Contemplation as Educational Activism within Communication

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ABSTRACT Critical reflection, contemplation, and inner transformation are vitally important for Canadian communication studies, particularly with regard to issues of pedagogy. To address this concern, this article brings the field of contemplative education into conversation with communication studies. Contemplative education is a small but growing field within the academy that deals with issues of inner meaning and purpose. The article provides examples of how these two fields can have meaningful interactions and is a call for more scholars and instructors in communication studies to explore contemplative education’s potentially transformative applications. Ultimately, contemplative education can be seen as a form of educational activism within Canadian communication studies, linking the robust critical tradition of the field with a much-needed focus on inner transformation and deeply personal forms of learning.

KEYWORDS Contemplation; Contemplative education; Educational activism; Communication studies pedagogy

RÉSUMÉ La réflexion critique, la contemplation et la transformation intérieure sont d’une importance vitale pour les études en communication au Canada, particulièrement en ce qui a trait à la pédagogie. Cet article souligne cette importance en rapprochant le champ de l’éducation contemplative à celui des études en communication. L’éducation contemplative est un champ académique restreint mais en croissance continue qui traite de sens et de motivation intimes. Cet article montre comment les deux champs peuvent interagir de manière positive et encourager les chercheurs et enseignants en communication à explorer les applications potentiellement transformationnelles de l’éducation contemplative. En fin de compte, l’éducation contemplative a le potentiel d’encourager une forme d’activisme dans les études en communication au Canada qui consisterait à associer la tradition critique robuste de la communication à une focalisation indispensable sur la transformation intérieure et des formes d’apprentissage très personnelles.

MOTS CLÉS Contemplation; Éducation contemplative; Activisme éducationnel; Pédagogie en études de la communication

Introduction
Many activist-scholars within communication studies are familiar with the ideals of praxis. Paulo Freire (1970) famously states in Pedagogy of the Oppressed that praxis is
“reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p. 36). Freire in this case is discussing the overthrow and transformation of oppressive social structures, but we can extend the concept of praxis to include many kinds of socially conscious actions within academic teaching and research that are informed by critical reflection. However, despite our best intentions to embody this ideal, most of us are more comfortable talking about transformative action than about critical reflection. For example, much of the discussion around activism in the academy centres on the types of actions we can take to create a better world, but often neglects the role of the inner transformative work that would need to go hand in hand with these social changes. We can thus argue passionately about the need to combat neoliberal logics in universities, advocate for more diversified ownership of media in society, and criticize unjust information policies that discriminate against the poor, but the issue of how we can greater align our inner lives with these outer changes gets overlooked. In other words, we talk about how we can change the world, but not nearly enough about how we can change ourselves in order to create a better world.

With this point in mind, this article argues that we need to enhance and extend existing traditions of critical reflection and activism within Canadian communication studies, particularly with regard to educational approaches in the field. As such, it highlights the importance of promoting inner transformation and contemplation within higher education classroom settings. Canadian communication studies, particularly in comparison with U.S. communication studies, is dialectical, holistic, and humanities oriented (Babe, 2000). Moreover, a number of foundational Canadian communication theorists have been concerned with power imbalances, inequities, and the pursuit of the common good (Babe, 2000). A critical orientation thus imbues the field, in both its political economy and cultural studies traditions (Babe, 2000). This critical tradition within Canadian communication thought should be celebrated and honoured; however, we can further strengthen this tradition by considering more the role of critical reflection and contemplation within the field.

To address this need, this article brings the field of contemplative education into conversation with communication studies. Contemplative education is a small but growing field within the academy that deals with issues of inner meaning and purpose. Although a relatively new development in higher education, contemplative education draws inspiration from the work of scholars such as John Dewey and William James (see Bush, 2011). Dewey is also a seminal figure within the field of communication studies, a theorist who brought a humanistic and reflective focus to the enrichment of both individual and community life. Contemplative education can be described as education for the whole person, connecting the inner lives of people with issues of outer change (Barbezat & Bush, 2014).

A critical, interventionist field such as Canadian communication studies can greatly benefit from the personally transformative approaches that contemplative education offers. For example, as more communication studies scholars integrate contemplative approaches into their teaching, this educational orientation can be seen as a form of activism within the field. This “education as activism” can narrow gaps between inner and outer change and stimulate critical reflection for students.
Contemplative approaches can also potentially influence research agendas in the field; however, this discussion cannot be explored deeply here and this article only briefly mentions possible effects on research agendas.

If we view activism as the promotion of socially conscious and progressive change in the world, then contemplative education also has a role to play in nurturing activism within students outside of the classroom, particularly with regard to stimulating actions rooted in greater self-awareness and reflexivity. However, we must keep in mind how some of the Cartesian-inspired dichotomies such as reflection/action can be problematic; for some activists on the contemplative journey, where their reflection ends and activism begins (and vice versa) is not so clear. In fact, one of the benefits of contemplative education is the ability to accept contradictions and ambiguity with greater ease and comfort (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). In summary, this article argues that contemplative education is an educational form of activism within the field and can also make activist endeavours within communication studies more deeply meaningful and effective.

The article is organized as follows. The next major section elaborates in greater detail contemplative education, describing its foundations and aims. It also highlights emerging discussions about information anxiety, fragmentation, and disconnection in both the popular and academic press. It is argued that a contemplative-inspired approach (informed by the holistic and critical orientation of Canadian communication scholarship) provides a more robust interrogation of, and engagement with, these pressing societal concerns. The subsequent section illustrates how contemplation and social action can be linked outside of the classroom, through a brief discussion of the life and work of the famous Catholic monk and peace activist Thomas Merton. The penultimate section is more personal in nature, discussing my own contemplative journey through yoga and how I am learning to apply it to my own work. I include this section because contemplative education is ultimately about “walking the walk.” It is not enough to merely talk about these practices; one needs to actually do them and integrate them into one’s work and life. The article ends with some thoughts about future directions in applying contemplative practices to communication studies teaching and research.

**Contemplative education**

Contemplative education is a small but growing movement within academia. Other related terms are *integrative education* and *holistic education*. Pioneers of the field include Parker Palmer, Arthur Zajonc, Mirabai Bush, and Daniel Barbezat. As mentioned in the introduction, John Dewey is also an inspirational figure within contemplative education and is someone whose forms of critical reflection are embraced within Canadian communication studies. With this point in mind, I will briefly highlight some of Dewey’s ideas with regard to communication and reflection, mainly to illustrate connections between his work and contemplative education.

For Dewey (1916), education and communication were vitally linked, such that “Not only is social life identical with communication, but all communication (and hence all genuine social life) is educative” (p. 6). In addition, he saw communication as a reflective and transformative process. For example, he notes, “Try the experiment of communicating, with fullness and accuracy, some experience to another, especially
if it be somewhat complicated, and you will find your own attitude toward your experience changing; otherwise you resort to expletives and ejaculations” (Dewey, 1916, p. 6). Thus, as Dewey states, “All communication is like art” (1916, p. 7). Critical reflection is therefore an important part of his approach. However, as will be illustrated below, contemplative education makes the process of critical reflection Dewey expresses more explicit, along with linking it to issues of personal transformation and contemplative inquiry.

At the heart of a contemplative and integrative approach is a focus on the whole person, which addresses the mind, heart, and spirit of students (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010). These words of Thomas Merton (2013) capture one major focus of contemplative education: “The purpose of education is to show a person how to define himself authentically and spontaneously in relation to his world—not to impose a prefabricated definition of the world, still less an arbitrary definition of the individual himself” (p. 434). Furthermore, with regard to a university education, Merton (2013) goes on to say, “The function of a university is, then, first of all to help the student to discover himself: to recognize himself, and to identify who it is that chooses” (p. 434). A contemplative education thus has a strong emphasis on self-discovery and self-awareness. Contemplative approaches also place the student in the centre of their learning so that they can connect their inner world to the outer world (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). In this sense, working on one’s own self is part of a process of engagement with the world.

This process of contemplation, however, should not be confused with an elitist conception of the term. Hannah Arendt (1958), for instance, wrote at length about the distinctions between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* in ancient Greek life. One of Arendt’s (1958) main concerns was the elevation of the contemplative life over the life of political action in the Western world, such that the philosopher’s concern with eternity trumped “a life devoted to public-political matters” (p. 12). While Arendt’s critique of contemplation’s development into an abstract and politically impotent ideal has merit, contemplation (in the case of contemplative education) is by contrast intimately connected with action and is not elitist in nature.

Mindfulness, also included within contemplative education, is a type of present-minded and non-judgmental awareness, cultivated by paying attention in a sustained and particular way (Kabat-Zinn, 2012). A number of studies indicate the benefits of mindfulness meditation in decreasing stress and promoting enhanced feelings of well-being for the general population (see Eberth & Sedlmeier, 2012; Tang, Holzel, & Posner, 2015). In particular, for many university students, stress is a major problem. In fact, we are witnessing an alarming increase in student anxiety disorders and levels of stress across universities in North America (Regehr, Glancy, & Pitts, 2013). As with the general population, studies are also showing that mindfulness-based interventions in campus settings can be effective in combatting stress for students (Regehr, Glancy, & Pitts, 2013).

In addition to mindfulness meditation, contemplative techniques in education can include practices such as conscious movement, yoga, tai chi, council circles, visualizations, pilgrimages, deep listening, storytelling, bearing witness, establishing a personal sacred space, drawing on ancient wisdom practices for personal insights, and so forth (Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, 2014). The benefits of contemplation
in higher education are numerous. For example, professors who use contemplative approaches in their regular courses report changes in their students such as increased concentration, greater capacity for synthetic thinking, conceptual flexibility, and an appreciation for an intellectual process that is different from the dominant analytical model of the university (Bush, 2011).

Contemplative approaches can also help to explore social issues through personal insights and first-person experiences, develop empathy and compassion in students, explore one’s own personal biases, and understand the nature of our minds. For instance, a social work course can use contemplative exercises for students to develop empathy for the clients that they will work with, while a contemplative economics course can challenge students to understand how their own selfishness, kindness, and compassion can affect economic decision-making (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). Moreover, applications exist not only for the humanities and social sciences, but for all fields, including the sciences, engineering, and medicine (Bush, 2011).

Contemplation for an info-dystopian age

Given this background on contemplative education, how might we apply some of its principles in addressing pressing concerns of the information age? This section focuses on some of the popular discussions of psychosocial maladies of the information age, such as increasing anxiety, fragmentation, and disconnection. A number of scholars and popular writers highlight how the growing demands of information technology are associated with shrinking attention spans, feelings of isolation, and information overload and offer a range of solutions with contemplative overtones. Yet, as is argued here, these popular descriptions lack the critical orientation of communication studies. Therefore, if education (and scholarship as well) within Canadian communication studies took on a more contemplative dimension, then the critique of these pressing societal concerns would become even more robust and effective.

One such author in the popular press is the American journalist William Powers (2010), who in Hamlet’s BlackBerry discusses the need for finding balance in an age of “digital maximalism” (p. 4). As he describes it, digital maximalism is an unexamined philosophy that we all live by which posits that: a) connecting via screens is good, and b) the more you connect, the better (p. 4). In terms of balance, Powers describes it as finding a happy medium between the human need to connect outward and the opposite need for time and space apart. Powers fears the urge to constantly be connected is causing us excessive busyness and stress, and perhaps more crucially is impoverishing our inner lives and inner space for deep thinking. One solution he proposes is to consciously disconnect from our networked lives on a regular basis in order to regain this inner space.

The arguments Powers makes find echoes in the American writer Nicholas Carr’s work, whose now famous 2008 essay in The Atlantic titled “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” generated a lot of buzz in popular and academic circles (Carr, 2008). He argues that the internet affects how his “brain worked” (Carr, 2011, p. 16), such that he was not capable of the type of deeper-level thinking he was used to in a pre-digital age. Although one can argue Carr is making a technologically determinist argument
about the internet’s ability to affect our thinking, he highlights some of the fears that many people have in the digital age.

On a related note, MIT professor Sherry Turkle (2011) has detailed how a generation of young high school and university students are increasingly living out their lives tethered to their devices, becoming lonelier and isolated in the process. In an opinion piece in *The New York Times* (Turkle, 2015b), “Stop Googling. Let’s Talk,” Turkle laments the fact that many of us use technology in ways that prevent authentic face-to-face communication from occurring. With regard to face-to-face conversation, Turkle (2015b) astutely notes that

> it is in this type of conversation—where we learn to make eye contact, to become aware of another person’s posture and tone, to comfort one another and respectfully challenge one another—that empathy and intimacy flourish. In these conversations, we learn who we are. (para. 8)

She contends more of us now are using technology as a substitute for authentic relationships. Consequently, we are becoming more emotionally stunted. For instance, she discusses a variety of strategies we use to avoid deep conversation, such as an over-reliance on texting and the use of “phubbing,” a way to maintain faux eye contact while texting (Turkle, 2015a, p. 4). In her research, some of her informants discuss how texting can appear to be a safe option, one that allows a comfortable distance from the complications and unpredictability of real human conversation (Turkle, 2015a). She describes this “flight from conversation” as a crisis, which is also a flight from self-reflection, empathy, and mentorship (Turkle, 2015a, p. 5). According to Turkle (2015b), one solution to this crisis is to reclaim our capacity for solitude in order to find our more authentic selves.

Many of the issues Powers, Carr, and Turkle discuss are in the popular consciousness and seem to make intuitive sense. However, the “solutions” that these authors propose can often seem naïve and perhaps quite difficult to enact. For instance, how can one simply “disconnect” if one’s job depends on having constant connectivity to the internet? Moreover, will problems of anxiety, stress, and scattered attention merely disappear and become alleviated once we change our relationship to technology? To be fair, these authors do provide some methods to counteract the troubling aspects of information technology, such as creating technology-free zones within one’s house (Powers, 2010) and finding time for reflection and solitude (Turkle, 2015a). However, they glide over the subtler affective and psycho-emotional aspects of our relationships to media, information, and technology. With this point in mind, contemplative education can provide a more robust foundation for critique that takes into account the complex inner dimensions of undergoing technological detox.

For instance, meditative and reflective practices might be used in classes to help students better understand how they relate to technology and how they can more effectively manage this relationship. In particular, the work of David Levy on information technology and contemplation comes to mind. Levy, a professor in the Information School (iSchool) at the University of Washington, advocates a contemplative and mindful approach to technology use. He teaches a course titled Information and Contemplation, in which students carefully examine their use of information technol-
ogy, including how much time they spend with it, how it influences their emotions, and how it fragments their attention (Parry, 2013). Levy begins his classes with a meditation and gives students assignments where they record videos of themselves using technology for later observation and also ones where they have to focus on sustained tasks for a certain period of time without doing anything else (e.g., checking email only for 15 minutes) (Parry, 2013). These types of analytic and contemplative assignments allow students to gain greater insight into how they use technology as well as understand how scattered and anxious they can be while doing so. What may seem theoretical about information anxiety and overload can become painfully and unmistakably real through these exercises.

However, contrary to a fatalistic resignation that technology is changing how we think, Levy believes there is hope in educating ourselves to be more attentive in the digital era (Parry, 2013). In fact, Levy (2007) argues that the “more-faster-better” (p. 248) hectic pace of the information age is occurring at a time when we have amazing digital tools of great use to scholarship and human development. The problem, it appears, is that we are not slowing down enough and having enough awareness of our minds to take advantage of the digital era’s abundance. Thus, contemplative and mindfulness practices can be a way to gain a greater sense of well-being and control when we utilize technology.

Contemplative education: A Canadian communication studies perspective?

While Levy’s work is important in emphasizing the role of contemplation in our relationship with technology, we need to politicize these insights to make them more useful for broader social change. If not, we risk reducing problems of information overload and anxiety into individual ones, where solutions would appear as deceptively simple as changing one’s own personal habits regarding technology use. These personal changes are important; however, an individual-centric approach ignores the systemic inequities that plague the techno-capitalist information age. Rising inequalities in income, increasing precariousness for workers of all types, and the erosion of social safety nets in a neoliberal era are all associated with, and serve to compound, issues such as information overload, anxiety, and stress. Ignoring this wider social context can potentially feed into neoliberal discourses that emphasize individual “virtue” over broader social reform. To be fair, Levy (2016) does mention how change on the individual level is related to broader social and technological changes, describing how individual, social, and technological changes are inter-related (Levy, 2016). Despite this awareness of the broader context, however, I argue that a Canadian communication studies perspective that integrates contemplative approaches would provide a more powerful multi-level (e.g., sociopolitical, economic, individual, psycho-affective) critique of our relationship with technology than approaches that rely largely on individual change.

How then can we bring more contemplative elements into communication studies pedagogy, such that we integrate both individual and systemic concerns regarding the perils of techno-consumerism? To stay with the example of our personal relationship to technology, the issue of desire can be examined further. Sociologist Zygmunt
Bauman (2007), among others, discusses how consumerist desire has become the defining axis of our neoliberal age, creating a “society of consumers” from a previous “society of producers” (p. 54). The concept of desire, therefore, is central to capitalism. A more critical approach to contemplation might entail a greater examination of desire within ourselves for technological products. Why, for example, does one need the new iPhone 7? What social, psychological, economic, and political forces are propelling one to buy this product? What role do mass media messages play in facilitating this desire? How is one’s personal identity tied into the acquisition of these products? Questions like these can strike at the heart of capitalist desire, potentially opening students up to larger questions about how oppressive economic systems operate. Moreover, we can begin to understand how our own behaviours and choices perpetuate a techno-capitalist economy that is built on destructive and rampant consumerism. Exploring the nature of technological desire can therefore be a powerful contemplative practice in communication studies.

Another concept that is ripe for contemplative exploration is commodity fetishism. Many readers will be familiar with Karl Marx’s description of a central process in capitalism, whereby one increasingly sees social reality as a “world of commodities” with exchange value. Commodity fetishism privileges the commodity form at the expense of seeing the world as it truly is, with all its social, human, emotional, and relational complexity. Commodity fetishism thus impoverishes our understanding of the world, and many Marxist-inspired scholars call for a demystification of this concept. Demystification is important, but what methods can help us with this process at a more affective level? For example, we can lead contemplative exercises in a class with a focus on a particular object, such as a mobile phone. One could begin this exercise by having students take out their mobile phones and pay very close attention to them for a minute or so. The physicist and contemplative scholar Arthur Zajonc (2008) describes this process as a meditative form of concentrated attention. Students could then close their eyes and hold the image of the phone in their minds, while allowing thoughts about the object to come to the surface. After this exercise, students can spend a minute writing down their thoughts. The instructor can then lead a group discussion around the thoughts that emerged for students. At this point, the instructor can discuss the global production chain of mobile phones, highlighting where the different components come from and the people who actually make the phones. From a social justice perspective, the discussion can also centre around the dangerous working conditions of technology workers in the Global South, as well as the problems associated with the disposal of mobile phones (i.e., e-waste).

The instructor can then show an image or set of images that capture the harsh reality for labourers in the mobile phone industry. A meditation on this particular image or set of images can take place afterwards, allowing students to observe the thoughts and emotions that arise for them. The final step would be having another large or small group discussion to help students process their thoughts and feelings surrounding this meditation. Thus what began as a contemplative exercise based on one’s own individual relationship to an object has expanded to include the social life of that object. Students may confront various contradictions and insights from this process, as

Canadian Journal of Communication, Vol 42 (1)
their relationship to an everyday technology object could get complicated. However, it is often in places of discomfort that real learning and transformation occurs.

The above example is hypothetical, but it illustrates the possibilities that a contemplative approach can bring to exploring critical concepts in communication studies. But my point here is not to make communication studies instructors feel they need to invent new exercises and activities, especially ones with which they are not familiar. In fact, many instructors are doing contemplative practices in their courses already, without directly calling them “contemplative.” For instance, aspects of “service learning” can be contemplative, especially components that have students reflect on their experiences working in different social, cultural, or economic contexts. To use the example of the mobile phone industry again, we can imagine an international service learning class with a focus on global digital labour. As part of this course, students may spend a few weeks in China working with NGOs that focus on improving the working conditions for mobile phone industry workers. Through processes such as empathic listening, working alongside others in collective struggle, and journaling, students may develop greater insight into the various inequities in this industry and also may understand how some of their own actions feed into this vicious and inequitable cycle.

Another area that we often overlook in the academy is the importance of empathy and compassion. Particularly with regard to activism, compassion and love are deep motivating factors, whether it is love for fellow human beings, a love of social justice, love for a particular issue, love for a certain subject, or love for a world in deep need of repair and healing. We thus often act out of love when talking about creating a better world, but are usually uncomfortable talking about this concept in our classes. A number of contemplative practices exist to help us cultivate the love within ourselves and for others. One notable example is the *metta* or loving-kindness meditation from the Buddhist tradition, which first focuses on cultivating love and compassion toward oneself, and then expands this heightened awareness to others, ultimately embracing the world at large (Barbezat & Bush, 2014).

At its core, a contemplative approach in communication studies pedagogy has to help us explore our inner lives in a deeper way, particularly if we want to motivate critically inspired activism in students. In other words, we should ask ourselves: what types of social change will I create as an activist if I am not in touch with my own thoughts, desires, and emotions? If I lead an unexamined life, how will my anger, hatred, and cravings affect the kinds of social change that I pursue? While we cannot expect to be perfect beings, greater self-awareness can potentially help us to create more conscious change in the world. I return again to a quote from Thomas Merton (1971), who writes eloquently on this topic:

> What is the relation of this [contemplation] to action? He who attempts to act and do things for others or for the world without deepening his own self-understanding, freedom, integrity and capacity to love, will not have anything to give others. He will communicate to them nothing but the contagion of his own obsessions, his aggressiveness, his ego-centered ambitions, his delusions about ends and means, his doctrinaire prejudices and ideas. (p. 164)
The next section briefly discusses some of the key ideas of Thomas Merton as they pertain to the focus of this article, as an example of a contemplative approach that also fully embodies committed social action. Merton serves as an inspiration and guide for taking contemplative insights and merging them into activist concerns.

**Contemplation and engaged action: The example of Thomas Merton**

Thomas Merton is a popular and inspirational figure in the field of contemplative education. As a Trappist monk who lived in a monastery in Kentucky, Merton spent a lot of time in silence and contemplation. The extended periods of contemplation were crucial in cultivating Merton’s social and political activism (Aguilar, 2011). Merton foremost expressed his activism through his writing, coming into the public eye with his first book in 1949 and remaining an active writer until his sudden and tragic death in 1968 due to electrocution in Bangkok. The range of topics that Merton wrote on was impressive, including literary criticism, Christian contemplative traditions, Asian spiritual philosophies, nuclear warfare, the Vietnam War, and civil rights, to name a few. He is most well known in activist circles for his fierce opposition to nuclear weapons and the Vietnam War, and for his commitment to non-violence (Aguilar, 2011). As his writings gained in popularity, many notable peace activists made visits to Merton in his monastery, and the demands on his time for speaking engagements and travel grew (Aguilar, 2011).

While he was a social critic and activist, Merton (2013) at the same time always saw contemplation as an essential activity in a human’s life. He felt so deeply about contemplation’s importance that he said it was needed for “man [sic] ... to remain human” (p. 226). He goes on to note, “If contemplation is no longer possible, then man’s life has lost the spiritual orientation upon which everything else—order, peace, happiness, sanity—must depend” (Merton, 2013, p. 226). We can thus see Merton’s activist writings as an extension of his contemplative practice; for him, going inward into silence and peace is mirrored by his engagement with issues of peace and justice in the outer world.

Near the end of Merton’s life, he became more engaged with reconciling contemplative traditions in the West with those in the East, ultimately bringing him to India and then to Thailand, where he met his untimely death. The last speech Merton gave was in Bangkok, titled “Marxism and Monastic Perspectives,” in which he explored some intersections between Neo-Marxist thought (primarily the work of Herbert Marcuse) and the monastic life. Although at first glance these two topics would seem to be an odd combination, Merton (1973) discusses how both Marxists and monks are interested in revolutionary change. As he contends, the “monk is essentially someone who takes up a critical attitude toward the world and its structures” (Merton, 1973, p. 329). On this same topic, Merton (1973) further notes:

The world refusal of the monk is something that also looks toward an acceptance of a world that is open to change. In other words, the world refusal of the monk is in view of his desire for change. This puts the monk on the same plane with the Marxist, because the Marxist directs a dialectical critique of social structures toward the end of revolutionary change.
The difference between the monk and the Marxist is fundamental insofar as the Marxist view of change is oriented to the change of substructures, economic substructures, and the monk is seeking to change man’s consciousness. (p. 330, emphasis added)

Thus while seeing the similarities between Marxist and monastic perspectives, Merton makes the important distinction about how the monastic (i.e., contemplative) experience is about revolutionary change that starts from within oneself.

It is perhaps fitting that Merton’s last speech was on this topic, as he continually sought to bring the inner transformation inherent in contemplative practice into conversation with social change. Unfortunately, he did not have a chance to elaborate further on these ideas. However, Merton’s thoughts here echo a theme highlighted throughout this article about how inner change and outer transformation are inter-related. Thus if Marxist social theory ultimately concerns itself with critiquing existing power dynamics with an eye toward changing them in a more socially just way, contemplative approaches can provide the affective and spiritual foundations for this social transformation.

**Contemplation and communication studies: A personal journey**

While figures like Thomas Merton are inspirations on the contemplative path, contemplative education is ultimately a personal and intimate journey. Great figures may light the way for us, but we must walk the path ourselves, as no one else can do it for us. As Barbezat and Bush (2014) note, having one’s own personal contemplative practice or set of practices is essential to being an effective and authentic contemplative educator. Given this reality, I discuss now my own interest and journey through contemplative education, as a way to give greater context and depth to this discussion. This discussion also highlights my hopes, dreams, and struggles in integrating contemplative education into my academic work during the age of the neoliberal university.

**A journey through yoga**

My contemplative journey began with a deeper engagement with yoga practice and philosophy, something that was in the background of my life for many years but only became more serious in 2011. Yoga in the modern world is synonymous with the practice of *hatha yoga*, which is mainly focused on physical postures (*asanas*) in combination with coordinated breathing. But yoga itself denotes a wide and profound Indian philosophical tradition that includes a variety of meditational, intellectual, psychospiritual, and devotional techniques and approaches for personal betterment, growth, and enlightenment. One popular definition of yoga is the idea of *union* (e.g., between the individual human spirit and the divine; between the body, breath, and mind; et cetera) (Desikchar, 1995). In addition, one of the earliest forefathers of the modern yoga movement in the West, Swami Vivekananda (1989), divided yoga into four categories for ease of understanding and application: karma yoga (yoga of action); jnana yoga (yoga of intellectual discrimination); bhakti yoga (yoga of devotion); and raja yoga (yoga of contemplation/meditation).

In the spring of 2012, during a research trip to India, I took a 200-hour yoga teacher training course in Madurai at the Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centre. Since then, I am
continuing my education in yoga, having taken workshops and further trainings at yoga centres in Canada, the U.S., and India. In May 2012, I started teaching a free weekly drop-in yoga class to students, faculty, and staff in the Faculty of Information & Media Studies (FIMS) at the University of Western Ontario (Western). In the spring of 2014, I added a weekly meditation class. While I initially thought I would keep my yoga/meditation and academic lives separate, this foray into contemplative teaching at the university has been both fruitful and potentially career altering.

For example, I have seen the hunger in students and staff for relaxation and stress relief, especially given the increasing pressures they face within the neoliberal university. So, on one level, participants in these classes report to me that they find stress relief. In addition, these classes have created a non-competitive, community-oriented space for faculty, staff, and students to gather together in a spirit of self-discovery and growth. These types of spaces are rare today, as neoliberal logics are increasingly making universities into ultra-competitive places that value instrumental and technocratic goals above all else. Reclaiming a place in the university for contemplative inquiry is one small act of defiance toward neoliberal logics.

In terms of integrating my own contemplative background into my regular academic courses, I am still in a process of exploration. With regard to the link between my contemplative background and activism, my ideas are also in a process of incubation. Despite the inchoate nature of my thoughts, however, I will comment on some applications of yoga philosophy for addressing problematic issues in neoliberal society, beginning close to home at my own university.

For instance, one example of neoliberal logics at work in Western is a fundraising and publicity campaign called “Be Extraordinary—The Campaign for Western.” The most visible aspect of this campaign is the presence of larger-than-life banners of famous alumnae adorning the sides of numerous buildings throughout campus, exhorting us all in large letters to “Be Extraordinary.” At first glance this campaign might appear to be harmless, if somewhat cliché and passé, as is the case for most university fundraising campaigns. However, upon further examination, the phrasing of this campaign is problematic and potentially harmful. By stating that we (and most directly students) must “be extraordinary,” the implication is that most of us are merely “ordinary” and hence deficient in some way. In the competitive logic of neoliberalism, we need to be better than ordinary to be someone, to have basic economic security, and to “win” in the marketplace of life. We can see parallels here with celebrity culture and the need to “brand” oneself to have value in neoliberal society.

How might yoga philosophy find application in this discussion? Central to yoga and other contemplative traditions is the inward journey toward self-discovery and awareness; in other words, our greatest fulfillment in life is delving deeply within ourselves and finding out who we really are (Cope, 1999). Seen in this light, a campaign to “be extraordinary” is potentially harmful, as it can take us away from ourselves in a vain journey to be someone whom we are not. This is not to say we cannot make extraordinary contributions in our work and personal lives; however, the emphasis in yoga is on becoming fully who we are in order to be of most benefit to ourselves, to others, and to the world at large. Thus, a contemplative approach can be useful in critiquing
the neoliberal sloganeering of universities. Moreover, this type of approach can open up a conversation about the nature and potential of higher education itself, bringing to light how a university education can also speak to the holistic development of students.

On another note, yoga philosophy is rich with social and personal ethical considerations. In yoga parlance, social ethics are termed yama, and personal ethics are called niyama (Bryant, 2009). Ethical considerations speak to issues such as non-possessiveness, contentment with one's state of life, and the need for self-analysis and self-study, to name just a few. The consumer economy is built on the constant need to buy things and to gain a type of “purchase” over the qualities and attributes associated with commodities; a practice such as non-possessiveness would seem to run counter to the capitalist appeal for consumers to lose themselves in their objects of consumption. In addition, by finding more contentment from within, the incessant need to find happiness through objects of consumption can be mitigated; this process can strike at the heart of the consumerist economy. The preceding examples are quite preliminary and need to be explored in much greater depth. They are presented here mainly as a way to explore how ethical considerations in contemplative practices like yoga may have political implications.

**Toward a contemplative communication studies**

This article has introduced the field of contemplative education to communication studies, with an eye toward the activist implications of this intersection. Specifically, contemplative education, through its emphasis on inner meaning and change, can provide essential emotional and spiritual support for activist forms of pedagogy. Thus, this article is ultimately a call for more scholars and teachers in communication studies to explore the benefits of contemplative education. I have shared my personal contemplative journey, incomplete and in its early, formative stage, largely to show how contemplative education must start from within and work its way outwards toward issues of meaningful personal, institutional, and social change. There are no shortcuts in this process, no way one can make the journey without simultaneously working on one's own self. But this reality should not unduly scare one away from starting the journey, as each journey is unique and unfolds when one is ready for it.

The rewards for taking this path can be transformative. What might communication studies activist teaching and research look like if more of us embraced contemplative approaches? Can we imagine an education where students are deeply in touch with their hearts, such that they cannot resist the love that beseeches them to bring healing to a world rife with inequity and misery? Can we envision research agendas that honour the need for media that support personal growth, healing, and peace? Contemplative education beckons us to address these questions and many more that remain unanswered.

**References**


