CS author Louis Komjathy, who addressed “the contemplative university,” while Southern Methodist University (SMU) professor and Zen teacher Ruben Habito came to campus to examine the intersection between contemplative practice in Zen and Christianity. We were also visited by Naropa University’s contemplative dance teacher Barbara Dilley, who led various contemplative movement exercises, while her Naropa colleague Judith Simmer-Brown, professor of contemplative and religious studies, came for a three-day visit to discuss contemplative theory and practice. We have also been visited by SMU professor Bill Barnard, who spoke about contemplation and entheogens, and by Emory University professor Bobbi Patterson, who addressed contemplative pedagogy. John Dunne of the University of Wisconsin’s Center for Healthy Minds discussed, on multiple visits, various aspects of contemplative studies. We have also organized repeated and ongoing visits by long-time meditation teacher and former MD Anderson Cancer Center staff member Alejandro “Ale” Chaoul on evidence-based integrative medicine.

Internally, during this time, we received invitations to discuss CS or contemplative pedagogy with the Departments of Sociology and Anthropology, Journalism, and Nursing, as well as the Women’s Studies Program and staff at the Health Center and the Counseling & Mental Health Center. We made off-campus presentations at various Mind & Life Institute events, the American Academy of Religion, and a CS conference at the University of San Diego.

Among our group’s course offerings, Andy Fort and professor of dance Susan Douglas Roberts taught Mindbodyness through the religion and modern dance programs, Mark Dennis developed an Honors seminar called Mindfulness and Millennials, and Blake Hestir from the Department of Philosophy taught Mind, Consciousness, and Self.

We benefited from the generosity of an array of university sources: our Koehler Center for Instruction, Innovation, & Engagement, the AddRan College of Liberal Arts, the Asian studies program, TCU's Discovering Global Citizenship Quality Enhancement Plan, the Honors College, the Departments of Religion and Philosophy, and the Service Learning & Community Engagement program.

TCU Contemplative Studies: 2017

Since the prior article on creating a contemplative studies program in the Southwest covered the time period through 2016, I will offer more detail on our progress since 2017. As I was finishing that article, two important new allies appeared: then–dean of the Honors College Diane Snow and the founding dean of TCU's new medical school, Stuart Flynn. TCU's then–provost, Nowell Donovan, also found the project sufficiently promising that he named me one of TCU's Green Distinguished Emeritus Tutors so that I could continue to build the program after I retired. Other allies, most prominently Blake Hestir in TCU's Department of Philosophy, joined shortly after, and I will describe below how we have started to offer both new programs and new courses in the contemplative domain in recent years.

Diane Snow is a neuroscientist interested in both how contemplative practice affects the brain and personal well-being overall. In 2017, she offered the Honors College's support for Cliff Saron, a neuroscientist from the University of California, Davis, to be the speaker at TCU's annual university-wide Honors Convocation—he was accompanied by John Dunne from the Center for Healthy Minds. This was perhaps the first opportunity for TCU's provost and chancellor to formally hear about our initiative. Dean Flynn, of TCU's new School of Medicine, came to Fort Worth specifically to create a medical school that focused on “person, rather than organ, based medicine.” We had conversations with him, his staff, and senior leadership of the College of Science & Engineering about how to include contemplative and self-care practices in and beyond the curriculum. These new partners exemplified our commitment to and success with interdisciplinarity across campus.

An indication of the increasing national awareness of our initiative was an invitation to Mark Dennis and me in September 2017 to participate in a think tank on building CS programs in the United States, hosted by Hal Roth of Brown University and funded by Brown and the Mind & Life Institute. It both effectively marked how far CS has come nationally and envisioned its (and our) future. Brown launched a Contemplative Program Development Network site, which is a great resource for interested readers.² It includes our presentation and course syllabi, along with those of many others.

One emphasis at the think tank was on critical subjectivity in the classroom; that is, thinking through how students might learn the cognitive framework within various contemplative traditions without being asked to believe any of those traditions to be true. Put another way, if we are scholar-practitioners, our ultimate practice in the classroom setting is traditional academic liberal education.

TCU Contemplative Studies: 2018

We saw more growth in 2018, manifested in part by the creation of a website for our initiative, originally found at contemplativefrogs.com, and now tcucalmstudies.org. There one will find information on faculty, staff, administrators, and students involved in CALM Studies, along with resources of various kinds.

We also began a fruitful collaboration with what was then TCU's University Programs division to develop co-curricular activities with contemplative elements and to have ongoing discussions about how to link critical thinking and student well-being in coursework. In fall 2018, we met with all the faculty and staff mentors involved in the Introduction to University Life (UNLF) course, which about half the 2,000-strong incoming first-year TCU class then took, to introduce them to contemplative pedagogy and practice. This offering evolved into one unit of the course, offered annually in the fall semester, being dedicated to introductory mindfulness practices as a resource for incoming students.

We also began to look in more practical terms at the impact of social media and other sociocultural influences on college students (shortened attention span, stress and anxiety, "FOMO," definitions of "productivity," etc.). These conversations led us to the Koru Mindfulness Program life-skills training begun by Duke University psychiatrists Margaret Maytan and Holly Rogers, described in the books *Mindfulness for the Next Generation* and *The Mindful Twenty-Something*. The latter book, written by Rogers (2020), has become a central text for the Mindfulness and Modern Life course we now regularly teach (which grew out of Mindfulness and Millennials).

It was at this point that issue co-editor Blake Hestir became a full partner in leadership of the initiative, both in coursework and extracurricular programs. Other courses in anthropology such as Anthropological Approaches to Nature and the Sacred and Native American Religions & Ecology offered by Dave Aftandilian, Director of HARE (Human Animal Relations) and a CALM Studies leader, also included contemplative practices. We screened the movies *In Pursuit of Silence* (Shen 2015), a meditative exploration of our relationship with silence and sound, and *Neither Wolf Nor Dog* (Simpson 2016), in which an author recounts his travels with an Indian elder through Lakota country. We

gave a keynote presentation about contemplative pedagogy at the Big XII Conference Teaching Excellence Centers meeting at TCU, and led a “Pedagogy in Practice” session, sponsored by our Koehler Center for Instruction, Innovation, and Engagement, called “Contemplative Practices in the Classroom.”

In early 2018, we hosted a visit by two leaders of the Integrative Medicine Program at MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston: Lorenzo Cohen, the director of the program, and our friend Ale Chaoul, then their director of education. Lorenzo and Ale held a half-day meeting to discuss the program with Dean Stuart Flynn and other senior staff members. In addition, Ale spoke to a diverse array of courses (in medical anthropology, philosophy, religion, biology, and nurse anesthesia); he also gave a public talk with Jane Torgerson, MD, the director of TCU’s Brown-Lupton Health Center, who several years ago received board certification in integrative medicine from the University of Arizona’s program under the direction of Andrew Weil, MD.

We were also pleased to finally see the formation of a student group, primarily thanks to the work of Mark Dennis. Students from the group led a panel on contemplative practice in the spring and organized meditation sessions during exam period (called “Let’s Breathe”) and a five-hour retreat in the fall. Off campus, we (Mark, Andy, and two students, joined by Dean Snow) offered a panel on mindful connectivity at the ASIANetwork annual meeting in Philadelphia. ASIANetwork Topics included the theory and practice of contemplative pedagogy at TCU and the intersection of mindfulness with healthy eating and sports psychology.

Mark also established promising connections with the campus recreation center and wellness program. Jay Iorizzo, director of campus recreation, met Mark to plan a meditation course that he led at the recreation center for students, faculty, and staff in both spring and fall. Members of TCU’s nursing program also became important new collaborators during this time. We presented our initiative to nursing program heads and led stress reduction meditations for nursing students and faculty.

In the fall, we sponsored a visit by Fran Grace of the University of the Redlands, one of the founders of contemplative studies in the United States, which included a talk on her recent book, *The Power of Love*, and a panel on contemplative practices and LGBTQ communities. Other activities included my presentation to the TCU retiree group Silver Frogs entitled “What Is Contemplation, and What’s in It for You?” and I continued to give similar presentations to that group through 2021. We led visits to Fort Worth’s Japanese Garden for an Honors College class on Happiness, and held another student-led contemplative studies retreat. Finally, I presented a paper, “Contemplative Studies and the Liberal Arts: An Integral Relationship,” at the Mind & Life Institute’s International Symposium on Contemplative Research.

TCU Contemplative Studies: 2019–2020

In 2018, we also began planning our biggest event to date, the Ronald E. Moore Humanities Symposium, focused on the question “What Is Well-Being?” and was intended to take place in March 2020, when, of course, the COVID-19 pandemic intervened. The Moore Symposium, organized by Blake Hestir since 1992, was rescheduled for March 2023 as part of CALM Studies’ “March Month of Mindfulness.” That month began with a keynote on the topic by neuroscientist Richard J. Davidson, the founder and director of the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin, and ended with a second keynote, also addressing well-being, by legal and contemplative scholar Rhonda Magee of the University of San Francisco Law School.³

We advanced on many fronts in 2019, when we felt we were fully riding “the wave” of interest in contemplative matters. Mark and I prepared and taught an Honors seminar called *A Contemplative Life: Reflecting on Self and World* in the spring, with visits by CS colleagues from anthropology, dance, philosophy, and psychology. Later that year, Mark and I redid the *Contemplative Life* course, retitling it *Mindfulness and Modern Life*, which we wrote about in an article (Fort and Dennis 2020a) for *Education About Asia*, the teaching journal of the Association for Asian Studies. That article shares feedback and insights from this early “contemplation-enhanced” course at TCU, and it continues to be taught by Mark and Blake today. Mark also prepared the course *The Mindful Leader* for fellows at the Neeley School of Business, and we held multiple meetings with them and other students in the BNSF Neeley Leadership program. Mark and I began to write an article called “Riding the Wave: Contemplative Studies Goes Mainstream” (Fort and Dennis 2020b) for the journal *Athenaeum Review*, which was accepted at the end of the year.

We also met with TCU’s new provost, Teresa Dahlberg, to introduce the CS initiative and discuss the Moore Symposium. We continued to meet with faculty and staff from the medical school, as well as members of the nursing, education, and business schools. The student group began weekly meditation meetings and held another retreat that doubled the turnout of the first. The Student Government Association also passed a resolution supporting our initiative and the creation of a contemplative studies minor.

We additionally hosted another visit by John Dunne to learn more about the work of the Center for Healthy Minds, particularly about *The Art and Science of Human Flourishing*, an interdisciplinary course created and piloted by the University of Wisconsin, Pennsylvania State University, and the University of Virginia and part of Wisconsin’s Student Flourishing Initiative (CHM, n.d.). A related year-end event was our visit to the University of Wisconsin to see the Center for Healthy Minds

in action and observe the course, which is now being taught at TCU by Mark and Blake. They have partnered with religious studies scholar Chad Pevateaux to author the second article in this issue, which describes this course and other recent CALM Studies efforts.

Also beyond campus, we participated in a “Colloquium for Advancing Contemplative Studies” at the American Academy of Religion (AAR) meeting in San Diego, as well as leading panels on both CS in the Southwest and integrative medicine for the regional AAR meeting. We were invited to Austin College in Sherman, Texas, to meet with faculty and staff to describe our initiative and help establish a program there, and I was invited to discuss our program at the Ligmincha Symposium for Contemplative Sciences in Serenity Ridge, Virginia.

While Mark has been leading the CS initiative since 2017, as I began to fully retire in 2020, we formally renamed the CS initiative CALM—again, “Compassionate Awareness and Living Mindfully”—to express the broadening of our concerns. This reorientation was, of course, significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which continues to shape university life in multiple ways.

While the Moore Symposium was temporarily put in abeyance, we continued to teach *Mindfulness and Modern Life* online. Our articles entitled “Teaching Students About Mindfulness and Modern Life” and “Riding the Wave: Contemplative Studies Goes Mainstream” (Fort and Dennis 2020a, 2020b) were published. We began weekly virtual meditations beginning in April, which continued to 2024, and also revised the session on mindfulness for the UNLF course for incoming students that fall. We had further promising discussions with the new dean of the College of Liberal Arts, Sonja Watson, about the CALM Studies initiative and vision for the future.

Most interesting during this time was the provost’s request, due to the increased stress for students from the pandemic, that we teach multiple sections of the *Mindfulness and Modern Life* course online during the summer,⁴ and one of those sections would be funded for and exclusively populated by students receiving Pell Grants. This was a fascinating opportunity for both us and the students, as every prior section had been populated exclusively by whites who were mostly from a privileged background. This section had Black, Latinx, and Asian students as well as white students. It was also taught during the height of the Black Lives Matter movement, so we acknowledged from the start our identities as senior white males and worked to create a safe space for sharing how various current social issues helped shape contemplative theory and practice. This emphasis, congruent with the broadening interests of the CALM program, has continued to affect course structure and content.

Letters of gratitude

One of the many high points of the course was reading the letters that students wrote to the provost expressing gratitude for funding their attendance in the class. I share some selections here anonymously to give a sense of the impact the course made.

Letter 1

I would like to offer my heartfelt gratitude for your efforts in making this course possible for me. I am a single mother of four children, work as an accounting assistant at a local nonprofit, teach dance in the evenings and on the weekends, and am an Accounting Major here at TCU. Being able to pass on a better future to my children is always at the forefront of my decision-making, and I know that TCU is unequivocally the right choice for me as I live out the importance of being educated in front of my children. Choosing TCU has also been the source of a great amount of stress: the academic rigor is nonpareil, the requirements to remain on my degree path are challenging, and the time-intensive work to maintain my grades means that I start my homework after a long day of work (sometimes work at both jobs) and go well into the late hours of the night (and morning) only to wake up at 6:00 am to start it over again. Being given the tools to manage this constant stress in a healthy and productive way will continue to benefit me—and by extension, my children—far beyond the time this class has lasted. Thank you, thank you for making this possible for me.

Letter 2

I have learned many things about suffering, society, meditation, and more but most importantly I learned about myself. The idea of mindfulness helped me to be aware of what is going on within myself and what is going on around me in the present moment. It teaches us how to respond intentionally instead of reacting immediately. Being in this class with fellow Pell Grant students was beyond eye-opening. Being around people who were not the typical TCU student allowed us to have in-depth conversations about different, yet serious, problems. Many of us believed we were the only ones on campus who struggled with some of these issues but through this course we learned we are not alone. I learned more about life in this course from my peers and incredible professors than I have in all of my classes combined. Words cannot express how thankful I am for this opportunity, you have changed my life.

Letter 3

This class composed of only Pell Grant students was a such a different learning environment than what a lot of us were used to. For me, it was such a breath of fresh air

and I really felt a sense of community with all of my classmates. Throughout this course we learned so many theories and concepts along with amazing meditations, and this class provided me so many resources and ideas to think about. We read books written by Buddhist monks, listened to a plethora of different podcasts, watched fascinating documentaries, and heard from guest speakers. With the pandemic and civil unrest going on in our country, this class provided us with a new lens to observe and assess the world.

Letter 4

From dealing with the everyday stresses of being a college student, to being an African American female while a pandemic is going around, these last few months have been a journey and this class came at the right time for me. I have learned and I'm still learning how to live in the present and be more mindful of my everyday actions and activities. I have also learned various meditation exercises that have shown how effective they are at being able to make me happier.

Letter 5

This course really expanded my approach to dealing with everyday challenges such as stress and anxiety through practicing mindfulness. It also emphasized the need for compassion towards others and provided me with practical ways to do what I can to help myself, others, and our environment.

Final Thoughts

Due both to my retirement and the transforming effects of the pandemic, along with the shifts in the CALM Studies initiative, this seems an appropriate place to draw this essay to a close. I will repeat that I see this article as an opportunity for readers to reflect on how to build a successful program in their local situation, and CALM Studies leadership would be delighted to be in contact with you to discuss some possibilities for your own institution. We have continued to hold meetings both online and in person with various campus constituencies since 2020, particularly engaging with student government leaders to discuss programming to promote student mental health and flourishing. We have continued extensive conversations with staff at the Center for Healthy Minds about and beyond a course entitled The Art and Science of Human Flourishing. Finally, as we switched from CS to CALM Studies, we decided to prepare a "position paper" on the future of contemplative activities at TCU. This is where my colleagues Mark and Blake will continue our story.

Notes

- ¹ See: <https://tcucalmstudies.org/>.
- ² See the website: <https://www.brown.edu/academics/contemplative-studies/contemplative-program-development-network>.
- ³ Their keynote addresses can be streamed on the CALM Studies website: <https://www.tcucalmstudies.org/moore2023>.
- ⁴ For an extensive course description, see Fort and Dennis (2020b). Please contact Mark Dennis for a copy of the syllabus and more information: m.dennis@tcu.edu.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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