
Diaries of Willfully Assenting Souls

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"I felt relaxed, at the same time I realized who I am, where I am in the real world and what my purpose in life was."

(a grade nine boy)

As a high school drama and English teacher, my objective is to provide an environment where my students feel free to try to understand their own psyches, natures, and spiritual forces. My hope is to create an atmosphere where young people may write and speak without fear of judgment—a place where speaking about sacred matters is welcome.

Meditation, guided visualizations, and free-style writing are wonderful strategies to help students get in touch with themselves. Usually, I begin free-style writing with some form of meditation where I ask my students to close their eyes, focus on their breathing, and enjoy stillness while trying to silence their inner monologues. Then I tell them to write without removing their pens from the page for a full ten minutes. I watch as they hunker over their notebooks, writing with intense concentration. As they write, they seem to go to a different place—inside themselves, together. When the time is up and they are asked to stop writing, many do so reluctantly. Their writing feeds them. They are consistently surprised by the freedom of a writing exercise in which they are assured that they "will not be judged on style or grammar but on honesty." And oftentimes they are impressed with the profundity of the content they have created. The art that is created after stopping to still the brain is inspiring.

The exercise can only be successful when the students are instructed to write freely from a place of stillness without stopping, editing, or judging. "We might say that in these cases the unconscious ‘takes over’ and begins to write itself" (Assagioli, 1988/1993, p.47). Such moments take students to places rarely visited within the confines of our educational system. When my students leave the classroom, they seem surprised by the hustle and bustle of the hallway; they drift slowly through the crowd, as if still caught within the power that flowed through their hearts and pens.

In my efforts to further explore meditation and spirituality, both personally, and in the classroom, I discover J. F. Gardner’s (1996) chapter on “Genius as The Goal of Education,” and I feel a sense of hope. Gardner suggests that the higher self that we search for is inherently within each and every one of us. He calls it our “Genius.” When we honestly tap into that super conscious part of ourselves, he says, we allow ourselves the power to create truly inspired works of art. Am I, in practicing meditation and guided visualizations with my students, opening them to the brilliance of their “Genius”?

Meditating daily, I begin to notice a change within myself. Somehow through meditation, I feel more cared for and connected to the moment and all it presents. And this connectedness fuels my teaching, reformats my thought patterns. Now, whenever I get anxious, impatient, or am rude to others, I look to my goal of spiritual awareness and redirect my behaviour. "None are so
poorly endowed that they cannot achieve the good they truly want, if they will just acknowledge and invite the higher self to overshadow it” (Gardner, 1996, p.124). I share my personal and spiritual development with my students in hopes that my honesty will motivate them to look inward as well. Although, I must confess, this spiritual quest has its hurdles.

Sometimes, I do not experience stillness during meditation and cannot silence my thoughts. *Single at thirty-seven is not always a fun place to be.* In self-pitying moments, my heart aches, I grow depressed, and I cannot see the love that surrounds me. But I am slowly learning how to simply accept life as it unfolds and to truly feel happiness for others. I am also learning that to find happiness, I must believe, as Gardner (1996) believes, that "One must be able to hope as much for others’ aims as for one’s own; and as to which shall prevail, one must be content to let divine wisdom decide” (p.130). I try to believe that “when love does not stream toward us, it is because it does not stream out of us” ( p.124). But I sometimes still find myself in a slump. On my path to spiritual understanding, I seem to take a few steps forward and then stumble, and fall one back. Like the game, Mother may I take a step?, I am constantly returning to the starting line.

Recently, I have been searching for a key to open my door to spirituality, which at the moment seems temporarily barred. I have to believe that such a key does exist in order to continue my quest for inner strength and growth. Stuart Miller (1975) dangles the elusive key in front of me, stating simply that ‘It is enough to accept the entirely reasonable proposition that there are aspects in each of us which are higher than many of which we are normally aware” (p.125). He encourages me to continue my search without forcing results; and, he kindly recommends practical exercises to dialogue with my higher self. Finally, a meditative direction! The exercise I choose advises me to meditate on visualizing (by letting it simply appear) a wise woman’s face and then to speak to that person. And so, on a fateful morning, I attempt this exercise because “for the technique to work, it must be tried”(p.128).

But I falter. I allow the doubts to cloud my mind. I ask myself, ‘How can I just let a face appear?’ This cynicism, these doubts, I realize, will certainly muddy my attempts at guiding my students through meditation. A teacher must be open herself, to those practices that she wishes to share with her students. So I forge ahead and decide to believe, as Miller proposes, “there are latent parts of [myself] wiser than [my] daily self” (p. 128).

And I then experience an epiphany—*my inner voice, my super conscious, my higher self has been communicating with me my entire life.* I am flooded with relief. The inner voice that I so diligently yearned to hear, I now realize, has been speaking to me when I have needed guidance all my life. And, unknowingly, I have been listening to my inner wisdom in many life-altering decisions. *Finally I am released from the stagnant spot to which I have been rooted.* And with a new sense of calm, I realize that if I was born with this inner voice of wisdom then so have my students. And, I decide, it is through meditation that I might share this knowledge with them.

Walking into the classroom the following Monday morning, emboldened by my newfound belief generates fantastic results. The grade nine Drama class begins with its daily ‘check-in,’” a time when everyone has an opportunity to speak about anything, uninterrupted. It is a ritual that my students embrace. During this particular check-in, many students mention that they are feeling stressed; they complain about not being able to shut off their minds, and that consequently, they are losing sleep. I announce that we are going to try a new exercise. After a brief discussion on breathing techniques, I take them through a guided meditation—a melding of my own and Miller’s style.

I instruct the students to sit up straight with their spine against the back of their chair. I tell them to close their eyes and focus on their breath—without altering it. After a few moments, I ask them to deepen their breath and to visualize the air traveling down through their body. I tell them to rest their weight on their behind; to imagine the rest of their body growing out of that grounded area. I guide them through a series of relaxation movements of their facial muscles, neck and the space between their eyebrows. Then I ask them to try, without forcing, to visualize a face or shape within that space between their eyebrows. They breathe deeply while allowing ‘the wise
person” to present herself or himself and to perhaps offer some advice. I suggest breathing in light and allowing it to permeate the body and heart. The notion of passing that light to someone in need is introduced—because as we pass the light we receive it. The peace which fills the room is tangible.

Upon opening their eyes, my students eagerly discuss their experiences, and in so doing, open me up to my own spiritual possibilities. The mood is truly reverent. Students have learned in a new way, and you can see the light in their eyes as they speak. A few say that they lost all sense of matter—some claim that they lost feeling in their extremities. Upon awakening, they exclaim, they are surprised that “they had feet!” Others see themselves as cloudy masses and are energized by their experience. Some students receive profound messages. One girl tells us that in her stillness she heard soothing words which eased her sadness—a sadness which she had shared earlier during the check-in. She reveals that a voice told her that she should live in the moment, take things one step at a time, and that nothing that was happening to her lately was “that big a deal” in the grand scheme of things. The voice said, “It will all blow over.” The class cheers her revelation.

Another girl tells us that during the visualization, she realized that her desire to be perfect was only to hide her insecurities. She knows now, she says, that she needn’t be perfect and that she must go easy on herself. Once again, compassionate applause fills our sacred space.

Listening to the fresh revelations of my students as they share their experience reconnects me profoundly with my own learning and reconfirms my ultimate reason for choosing teaching as my profession—to make a difference. My heart glows as I witness my students’ profound growth in their own understanding and their desire to learn. I take a moment to express to them that they had heard the voice of the wise person within them, and that this presence exists within each and every one of us. I am speaking what I most need to hear. As poet Rishma Dunlop stated in an e-mail to our poets’ collective on Oct 7th, 2002, “Education must be about creating a space, a location in which beauty can happen. If we revise our positionings continuously to exist in that path of beauty, it will find us, or at least we will be prepared to recognize it when it lights us up, like a shooting star across a certain path of sky.” Beauty consistently lights up our classroom and inspires me to continue my mission to visualize the wise person within me.

“Now that I’ve let that [the bad] all out I don’t feel the same. It feels good knowing I can get rid of the feeling that makes me so hard on myself.”

(a grade nine girl)

Weeks later, and I am still patiently awaiting more profound visions while I sit and meditate. When I release my desire for a sign, one usually appears. For example, at this moment I’m trying to visualize my higher self; I don’t know whom to look for so finding her is proving difficult. It helps to believe that I am “appealing to a power within [me], and not to anyone outside” (Easwaran, 1988, p.138). Frustrated, I begin think about a friend who recently told me about a struggle he was having. The moment that I set thoughts about myself aside and focus exclusively of my troubled friend, I have a vision. My mind sees fists pounding. The fists are tiny but powerful and they are pounding out pain, poverty and problems—fists that are fighting for all that is right and good in the world. The visualization reassures me. It reminds me that the power is within me, and, in thinking of others, I will get the results I desire. Acting on these selfless thoughts throughout my day will lead me to a deeper level of fulfillment and “horizontal consciousness.”Easwaran’s claim that “meditation is a skill for living” (1988, p.139) fuels my determination to stick with my morning ritual. I am finding my power—or the power that is inherently within me— and realizing its connectedness to every other living entity. By sharing this experience of mindful awareness with my students through meditation, writing, and discussion, we journey along a spiritual path together.

I collect the students’ Drama journals at the end of the class, and am moved by their honest feedback about meditation and their inner worlds. Once again, their words fuel my quest—a quest that has begun and will never end. Meditation is a journey that I am grateful to have embarked upon, both alone and with my receptive students.
"I had no pain to let go, but I had all the happiness to give to others. I saw a woman on a bench, she was crying, and as I gave her the light she smiled, and then walked away. I had helped someone, it made me feel good about myself."

(a grade nine girl)

Resources


Recommended Readings


Inayat Khan, H. (1982). *Personality, the art of being and becoming*. Santa Fe: Sufi Order.

About the Author

Jodi Derkson is a Drama/English secondary school teacher in Vancouver, BC. She is currently doing her Masters of Education at UBC. This year, she produced, directed and co-wrote “Even Shadows” – a play about an adolescent boy in conflict with his dark side. Her second play, “Bridges” was co-written with her Drama 9 class and Eileen Edwards (fellow graduate student). “Bridges” is a play about oppression, social justice, and global awareness. Received with acclaim, all of the show’s proceeds were donated to CPAR (Canadian Physicians Aid and Relief for Malawi, Africa). Jodi hopes to continue writing, both personally and professionally (with her students) and to continue to “push the envelope” when it comes to education, curriculum, and the arts.