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# Sabbatical as Sacred Time: Contemplative Practice and Meaning in the Neoliberal Academy

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*What if we considered the sabbatical as a sacred time for renewal and wholeness? How might this understanding of sabbatical change the way we see ourselves as teachers, scholars, and human beings? How might it shape the way we approach our teaching and scholarship in more creative, holistic, and meaningful ways? And what implications might the idea of sabbatical as sacred time and as contemplative practice have for how we as faculty negotiate the challenges of the contemporary neoliberal academy? These are some of the questions I explore in this essay.*

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## INTRODUCTION

I recall longing for that first sabbatical of my career—a reward for work well done, for earning tenure, and for demonstrating my value to the institution. The break from teaching, advising, meetings, and administrative paperwork would allow for uninterrupted research and writing. Having been trained as a cultural anthropologist, I was anxious to get back into “the field”—some place away from home—to do the research that I had been trained to do but that my position teaching in a small liberal arts college made challenging. In 2008, during my half-year sabbatical, I made two field visits to Hawai‘i and spent a total of six weeks doing ethnographic fieldwork on the local food movement. I took my five-year-old daughter along—a challenging balancing act specific to my social location as a motherscholar (thanks to Cheryl E. Matias [2016] for this term). This sabbatical was made up of frenetic research and writing activity, including the drafting of a National Science Foundation grant proposal, with very little time for rest or reflection. By the time the fall 2008 semester was upon me and I returned to teaching, I was exhausted. Furthermore, I did not yet know that post-tenure, much of my time would be taken over by institutional administrative and service work, limiting research, writing, and reflection to the summer months.

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Six years later, when my second sabbatical was granted, I decided to do things differently. Having been promoted to full professor, I wanted to honor the milestone I had reached in my professional life—to celebrate what I had achieved before jumping immediately into the next project. I yearned for time and space to reflect and regroup myself. I found it troubling and anticlimactic that earning a full professorship was not marked by any institutional or communal ritual—just a verbal announcement, some clapping, and then back to work. Where was the celebration? Where was the pause? Where was the honoring of intellectual growth and maturation?

While these thoughts lingered in the months leading up to my sabbatical, I did not feel free to fully indulge them until I found myself walking the Camino de Santiago, also known as The Way of St. James, a 1500-plus-year-old medieval pilgrimage through Europe and the sabbatical gift I gave myself that would reveal a new direction in my professional life. Walking six to eight hours every day, I was alone with my thoughts in a way I had never been before. It is impossible to escape oneself under such circumstances or to avoid insights that demand new ways of being and knowing. Silence, even in movement, creates space for the inner voice to emerge. And my inner voice had a lot to say about my experience in the academy under neoliberal capitalism and how distanced I felt from my reasons for being there in the first place.

One day on the Camino my companion and I lost our way. Confronted with numerous diverging pathways as we came upon a clearing in a dense eucalyptus forest, we chose the one that seemed “right” and most direct. Eventually we found ourselves descending a very steep and rocky hill—hard-packed, severely water-rutted, and difficult to navigate. It was tough going and I was thankful for my 20-euro poles. When I finally reached the bottom and got some distance from the hill itself, I turned around to look back. Sweating profusely in the midday heat, my almost-50-year-old knees aching from the sharp descent, I silently thanked my body for moving me safely down the hill. I opened myself to some much-needed—though frequently withheld—self-compassion. It was a critical “aha!” moment for me, as I realized how rarely I honored my own efforts or reflected on their meaning before moving on to the next item on the to-do list.

So often in the United States, in a culture enamored with individual success, we push ourselves forward, always looking towards the next accomplishment. This is especially true in academe, where we are evaluated and rewarded by individual output in the form of material products and where more intangible contributions become irrelevant. There is little time or patience for sitting in solitude, for assessing where we have been and what we have contributed, for thinking deeply and carefully about what to do next or even the *meaning* of the work we do. Yet I yearned for such moments with my whole being.

This essay, then, is an effort to reflect on and think critically about my lived experience as a faculty member in the early 21st century—and about sabbatical as a pilgrimage to meaning and wholeness in my work as a teacher and scholar. I share my vision of sabbatical as sacred time and the importance of contemplative practice as pedagogy, as intellectual inquiry, and as lodestar to a more integrated personal and professional life.

My discussion is informed by three key areas of scholarly literature: feminist theory and pedagogy, contemplative inquiry and pedagogy, and critical analyses of higher education.

My reflections are grounded in a feminist autoethnographic approach that centers my everyday personal experiences as a scholar and teacher in a critical consideration of sabbatical or the “everyday as animation” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 10). Chicana feminist scholar Gloria Anzaldúa (2015) redefines autoethnography as *autohistoria-teoría*, calling it “a hybrid genre, a new discursive mode” that “fuse[s] personal narrative with theoretical discourse, autobiographical vignettes with theoretical prose” (p. 6).<sup>2</sup> This method recognizes that the personal is always political and “the personal is theoretical” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 10). Therefore, it is also important for me to recognize that my social location as a white-skinned cisgender woman and tenured full professor teaching at a private liberal arts college in the Mid-Atlantic US confers on me certain privileges: the benefit of sabbatical and the relative power to critically interrogate the system of higher education in which it is embedded.<sup>3</sup> As a result of this confluence of privileges of race, class, academic status, and geography, my experiences will be different from other faculty members, yet I maintain that we share certain commonalities of experience across boundaries of race, gender, class, rank, discipline, and institution that I hope will make my reflections relevant for a broader audience. Indeed, the power of autoethnographic work and personal storytelling is that it creates possible openings for connection across difference and the creation of an “unmapped common ground” for alliance-building and changemaking (Keating, 2013, p. 54; Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 570).

I begin by providing some historical context for the origin of the faculty sabbatical, its contested meanings, and its place within the contemporary context of higher education as shaped by a global neoliberal capitalist economy. I then discuss how reframing the sabbatical as sacred<sup>4</sup> reflective time relates to faculty job satisfaction and meaning and serves as one potential intervention into the neoliberal university structure. Building on this notion of sabbatical as sacred time, I then consider how integrating contemplative approaches into my current teaching and scholarship and sharing

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2 Similarly, Allen and Piercy (2005) define autoethnography as a “practice of going back and forth between inner vulnerable experience and outward social, historical, and cultural aspects of life, searching for deeper connections and understanding” (pp. 155-156; see also Pitts, 2016; Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

3 This essay does not address another crucial component of labor under the neoliberal academy: contingent labor, a group that by definition does not enjoy the privilege of sabbatical. Ironically these faculty are probably those most in need of sabbatical time given the precariousness and pace of their work. Hulburt and McGarrah (2016) of the Delta Cost Project at American Institutes for Research have discussed this shift toward a contingent labor force and its effects. See also Del Gandio (2014), Cantor (2014), and numerous essays published in the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) magazine *Academe*.

4 I define the sacred as that which we honor and regard with reverence and respect. I fully embrace its allusion to the spiritual, which I define (following Fernandes, 2003, p. 10) as a transcendent sense of interconnectedness that extends beyond the knowable, physical, material world. My definitions of *sacred* and *spirituality* are not premised on belief in a divinity, though they make space for such belief.

them with colleagues have transformed my relationship to laboring in the academy. I conclude with some of the insights I gained by rethinking as sacred not just the sabbatical but also all of my work in higher education, and my aspiration to, in the words of Parker J. Palmer (2004), live a divided life no more.

### **SABBATICAL, JOB SATISFACTION, AND “PRODUCTIVITY”**

Sabbatical is a rarity among the working population in the contemporary United States, and we as faculty members are often reminded—by administrators, friends, and family—of how lucky we are to have it. Sabbatical leaves are found primarily among teachers, including the professoriate, religious clergy, and spiritual leadership.<sup>5</sup> The first sabbatical leave was awarded at Harvard University in 1880 to entice a scholar away from Johns Hopkins University (Sima, 2000), and the practice has continued as an integral component of university life for tenure-track professors.

Celina Sima (2000) identifies a range of purposes for sabbatical: these include allowing faculty to conduct research, engage in uninterrupted study, write articles or books, enhance artistic performance and creative growth, improve teaching, course curriculum and development, complete additional education and training, and find opportunities for new experiences (p. 69). One study she discusses emphasizes the importance of sabbatical for

shift[ing] the balance of faculty responsibilities...[to] free the person from all teaching and administrative responsibilities and to encourage him or her to review past accomplishments, or to take stock, or to move in new directions...*The sabbatical is not a gift from the university. It is recognition that there has to be a time when you can take distance from your accustomed routine so that when you return there will be an infusion of new energy and new ideas* [emphasis mine]. (Sarason, 1990, p. 138, as cited in Sima, 2000, p. 70)

Research has demonstrated that sabbaticals contribute significantly to faculty job satisfaction. For example, Zahorski (1994) presents evidence of six key benefits enabled by sabbatical, which he identifies as:

- rejuvenation and renewal,
- time for reflection,
- a fresh perspective,
- an opportunity to build new professional relationships,
- opportunities to become or stay current in the discipline, and
- enhanced teaching (as cited in Sima, 2000, pp. 72-73).

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<sup>5</sup> The sharing of this experience by both the professoriate and spiritual leadership highlights the role that spirituality once held in Western forms of education before the secular philosophy of Aristotle pushed it outside of the academy (Zajonc, 2003). Sabbaticals are less common within the for-profit world, though some companies do offer them (Shen, 2016) and some management experts now advocate for them (Burkus, 2016).

Yet, while these benefits are significant to faculty members, they are not necessarily valued by administrators or trustees. Urged by legislators, trustees, and consultants to accept a model of higher education that stresses managerialism and measurement, administrators focus on those “tangible products” of the faculty that can be most easily counted, including journal articles, books, manuscripts, research grants, conference presentations, exhibitions, and performances. The audit culture (Strathern, 2000) of the contemporary academy seeks to quantify and measure everything faculty members do to make sure we are worth the cost, and to deny us raises and sabbaticals when they believe we are not. Since the 1990s, with the deepening of neoliberalism within the US, the UK, and Canada, sabbaticals have increasingly been called into question, and some universities have made efforts to eliminate them, cutting them in part or in total, temporarily or permanently.<sup>6</sup>

Corporate academe’s vision of “productivity” turns faculty members into producer-laborers whose value lies primarily in their output rather than in their creativity and relational work or the transformative experiences they cultivate for their students, colleagues, and communities. William Deresiewicz (2011), writing in *The Nation*, says that “academic labor is becoming like every other part of the American work force: cowed, harried, docile, disempowered” (par. 24). University of Warwick professor Stuart Elden writes:

Teaching, preparation, marking, office hours, meetings, emails, phone calls and so on make consolidated and protected time for individual study very difficult to obtain and protect. *Yet much of our most important work, perhaps especially for academics in the social sciences and humanities, happens alone, in time that cannot easily be quantified, measured or evaluated* [emphasis mine]. (“Workload Survival Guide,” 2016)

The inability of current assessment models to capture the variety, complexity, and at-times-imperceptible work we do as faculty is troubling. Even more troubling is that the impact of our teaching and mentorship on students—which I, and many of my colleagues, find especially meaningful—may also be outside the currently privileged assessment frame and thus impossible to quantify, understand, or celebrate. How does one adequately measure student learning? Do our tools themselves limit what we can measure, know, and therefore find meaningful?

Let me give you an example. Not long ago I received an email, out of the blue, from a former student who took two classes with me before transferring *ten years ago*—a student I cannot remember, but for whom my classes were transformative. Jenna Wiesenbahn wrote:

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<sup>6</sup> Recent (2017-2018) threats to sabbatical leaves have occurred at University of Montana, Utah Valley University, St. Louis Community College, Lincoln University, and public universities in Iowa. Additional examples include the California community college system, Truman State University, University of Toledo, and Kent State University which cut them in 2009 and then reinstated them a year later because it had a “catastrophic effect” (“Colleges Cut Sabbaticals,” 2011).

I had never heard privilege to mean anything other than financially wealthy before I took your classes, and while I was very open to the concept, and by nature constantly trying to understand others, it has still taken me a decade of experience, intentional self-reflection/critical thinking, and getting to know people outside of my earlier in-groups to truly understand what privilege is, what mine looks like, and what to start do about it.

The feminist I am at 30 compared to the feminist I was at 18 is not a surprise, but I fear [she] may not exist were it not for Hollins and you. And, thanks so much to ideas and language that were just the tiniest seeds planted by you, I have the awareness and tools for understanding and fighting for social causes I now care deeply about. I teach special education in DC, and between that and expanding my social experiences, I have become enlightened to so many more issues beyond just feminism.

...But I know so much of this is still a matter of my privilege, and that so many others do not benefit from the things I still take for granted. I continue to try to learn how I can speak up, help effect change, help others recognize and understand their privilege, and be an ally from a place of privilege.

For so much of all of this, I have wanted to thank you for so long. I know we all hope we are helping make change, individually and societally, but sometimes it feels like all we're doing is pouring out our energy with no idea if anything is reaching anyone. In your case, it has, and I am so deeply grateful. (personal communication, August 26, 2016, qtd. with permission)

Receiving this letter was profoundly moving because it helped me remember why I became a professor in the first place and the deep joy and satisfaction I derive from teaching. But where do experiences like this fit in our academic system? How can our assessment models account for learning that continues ten years later and beyond? What if our worth as teachers—and as human beings—lies in more than simply our immediate “productivity”?

The “corporate reach”<sup>7</sup> in higher education is also evident in its “culture of speed” (Berg & Seeber, 2016) and in the discourse of busyness that accompanies it. Busyness is a disease in North American culture that has become a badge of honor and success, a sign of value and social status. Brigid Schulte’s (2014) book *Overwhelmed: Work, Love, and Play When No One Has the Time* documents this culture of speed in star-

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7 “The Corporate Reach” was the title of the AAUP’s September/October 2016 issue of *Academe*, attesting to the timeliness of this topic.

ting detail.<sup>8</sup> Schulte describes the work of sociologists studying the increase in time pressure and role overload (notably higher among women) that leaves us feeling “time starved.” This culture is especially evident within the academy, where expectations of productivity require faculty members to always be working and a “defensive culture of guilt and overwork” flourishes (Berg & Seeber, 2016, p. 2; see also Gill, 2010). This constant pressure to do and to be always available is an example of what Marxist geographer David Harvey (1989) calls “time-space compression.” In his influential text *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Harvey explains time-space compression as a feature of contemporary globalization and neoliberal capitalism in which technology and other social processes collapse spatial locations and confound natural cycles of time. Because of the way new technologies network us across vast distances, we experience disorientation in our human social relations and our connection to place. We also find ourselves in fewer undistracted moments of solitude and reflection, becoming less conscious about and connected to the very work we do.

The corporatization of higher education has negatively impacted faculty job and life satisfaction, leading some to question their purpose in becoming professors in the first place.<sup>9</sup> In 2008 *The Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* published a special issue on the topic of faculty time stress. Researchers found that the rapidly changing environment of the academy has resulted in “work overload,” “having jobs with no boundaries,” very high “self-imposed expectations” and “declining resources and increasing pressure to work as efficiently as possible” (Buckholdt & Miller, p. 221, as cited in Berg & Seeber, p. 8). A 2007 study of Canadian faculty found that “work-life balance was the most consistent stress-related measure predicting low job satisfaction and negative health symptoms” (Catano et al., p. 6, as cited in Berg & Seeber, p. 8). In 2016 the *Times Higher Education* conducted a workplace survey which found that more than two thirds of academics in the United Kingdom feel they “spend too much time working” and less than one third believe their “work responsibilities allow for a healthy work-life balance” (Grove, 2016); another *Times* article revealed that many faculty are “exhausted” and that “clear leisure time does not exist” (“Workload Survival Guide,” 2016). And while these increased pressures on faculty members affect the well-being of all, they take their greatest toll on faculty of color and women—groups historically marginalized in the academy.<sup>10</sup>

I knew from conversations with colleagues that I wasn’t the only professor experiencing what physician Larry Dossey calls “time sickness,” the “obsessive belief that ‘time is getting away, that there isn’t enough of it’” (Berg & Seeber, 2016, p. 53).

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8 Schulte (2014) notes that the American Psychological Association reports that Americans are chronically overstressed and that the World Health Organization finds Americans to be the most anxious—despite living in the richest country in the world.

9 Numerous scholars have documented and critiqued the corporatization of the academy. Examples include Busch, 2017; Ginsberg, 2011; Nussbaum, 2010; and Readings, 1996.

10 For research documenting the negative health impacts of work in the academy, including occupational stress, on faculty from historically marginalized groups, see Thompson and Dey, 1998; Smith, 2004; Gill, 2010; Harris and Gonzalez, 2012; and Eagen and Garvey, 2015.



A highly productive colleague from an R1 institution posted on Facebook:

I am unable to keep up with the neck breaking speed at which this world is moving. So this weekend, I am going to slow down everything and be social media free, take long walks, dance in the forest, lie on the ground, write (non-academically), paint, journal, and have a full day of silence on Sunday. Time for self-care and for filling up my inner resources. See you on Monday. (K. Bhattacharya, personal communication, September 10, 2016, qtd. with permission)

Like her, I yearned to slow down and to reclaim a sense of purpose.

My feelings of resistance and desire for more spaciousness were affirmed by the publication of *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* in the year following my sabbatical. Authors Berg and Seeber (2016) document the feelings of loneliness, isolation, and loss of purpose experienced by faculty; the occupational stress of academics; and their negative impacts on teaching, scholarship, and physical and psychological health. They articulate the systemic nature of the problem and argue that individual practice as a form of agency can be one site of resistance to these trends. Berg and Seeber write: "Slow professors act with purpose, taking the time for deliberation, reflection, and dialogue, cultivating emotional and intellectual resilience" (p. 11). This is particularly important because "professors' well-being is inextricably linked with students' learning" (Berg & Seeber, 2016, p. 6) and what we model is emulated by our students. Changes made at the individual level, while only part of the solution (Gill, 2010), are one form of critical intervention in the academy's culture of productivity.

In an AAUP essay on sabbaticals, University of Massachusetts professor Mark Page (2010) perceptively asks, "How did we make 'productivity' the key word associated with a term [sabbatical] that expressly forbids productivity?" (para. 9). Page laments that, asked to speak to a group of faculty on the eve of their sabbaticals, he found that his audience focused on time-management tips and no one in his session asked how they could improve the *quality* of their work, just how they could do *more* and work *faster*.

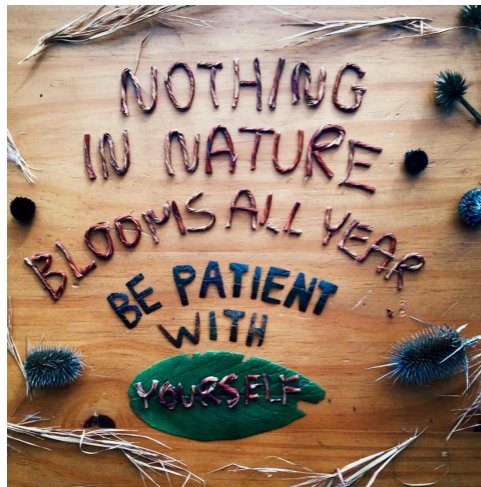
I came up against this obsession with productivity during an encounter at a university event I attended early in my sabbatical. Surprised to see me on campus, one of my colleagues inquired, "So, are you being productive?" Feeling at once sheepish and defiant, I paused for a moment before answering, feeling entangled in that word "productive." I replied, "Not in the way you typically define productivity. But yes, I think I am." This moment confirmed my conflicted feelings over expectations of output and pace, and my urge to resist what I felt was an iron cage being cast around my sacred time.

### **SABBATICAL AS SABBATH AND SACRED**

What might it mean to think of sabbatical as sacred time? It is instructive that the word sabbatical derives from the Hebrew word *Shabbat*, or Sabbath. This literal "ceasing" is often understood as a rest from work. In the Hebrew Bible, God rested on the seventh

day after creating the universe and humanity; similarly, periods of rest are considered integral to the cycle of agricultural production: “Six years thou shalt sow thy field, and six years thou shalt prune thy vineyard, and gather in the fruit thereof; but in the seventh year shall be a sabbath of rest unto the land, a sabbath for the Lord” (Leviticus 25:3-5, King James Version). On the Sabbath, humans are to rest, temporarily interrupting the cycle of production.

Whether we take this story literally or figuratively, the Sabbath acknowledges the interconnection between humans, agriculture, and the physical landscape; the relationship between humans, labor, and the divine; and the idea that rest is integral to production and creation. During the Sabbath or sabbatical year, the land lies fallow, in preparation for future growth. Likewise, on the seventh day of the week humans are to rest from their everyday endeavors, spend time with loved ones, and engage in self-reflection. Unceasing growth and productivity may be the hallmarks of neoliberal capitalism but they are unrealistic and disconnected from natural cycles of life. This is captured well in the Facebook meme, “Nothing in nature blooms all year. Be patient with yourself.”



Perhaps one of the most eloquent discussions of the Sabbath comes from rabbi, theologian, and professor of Jewish mysticism Abraham Joshua Heschel (1951) in his book *The Sabbath*. Heschel meditates on the meanings of the Sabbath and describes it as “a sanctuary in time” (p. 29).<sup>11</sup> For him, “The Sabbath is a day for the sake of life. Man [sic] is not a beast of burden, and the Sabbath is not for the purpose of enhancing the efficiency of his work” (p. 14). This insight resonates at a time when unrealistic expectations of productivity are resulting in high levels of work-related stress and ill health. Heschel writes: “Sabbath celebrates time rather than space...to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation” (p. xviii). This focus on process and mystery invites us to think beyond the limits of the production of knowledge as a commodity and time-bound practice.

<sup>11</sup> For a related meditation on contemplative pedagogy as “sanctuary,” see Seidel, 2014.

Heschel (1951) also says that “observing the Sabbath is not only about refraining from work, but about creating *menuha*, a restfulness that is also a celebration. The Sabbath is a day for body as well as soul” (p. xiv). Heschel’s simultaneous attention to body, mind, and spirit reunites what has been split under both globalization’s time-space compression and the academy’s expectation of the submission of the body and spirit to the dominance of the mind.<sup>12</sup> How many of us have submitted our bodies to the punishing discipline of time? How often do we give up precious sleep, exercise, and nutrition, “pushing [our] bodily limits by means of coffee, cigarettes and other stimulants” (Mani, 2009, p. 47)? And how many of us have denied the authentic, embodied self, the voice that whispers, “There is more to life than this work”?

In her book *Embodied Inquiry: Writing, Living and Being Through the Body*, dancer and educator Celeste Snowber (2016) considers Sabbath and its connection to the body. She argues that the rest and sacredness of Sabbath “is a place to have compassion on our limits and know we are not perfect, but are perfect in our imperfection. Vulnerability calls one to solitude, and here lies a great gift” (p. 19). Centering the body in her exploration of epistemology, Snowber considers how solitude can transform our relationship to time and to the creation of knowledge: “Solitude and silence strip away the urgency of time, and one is invited into what is infinite, to experience *kairos* time or unmeasured time, and leave *chronos* time or chronological time. In *chronos* time moments are measured, but in *kairos* time one can be swept into the eternal present and infinite possibilities are born” (p. 21). Similarly, contemplative educator Jackie Seidel (2014) writes that “Kairos time might be imagined as the time of love and compassion, of wonder, of open potential and unknown futures, and of yet unwritten rhythms and possibilities for all life on earth” (p. 146).

The restfulness and release from *chronos* time that Heschel (1951), Snowber (2016), and Seidel (2014) celebrate echo my desire for rest, renewal, and spaciousness in my work as a professor. These authors point to an ethic of self-care and well-being (both individual and communal) that is increasingly being voiced within both the academy and the culture at large. Their visions of the Sabbath beckon me precisely because they gesture to a way of being fully in the moment, outside of the relentless clock-time of the neoliberal academy. Feminist historian and cultural critic Lata Mani (2009) describes this immersion in present-moment awareness as “step[ping] through the threshold of objective time” and being “suspended in the Now” (p. 46). Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) refers to this as “flow”: a state of consciousness where one is completely absorbed in the present moment, resulting in happiness. Leisure researcher Ben Hunnicutt says that “without time to reflect, to live fully present in the moment and face what is transcendent about our lives...we are doomed to live in purposeless and banal busyness” (qtd. in Schulte, 2014, Chapter 3, Section 4, para. 12). Such mo-

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<sup>12</sup> There are interesting connections here to feminist critiques of objectivism and embodiment vis-à-vis matrices of power that point to the problematic disembodiment of intellectuals/professors, whose very ability to dis-embodiment is a result of racial, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, and citizenship privileges. See for example Haraway, 1988; Grosz, 1994; Garland-Thompson, 1997; Roberts, 1998; and Ahmed, 2000. On embodiment as it relates to feminist and contemplative teaching see Thompson, 2017; Berila, 2016; and hooks, 1994.

ments of awareness are crucial for deep thought, creativity, and problem solving (Berg & Seeber, 2016, p. 26) and therefore essential for the important work of teaching and scholarship. But they must be tenaciously fought for and defended in an academic culture of speed marked by “productivity” and “time sickness.”

Heschel (1951) and Snowber (2016) also suggest the potential spiritual dimensions of the work that we do in the academy. In describing the Sabbath as a “sanctuary in time” and one of “our greatest cathedrals,” Heschel points to the possibility of Sabbatical as providing, beyond just restfulness or present moment awareness, “an atmosphere” (p. 21) of “tranquility, serenity, peace and repose” (Genesis Rabba 10.9, qtd. in Heschel, 1951, p. 22) for introspection and experiencing the eternal mystery. Heschel writes that the Sabbath is “more than an interlude; it is a profound conscious harmony of man [*sic*] and the world, a sympathy for all things and a participation in the spirit that unites what is below and what is above. All that is divine in the world is brought into union with God. This is Sabbath, and the true happiness of the universe” (pp. 31-32). Heschel’s vision of the Sabbath is one of devotion and love, infused with spirit and holiness. There is a depth to Sabbath that both creates and depends upon spaciousness and acknowledges a relationship with oneself, with others, and with a divine source. Similarly, Snowber writes that the Sabbath provides an opportunity to experience solitude, which “beckons our bodies to come into a love relationship with ourselves” where we can experience “deep replenishment” (pp. 17-18), live in gratitude, and recognize that “everything is sacred” (p. 22). Envisioning and enacting the sabbatical as sacred time may therefore give rise to new and inspiring onto-epistemologies (see, e.g., Anzaldúa, 2015), thereby transforming the practice of teaching and scholarship and the institutional structure of higher education.

For me, walking the Camino de Santiago during my sabbatical was a sacred practice where I could engage in introspection and experience the spaciousness of *kairos* time and *menuha*. Over the span of 33 days, I walked 400 miles from Lisbon, Portugal to Santiago, Spain, averaging eight hours of walking per day. While I walked with a companion and we sometimes talked, sang, laughed, and fretted, more often than not we walked in silence, together or alone. This silence was a treasured gift bestowed again and again in lush pine forests and salty marshes, along ancient rivers, mountaintops, and pristine coastlines, and even hectic four-lane highways. Walking was a total-body meditation where I could “listen to the wells of inspiration” (Snowber, 2016, p. 20) uninterrupted and with full attention. At last I could simply *be* rather than *do* and allow the ideas, questions, and emotions to flow. Like adrienne marie brown (2017), “I learned that...feeling is an important and legitimate way of knowing” (p. 38), and that emotion is central to epistemology (Anzaldúa, 2015; Jaggar, 1989; Lorde, 1996; Keating, 2013). To speak of sabbatical as sacred time then is to regard it and ourselves—mindbodyspirit—with honor, respect, and reverence and recognize the spirit at its core.

While applying these sacred aspirations to sabbatical, scholarship, and pedagogy may be heterodox and feel uncomfortable for some in today's highly secularized academy, which regards anything spiritual with disbelief and derision (Crowley, 2012; Palmer & Zajonc, 2010; Zajonc, 2003), such views are more common and accessible than one might expect, as I have found during my ongoing exploration of the contemplative in academe. One needs only to be willing to recognize them and to fearlessly embrace their possibilities.

### **CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE, MEANING, AND WHOLENESS**

Snowber (2016) writes that "Sabbath, being a place that is set apart, is a place where the ordinary becomes sacred" (p. 18). As my sabbatical leave came to an end, I began to think about how to integrate that sacredness I experienced, and the forms of onto-epistemology to which it gave rise, more fully into my professional life. How could I apply those very profound lessons that I had learned at both an individual and collective level? In this final section I discuss some of the ways that I have proceeded, in the hope that this may provide a roadmap of sorts for others seeking to recapture meaning and wholeness, and therefore greater satisfaction, in their work in higher education.

In rejecting conventional notions of the sabbatical as a time of hyperproductivity, I sought an alternative that would respect my desire for slowing down and create spaciousness for reflection. This seemed to me a necessary process of both self and community care at a critical moment in my professional life. My emerging interests in contemplative pedagogy and inquiry, which were the intended focus of my sabbatical project, also demanded that I slow down. It seemed illogical and contradictory to engage in research on contemplative practices while still adhering to the fast-paced productivity model of the neoliberal academy. During my sabbatical I intentionally deepened some of the mindfulness and "bodyfullness"<sup>13</sup> practices that I had already been doing, in some cases for decades. These included yoga, meditation, prayer, and journaling, practices I continue to this day. And I walked, *a lot*, culminating in my pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela.

Committing to these contemplative practices in a sustained way provided essential experiential grounding for my research on contemplative pedagogy and activism. Practicing regularly fostered a sense of present awareness and had positive impacts on my physical and mental health. They allowed me to understand the concept of wholeness—body, mind, and spirit—in an entirely new way.<sup>14</sup> Feminist scholar and public intellectual bell hooks, a life-long Christian Buddhist contemplative, is for me one role model of wholeness. She writes: "The practice of mindfulness has helped me balance my passion

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13 Snowber (2016) argues that the mind is intertwined with the body and that therefore when we talk about mindfulness practices we must attend to the ways that mindfulness is "connected to being full-bodied and fully inhabiting the body. Perhaps one could call it bodyfullness" (p. 17). The idea of bodyfullness is also discussed by Caldwell (2014) in an effort to better delineate and support "body based contemplative practices" (p. 71) that too often go unnamed.

14 Just eight years earlier I had been transported off campus in an ambulance after suffering what I feared was a heart attack—an experience that set me on a path that would eventually lead to this work. How many faculty members have similar stories?

for thinking, for processing—this passion that is the catalyst for ecstatic teaching—with a passion for silence, for the present moment” (hooks, 2003, p. 172).

For me, slowing down was the necessary foundation for a creative exploration which led to the development of new projects and course offerings and the cultivation of new relationships with other scholars and activists—precisely the intellectual work I was meant to be doing during my sabbatical. Through this redefinition of time and space I discovered that “the field” to which I traveled was no longer a distant land or a community, but rather my own inner life. And this inner life was one in which I was compelled to grapple with additional ways of knowing that are not typically valued or even recognized in the academy, including the somatic, the intuitive, and the spiritual. This then begged the question of how to better guide and support students in exploring their own inner lives in conjunction with their intellectual work and future vocations.

This key finding became central to how I began to reconceptualize my work with students. Using contemplative pedagogical methods enabled me to provide students with opportunities for reflection and self-discovery in the context of the material we were studying, primarily topics related to inequality, oppression, and social justice. In teaching about cultural and social difference, relations of power, and human suffering, I have engaged my students with material and ideas that are frequently uncomfortable and even painful: sexual violence and trafficking, racism, genocide, transphobia, poverty, environmental destruction. In my teaching I invite students to think critically and carefully—not just about this world as it is and why, but about the world they *want* to live in and their responsibility in co-creating it.

Some of the contemplative practices I have incorporated into my teaching include moments of silence, meditative walking, movement, ritual, sound, and reflective writing; these practices seek to reimagine the classroom, and learning more broadly, as sacred. One specific example of how I have applied this idea of holistic, spacious, and soulful learning is the practice of deep listening, or what feminist scholar AnaLouise Keating (2013) calls “listening with raw openness.” Deep listening is ontologically and epistemologically significant: it challenges students to be in the world differently and to think about what they learn and know in new ways. Keating writes that listening with raw openness “takes tremendous effort, demands vulnerability, and requires a willingness to be altered by the words spoken” (p. 52) and is multidirectional, including “numerous overlapping dialogues...where listeners do not judge each other based on appearances, presuppositions, previous encounters, or anything else” (p. 53). Keating (2013) emphasizes that this practice can be dangerous because when we listen with raw openness we make ourselves vulnerable and risk being changed by what we hear. In that sense, it is antithetical to the hierarchies that so frequently shape the academy and society more broadly.

While practicing listening with raw openness, students must be fully present with each other, encountering each other’s differences, emotions, and points of view and sharing their own. The classroom becomes a sacred, relational space where connections can be generated and acknowledged at the same time that difference is observed and

respected. In her book *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice*, Mary Rose O'Reilley (1998) reflects on deep listening:

In academic culture most listening is critical listening. We tend to pay attention only long enough to develop a counterargument, we critique the students or the colleague's ideas, we mentally grade and pigeonhole each other. In society at large, people often listen with an agenda, to sell or petition or seduce. Seldom is there a deep, open hearted, unjudging reception of the other. And so we all talk louder and more stridently and with a terrible desperation. By contrast, if someone truly listens to me, my spirit begins to expand. (p. 19)

In classes where we practice deep listening, students have shared that they were profoundly moved by this practice, which is so simple and yet so difficult. Some students become aware for the first time that rather than being present with another speaker they are in their heads, crafting a response or rebuttal, and that this is diminishing for both themselves and their conversation partners. Using this exercise early in the semester has had a positive impact on the dynamic and tone of class conversations and on the respect and generosity students show one another—which are particularly important when discussing difficult and polarizing issues. Students have reported feeling truly heard and even transformed by this exercise, which teaches them both how to hold space for the very real experiences of others and how to sit with (rather than avoid) the discomfort that may arise.<sup>15</sup>

Through experience I have found that contemplative pedagogy, especially when in conversation with intersectional feminist and womanist theories of social justice, can facilitate self-reflexivity because it acknowledges the need for spaciousness and pause and encourages a holistic approach that includes attention to power and the recognition of knowledges beyond the objective and secular that are typically centered in the academy. This, I argue, is the fundamental foundation for transformative education and for living a life of purpose that reaches beyond narrow, material definitions of “productivity” and “success.” Deep listening takes *time*—that precious resource we never seem to have enough of. It cultivates experience of the Now or “flow” and a sense of timelessness. As such, deep listening may support students in experiencing interconnectedness and serve as a prelude to building the “complex commonalities” across perceived differences (Keating, 2013) which are at the core of creating community and positive social change.

Parker J. Palmer writes that reflective inquiry has long been an “ancient and abiding value” of academic culture but has “largely lost one of its most critical preconditions: the *quietude* [emphasis mine] that allows for real reflection on what we have seen and heard, felt, and thought, a quietude that has been overwhelmed by overactivity and frenzy of the same sort found in many workplaces” (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010, p. 145). This shift in the context of the contemporary academy has resulted in models of inquiry and teaching that

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<sup>15</sup> See Barbezat and Bush (2014) for a useful template for teaching deep listening (pp. 143-147). See Berila (2014, 2016) for a more detailed exploration of how contemplative practices help students reflect and stay present when discussing oppression.

are “argumentative, aggressive, and even combative” (Palmer, 2004, p. 145) and that prevent us from having genuinely open conversations where creativity and understanding can flourish. Furthermore, in Palmer’s book *The Heart of Higher Education*, co-written with Amherst College Emeritus Professor of Physics Arthur Zajonc, he cites Harry Lewis’s (2007) argument that the university has become “soulless” and that we as faculty must “re-ensoul the university” by developing *our* full humanity—in order to help students “learn who they are, to search for a larger purpose for their lives, and to leave college as better human beings” (qtd. in Palmer & Zajonc, 2010, p. 3). This approach to education takes the whole human being seriously—mind, body, and spirit.

By intentionally creating moments of pause and deep reflection in the classroom, I have sought to intervene in the limiting institutional and social narrative of time scarcity and productivity. Beginning with my own practices and reimagining of sabbatical and extending those practices of reflection into my everyday work as a teacher and scholar, I am in the thick of revising my relationship to the neoliberal academy. While I believe such a shift is imperative, I also recognize the dangers inherent in a personalized approach which, when communicated in a discourse of vocation and calling, can reinvigorate rather than challenge individualizing, neoliberal discourses of power. In emphasizing a personal relationship to reflection, I do not mean to ignore the substantial systemic power of neoliberal academe. Nevertheless, the individual remains an important locus for imagining and instigating change. At the same time, additional work is required to extend inner transformation to the transformation of oppressive structures. This is precisely the argument of noted contemplatives, political activists, and social justice scholars such as Thich Nhat Hahn, Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Grace Lee Boggs, Gloria Anzaldúa, adrienne maree brown, and many more.

Thus, while I have continued my personal exploration of contemplative pedagogy and inquiry with great commitment, I have also sought to engage colleagues in a broader cultural shift. Upon returning from sabbatical in the fall of 2015 I began to explore whether there was interest in contemplative practices on my campus. I initiated a weekly meditation group for faculty and staff, to create a moment of pause in my day and to foster a sense of community accountability and support. The following year, as part of our 2016-2017 Mellon Fellow Program focused on “Teaching the Whole Learner,” I helped bring to campus Dr. Daniel Barbezat, who taught us about contemplative approaches to teaching and research. Initially I was apprehensive about how my colleagues might respond to something that I personally found so meaningful; however, a number of faculty expressed great interest in this work and subsequently incorporated new ideas into their teaching and scholarship. It was a great lesson in remembering not to make assumptions and trusting my intuition that many of my colleagues were feeling similar pressures and constraints within the academy. Given the feelings of loneliness, isolation, and burnout experienced by faculty under academic corporatization (Berg & Seeber, 2016), opportunities to learn from one another, to collaborate on new projects, and—frankly—to simply sit in silence together can be enormously rejuvenating and even healing. As Martela (2014) argues, well-being “takes place inter-subjectively, between people rather than



being an individual achievement” (p. 82, as cited in Berg & Seeber, p. 81). This means that any lasting cultural and systemic change must in fact be collaborative and collective.

Thus, during the 2017-2018 academic year I organized three Contemplative Pedagogy and Mindful Campus workshops for faculty and staff colleagues, taught by Dr. Richard Chess, professor of English and director of the Center for Jewish Studies at the University of North Carolina Asheville. This eventually led to the creation in 2018 of the Hollins Contemplative Collective, which seeks to cultivate a culture of reflection, mindfulness, and well-being for all members of our campus community. Our Contemplative Collective includes a steering committee, a practice series, a faculty-staff learning community, and an internal resources webpage. Much of this work would not have been possible without the broader community of colleagues I have found through the Association of Contemplative Mind in Higher Education and UNC Asheville’s Mindful Campus conference. These colleagues showed me, through their inspired examples of living, working, writing, and teaching and their gift of shared knowledge, that it is possible to infuse our work with an intentionality and sacredness that belies the coarse economic instrumentality of the contemporary neoliberal academy.<sup>16</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Clearly, these interventions have not yet toppled the neoliberal academy or the broader culture of productivity. In fact, one might even argue—and some have—that the incorporation of contemplative practices in the form of “mindfulness” into US working culture and contemporary capitalism has in fact reinforced rather than challenged existing conditions (Zahn, 2016; Carrette & King, 2004), but that is a discussion for another essay. What these approaches and practices have done for me and for many of my colleagues is to create more spaciousness for us and our students to relate to ourselves, one another, our work, and our institutions in novel and discerning ways.

Periodically and consistently making time for ourselves, engaging in self-care as well as deep reflection, enables a more balanced approach to work and life and creates openness to new opportunities and ideas that serve our teaching and scholarship—especially when we do so in community with others. It acknowledges not just the student but also the professor as a “whole person” whose intellect is always already informed by the emotional, spiritual, and the physical. Acknowledging and honoring the whole person in ourselves is essential and fundamental for acknowledging and honoring the whole person in our students, something that neoliberal capitalism continually seeks to undermine in its perpetual pursuit of profit.

Imagining and enacting sabbatical as sacred time may have saved me in more ways than one. It has been profoundly healing in the way it has reenergized my scholarship and teaching, orienting that work in new directions that investigate the onto-epistemological significance of the contemplative and the spiritual in the face of an alienating

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<sup>16</sup> For additional discussion of how faculty and staff at other institutions have used contemplative approaches to transform their campus cultures, see Coutant and Caldwell, 2017; Barbezat and Pingree, 2012; Simmer-Brown, 2009; and the ACMHE webinars at <http://www.contemplativemind.org/webinars>.

neoliberal capitalism. Turning inward I became much clearer on my own purpose as a teacher and scholar, and more convinced of the importance of making space for students to struggle not only with theories and practices of oppression and social justice, but also with their own sense of purpose—something that is vital and meaningful in their educational journeys.<sup>17</sup>

bell hooks (1994) claims that “the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy. ...To educate as the practice of freedom...comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is *sacred* [emphasis mine]; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students” (pp. 12-13). I believe that the work I do with students is sacred work, no matter what neoliberal models may claim. And I will do whatever I can to carve out moments of spaciousness and reflection—for myself, for my students, and for my colleagues—because it is in those moments that inspiration and possibility continue to unfold.

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17 When the Higher Education Research Institute (2005) at the University of California, Los Angeles surveyed over 112,000 first-year undergraduate students at 236 colleges and universities, three fourths of the students indicated they were searching for meaning or purpose in their lives, and more than 80% indicated a belief in the sacredness of life.

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