The State of the Contemplative Movement

By Tom Callanan

From June 10-13, 2010, thirty spiritual leaders and practitioners from different faith traditions, practices, and professions gathered at a remote conference facility in Kalamazoo, Michigan. During the second day of the meeting, a tension point surfaced that had me sitting on the edge of my seat. "I'm concerned about the altar in the middle of the room," said a participant who is a spiritual director. "Many of us placed sacred objects there, and now I see that it's also become a place for note cards, pens and even insect repellant. This feels like sacrilege to me." Another participant, a spiritually-oriented radio personality, spoke up immediately, "I agree, and I'm also concerned about the rock that's up there. I know it means something to someone, but it worries me. I want to know more about that rock."

The intent of the three-day meeting hosted by the Fetzer Institute, a mid-sized foundation based in Kalamazoo, was to "assess the current and future state of the contemplative movement in America." Buddhist teachers and practitioners were in attendance from organizations such as the Naropa Institute and Spirit Rock Meditation Center as well as practitioners from other faith traditions including Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Sufism, and interfaith. (See attendance list attached). In addition to those working in religious settings, there were also those teaching in secular settings at places like Google, the University of San Francisco Law School and the US military.

Given the diversity in the room, I wasn't surprised by the discussion about the altar. For fifteen years between 1994 and 2009, I was a program officer at the Fetzer Institute responsible for attending, convening, and facilitating spiritually-oriented gatherings like this one. It was not uncommon at such events for questions about what was at the center of the room or who would lead the opening prayer or who would deliver to the keynote address to ignite the types of conflicts that the gatherings were designed to preempt or heal.

Fortunately, at this particular gathering, the potential conflict was resolved as gracefully as I've ever witnessed. The facilitators announced a break; three participants quietly cleared the altar of note cards and insect repellant; and the participant with questions about the rock met over tea with the guy who'd brought the rock. Ten minutes later, everyone returned to their chairs

and dove wholeheartedly into the next session of the gathering without so much as a glance backward.

How, I wondered, had this group so easily side-stepped issues that brought other meetings to a standstill? "I don't think we can attribute what happened here to any one person or element," said Mirabai Bush, co-facilitator of the event and Associate Director of The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society. "I think it's a reflection of the nature of the contemplative movement and a reflection of one of the gifts that this movement has to offer the world."

The "contemplative movement" described by Bush refers to approximately 1/4 to 1/3 of the adult population who are engaged on a regular basis with some form of contemplative, spiritual practice. Contemplative practice is defined broadly as that cluster of spiritual practices of all faiths that quiet the mind and bring body, mind and heart into alignment producing grater calm, insight, openness, receptivity, and connection to oneself, others, nature and the divine. Examples include forms of meditation, yoga, prayer, contemplative arts, contemplative movement and ritual.

The use of contemplative practice has historically been limited to monks and nuns living in monastic settings. With a few exceptions such as Emerson, Thoreau and 19th Century Trancendentalists, the idea of lay people engaging in meditation and contemplation wasn't considered until spiritual teachers from the east began visiting the west in the 1960s. When the Beatles took up meditation with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in 1968, it was as if a spiritual Berlin Wall had come down as people of all ages and faiths began accessing powerful ancient practices, not just from within their own religious traditions but across many traditions.

Initially there were divisions and rivalries between practices mirroring the centuries-old divisions between religions. Those divisions began to disappear as the practices were uprooted from their traditions and combined, often in secular settings, with other practices. Medical doctors such as Jon Kabat Zinn and Dean Ornish, for instance, began using Buddhist meditation and Hindu yoga techniques in hospital settings with reimbursement from insurance companies. In 1992, as awareness grew about the similarities between and benefits of such practices, The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society was created to support all contemplative practices. "We are committed to the value and insights of all spiritual and wisdom traditions and their associated forms of contemplative practice," says the group's website.

Although there's much that contemplative practices share in common, many at the Fetzer meeting questioned the idea of belonging to the same "movement." Most movements are defined by a sense of solidarity and shared commitment to a common element at the center. Given the group's discussion about the altar, there was no agreed-upon common center to rally around, at least not on the surface. "There's a transformation that I see happening within practitioners of all faiths that is birthing a new type of consciousness---a consciousness of interdependence and wholeness," said Dena Merriam, founder of the Global Peace Initiative for Women. "Perhaps it's this consciousness of wholeness that's at the center," said Merriam. "The consciousness is similar to the ocean, and each individual's practices and traditions are like harbors and bays that provide safe access to that ocean."

"The paradigm shift that we're experiencing here," said Mirabai Bush, "is that we're all moving toward the universal (the ocean) while still maintaining the integrity of our separate paths and traditions." The contemplative movement is thus one that is defined by a common goal of unity while acknowledging the validity of many ways of getting there. When this unity of consciousness is present, the items on the altar are representations of the different paths to that unity. "Though my primary work is in the domain of Sufism," said Pir Zia Inayant-Kahn, the spiritual leader of the Sufi Order International, "I'm moving out of my personal comfort zone, my spiritual tradition, to support the larger movement for the transformation of consciousness that I see taking shape in so many seekers. The task here is to explore revelation as a planetary phenomenon in which all religions have a share but of which none has a monopoly."

As part of their participation in the Fetzer event, each of the thirty participants wrote 10-20 page papers describing the state of the contemplative movement within specific domains of action including education, leadership, law, social action, conflict transformation, end-of-life care, healing trauma, and online communities. When I read the papers and combined them with what was said at the meeting, a clear and compelling picture of the movement and its potential effect on the spiritual landscape of America and the world began to emerge. The diversity and complexity of the movement as it develops within multiple sectors simultaneously can be described best through the following ten intersecting and interrelated trends and developments.

Ten Trends and Developments Within the Contemplative Movement:

1. A Radical Individuation of Practice: In most parts of the world, people's spiritual beliefs and practices are usually determined by their family

of origin. We are born Hindu, Christian, Muslim etc. and that determines what we believe and how we practice. But now, with the dramatic increase and easy availability of contemplative practices of all kinds, we can choose our practices for ourselves without limitation from our religion of birth. "I was raised Jewish and I still consider Judaism to be my cultural and religious roots," says Claudia Horwitz, the founder of stone circles and The Stone House, a non-profit center dedicated to bringing spiritual practices to social activists, "but my primary practice is mindfulness meditation and yoga, and that's what I draw on in my work." This trend toward radical individuation is increasing as marriages continue to cut across religious, racial, and ethnic boundaries producing children who must necessarily choose those combinations of beliefs and practices that work best for them. "Of the 30 contemplative practitioners in this room," says Arthur Zajonc, professor of physics at Amherst College, "there are 30 different expressions of practice. And it's not just Protestant, Catholic, and Hindu. It's what particular kind of Catholic are you; and what particular type of yoga and meditation do you do?"

2. An Explosion of Contemplative Modalities: "During the past twenty years," says Michael Craft, the Program Director at the Omega Institute, "the list of contemplative modalities offered at Omega has literally exploded from a few meditation courses to now include a broad spectrum of techniques, practices and modalities oriented around self awareness and interior and even exterior experience." That list now includes such widely diverse activities as centering prayer, chi gung, journaling, breathing exercises, sacred dance, Zen flower arranging, and labyrinth walking. One participant at the gathering claimed to be experimenting with the idea of "mindful e-mailing." Despite this radical inclusiveness, the leaders of the movement are clear, if not always in agreement, around the boundaries that define the movement. Those practices most often excluded are faith-based forms of petitionary prayer, study and ceremony that tend to reinforce pre-existing religious, spiritual, and psychological beliefs versus focusing on direct experience and cultivating receptivity and openness. Following this line of thinking, one might best determine the line between contemplative and non-contemplative e-mailing by whether one comes away from the experience more righteous and willful or more open, expansive and creative. Regardless of where the line is drawn, "the variety of contemplative practices continues to expand dramatically," says Craft, "along with the public's interest in and demand for learning them and applying them in their lives."

3. Religions are Adapting and People are Returning Home: The exodus of westerners from mainstream religions during the sixties, seventies and eighties to embrace contemplative practices from the east is well documented. What is less well known is that mainstream religions are now

opening to embrace these practices and people are returning to their neighborhood churches, temples, synagogues etc.. Rabbi Rachel Cowan, tells the story of a delegation of Rabbis who went to see the Dalai Lama in the early 1970s at his home in Dharamsala, India. "There are so many Jews here who are practicing Buddhism with you," they said. "Will you send them back to us?" His Holiness apparently responded, "They need a place to return to. Will you create that?" During the past twenty years Cowan's Institute for Jewish Spirituality has attempted to do just that by creating the movement for "contemplative Judaism." That movement has supplemented and revived/revitalized traditional Jewish practices with mindfulness meditation, yoga, spiritual direction, mussar, and contemplative prayer. "The Jewish community," explains Cowan, "more readily accepts that one can borrow practices from another tradition (acknowledging their source) and adapt them to the framework of Judaism without importing contradictory messages from another religion." The result, Cowan explains, has been a win-win, both for traditional Jewish synagogues who are finding people returning to their doors and also for those practitioners who reluctantly fled their synagogues and are now happy to return to their local communities and home religion.

Similar movements are happening in the other religions. Douglas Burton-Christie, Professor of Theological Studies at Loyola Marymount University and a leader in the Christian Contemplative movement describes the reciprocal process whereby those who've left the church return to breathe new life into traditional stories and practices. And for those who return after years of sampling practices from other faiths, the church can provide an integrity and continuity of practice. "What does it mean," says Burton-Christie, "to stand in a contemplative tradition and honor the integrity of the thought and practice that has unfolded over thousands of years? That doesn't mean we have to do it as it's always been done. But sinking one's practice into that rich ground can produce great benefit."

4. Finding Unity in Diversity through a Common Way of Knowing: One might predict that the radical individuation of practices within the contemplative movement would cause splintering and fragmentation, but that's not what's happening. Regardless of the tradition or set of practices, there's a growing recognition within the movement of a common mindset or way of knowing that all contemplatives share. "The contemplative mindset," says Buddhist teacher Judy Lief, "is an approach to life that may include contemplative practice but is much broader in scope. It's based on the experience of interconnectedness of oneself, others, and the world as a whole and the view of life as a path of continual challenges, learning and growth." Tobin Hart, the author of the Spiritual Life of Children says that contemplation is a "third way of knowing beyond the rational and the

sensory." This way of knowing and experiencing the world is direct, intuitive, and non-conceptual. "Whether we find the contemplative in centering prayer," says Barry Boyce of the Shambhala Sun, "or in the zone we enter on a swift downhill ski run, in resting our mind on a sacred image, or while making art doing carpentry, the experience, or non-experience, if you like, is the same. There is a moment outside time, a suspension of any attempt to make permanent and solid what is dynamic and ever changing." To be a contemplative is to live with a certain kind of awareness that recognizes the unity in the diversity of all things. The contemplative movement is therefore a unique kind of club, the members of which include those who yearn to be part of a club where nothing and no one is ever excluded. "We're all working toward the same thing," says Brenda Salgado of the Movement Strategy Center in Oakland, California. "That's a vision of a world where there is no other."

5. The Movement Meets the Mainstream: The radical inclusiveness and creativity of the movement has helped to move its practices and its way of thinking into the mainstream in unexpected directions and sometimes at a rapid pace. A 2008 study of Yoga in America (YIAS) found that the number of adults practicing yoga grew from 4.3 million in 2001 to 15.8 million in 2007, an increase of almost 400% in just 6 years. "We're talking less about a movement," says Arthur Zajonc, "and more about an infusion." A 2004 study by the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society pointed to five sectors that were most influenced by that infusion. They include business, medicine/science, education, law, and prison work. Recent activity in the technology and military sectors warrants them also being added to the list.

In the technology sector, for instance, Google recently created a program for its employees called "Search Inside Yourself." And Apple has a new "Meditate" application for its iPhone. In April, 2010, a conference was convened in the Silicon Valley titled "Wisdom 2.0" that brought together mindfulness practitioners working within the technology sector. In a talk at the conference on the "aesthetics of Twitter," Greg Pass described Twitter as an invitation to experience "a moment in time more deeply" so as to give "extraordinary attention to something in our lives that might otherwise pass us by."

In the military sector, programs such as the Military Care Providers Project and the Coming Home Project offer counseling and teach mindfulness, tai chi, and chi gung to Army chaplains, medics, and other care givers along with soldiers suffering from symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Although these programs focus on contemplative practices and their effect on behavior, their greater power rests in a more reflective way of knowing and

being that promise a deeper and more lasting transformation. There was talk among the leaders at the Fetzer meeting of the notion of the contemplative family, contemplative education, contemplative law, contemplative journalism, and the biggest tent of all, the contemplative society.

6. Professionalization and Secularization: Social movements follow a fairly consistent developmental trajectory. Stage one typically begins on the fringes of society with a few charismatic leaders and small groups of followers who are focused on building their own identities, language, and practices with little awareness of other groups. Stage two occurs when groups begin enjoying wider popularity and recognize the advantage of joining with similar groups to form alliances, associations, collaborative publications and common ways of speaking. Stage three is characterized by further growth and acceptance within the mainstream. This brings greater popularity, resources, and attention but often threatens the integrity, depth and legitimacy of the individual groups and practices. At this point, various educational, research, and outreach organizations often position themselves between the groups and the mainstream so as to maintain the integrity of the individual groups but also to create a successful bridge and easier accessibility for those within the mainstream.

The contemplative movement is clearly moving into this third stage of development. For instance, a number of secular institutions within the mainstream have formed during the past two decades that are not attached to any particular practice but are clearly devoted to the study, application and dissemination of contemplative practices within the mainstream. These organizations include The Mind and Life Institute, The Center for Mindfulness Medicine, Health Care and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, the Mindfulness Awareness Research Center (based at UCLA), and the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education. Foundation support for the movement is now coming from many directions within the secular world including Fetzer, the Nathan Cummings Foundation, the Garrison Institute, the Templeton Foundation and the Seasons Fund for Social Transformation, a consortium of a dozen foundations.

This institutionalization of the movement has not been without its growing pains as secular organizations attempt to integrate contemplative practices once limited to the monastery into organizational life. "Bringing contemplatively-oriented individuals together into an organization is no guarantee of success," says Walter Link. "Some of the most dysfunctional organizations are the ones that claim to be contemplative." And yet, "we need organizations, memes, and ideas," continues Link, "to create an

atmosphere and institutions where practice can be supported. It's a real challenge as we move from the fringe to a more active, organizational life that sometimes challenges the comfort of our contemplation."

7. **The Marriage of Contemplation and Action:** "The perceived split between contemplation and action is well established," says Patricia Jennings, Director of the Initiative on Contemplation and Education at the Garrison Institute. "The standard thinking has been that you're either a contemplative and removed from the world, or you're engaged in action and can't engage in true contemplation. What we're now seeing is that the movement is healing that split. You can do both. To be effective, we're realizing that you actually have to be both. True contemplation demands action, and effective action demands contemplation." A new report, "Out of the Spiritual Closet" developed by the Movement Strategy Center highlights how the split is being healed within the social justice movement. "Individuals are coming out of the spiritual closet; they are seeking transformative practices as a way to be more integrated, interconnected and whole. Across the country, in many different communities, frontline organizers are using a diverse range of practices as they seek to balance their commitment to political/outward transformation with spiritual/inward transformation… While there is great diversity in organizer's approaches, there is also profound unity. As organizers confront the disconnection, fragmentation, and objectification that defines dominant culture, they seek practices that will counteract, heal and transform those experiences. They are working toward deeper embodiment, awareness, connection, interdependence and a life-giving sense of power."

8. **Science and Contemplation Become Engaged:** The proliferation of scientific research on contemplative practices (particularly meditation and mindfulness) is one of the most remarkable trends of the past five years," says Maia Duerr, the author of "A Powerful Silence" a landmark study of contemplative practice in America in 2004. For instance, the number of clinical trials conducted on the effectiveness of various meditation practices increased from 12 between 2000 and 2004 to 72 between 2005 and 2009 (a 600% increase). Positive findings from these studies have seeded a few high caliber studies conducted by leading scientists including D. Clifford Saron (UC Davis), Dr. Richard Davidson (U. of Wisconsin/Madison), and Dr. Amishi Jha (University of Pennsylvania). The most promising elements coming from these studies relate to the notions of neuroplasticity and mental fitness. The studies point to the fact that our brains change and develop throughout life. We can exercise our brains and keep them young and fit (through contemplative practices) much as we can keep our bodies young and fit through physical exercise. "These studies are creating legitimacy for

contemplative practices," says Duerr, "and they're providing people in leadership positions with excellent data to justify the application of these practices, not only in health care but in other fields as well." During a recent debate on Health Care reform within the U.S. House of Representatives, for instance, Tim Ryan (R. Ohio) presented personal testimony along with scientific evidence for the role that mindfulness practice can play in promoting health and well-being and thus reducing health care costs.

9. The Marriage of personal, organizational, and social transformation: Until recently, the contemplative movement has focused more heavily on personal transformation. The most common sensibility is that transformed individuals will create a transformed society. Unfortunately, current organizational, social, and cultural forms and structures are antithetical to contemplative practice. The circle of concern for those within the contemplative movement is now beginning to expand to include organizational and social transformation. The most promising work in this area is occurring within the domains of social action, law and politics. "Practice aimed at individual freedom is simply not enough," says social activist Claudia Horwitz. "People are seeing the opportunity to transform whole organizations and institutions. This is what we need. For activists, the life of the spirit is both an individual and a collective enterprise." Rhonda Magee, Professor of Law at the University of San Francisco (USF), speaks about her experience working with other mindful change agents in two settings---organizing the first national conference on law and meditation at the UC Berkeley Law School and co-developing a course on Contemplative Lawyering at USF. "In each case, we faced challenges," she says, "working with our own interpersonal dynamics and navigating across real and imagined difference. Although we were each skilled in our contemplative practices, we found we had to really work, at times, to apply the principles of that inner work to our work together." "No one said it would be easy," says Horwitz, "but the key to social transformation is marrying a rich inner life dedicated to the cultivation of loving kindness and compassion with the practice of new forms of inter-personal and group interaction, politics, economics and public policy."

10. The Marriage of the Personal and the Environmental: "The environmental crisis, particularly rapidly increasing climate disruption and the lack of adequate responses by leaders, is perhaps the most ominous crisis of our times," said Donald Rothberg, a teacher of socially engaged Buddhist practice connected with Spirit Rock and the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. "The crisis makes problematic whether good conditions for contemplation will be possible in the long run (without confining contemplation to the enclaves of the few)." Michael Craft indicates a hopeful trend within the Omega

Institute's courses on sustainability and the environment. "Our courses incorporate strong contemplative practice highlighting the inseparability of individual humanity and the wider web of life. We now believe that the internal experience of interdependence cannot be separated from environmental awareness." "Can we learn again to experience and express our deepest sense of affinity with the living world," says Douglas Burton-Christie, "to develop both the sensibilities and practices that allow us to engage the living world not merely as an object but as a subject---as Beloved Other? I believe such a vision of living is still possible. But we have yet to acquire the kind of moral and spiritual honesty required to bring it into being."

Where do the members of the contemplative movement begin to acquire the kind of moral and spiritual courage that Burton-Christie speaks of? "We don't know what our future will bring," says Arthur Zajonc. "How do we prepare for an inner security when all the outer security of our world is collapsing?"

During the closing circle of the Fetzer event, Barry Boyce of the Shambhala Sun received a phone call from U.S. Congressman, Tim Ryan who said to Boyce, "Washington needs mindfulness practice now more than ever. We need you and your constituents to knock on our doors and tell us how it will benefit the world." As Boyce relayed Ryan's message to the group, I was overwhelmed by conflicting emotions. First, there was pride and wonder as I considered the movement's path from near obscurity to the halls of Congress during just the past few decades. Then, I felt overwhelmed as I recognized the gulf that still existed between Ryan's world of constituents, knocking on doors and sound bites and the quiet, subtle, and persistent work of awakening consciousness. Where do we begin to bridge the gap? "It's the immeasurables and subtleties of our contemplative relationship with each other and the world that will show us the way," said Arthur Zajonc during the closing circle. "We need our depth of commitment to our practice and to each other now more than ever." An hour later, as I walked to the parking lot to make my way home, I noticed two participants sitting on a bench waiting for a cab to the airport. Instead of talking and trading business cards as often happens at the end of such events, they were sitting close to each other---in silence--- already doing their work.

Participant List:

David Addiss, Fetezer Institute, Kalamazoo, Michigan
Bobby Austin, Merton Institute, Washington D.C.

Barry Boyce, Shambhala Sun Magazine, Nova Scotia, Canada

Douglas Burton-Christie, Theological Studies Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, California

Mary Ann Brussat, Spirituality and Practice, Greenwich Village, New York

Susan Burggraf, Naropa Institute, Boulder, Colorado

Mirabai Bush, Center for Contemplative Mind in Society

Tom Callanan, Writer/Consultant, Santa Cruz, California

Rabbi Rachel Cowan, Institute for Jewish Spirituality, New York, NY

Michael Craft, Omega Institute, Rhinebeck, New York

Margaret Cullen, The Wellness Center, Walnut Creek, California

Andrew Dreitcer, Claremont Graduate University, Claremont, California

Janet Drey, Merton Institute, Des Moines, Iowa

Maia Duerr, Five Directions Consulting

Liz Budd Ellmann, Spiritual Directors International, Bellevue, Washington

David Frenette, Center for Contemplative Living and Naropa University, Boulder, CO

Michele Gossman, Transformations Spirituality Center, Kalamazoo, Michigan

Linda Grdina, Fetzer Institute, Kalamazoo, Michigan

Claudia Horwitz, Stone Circles, Mebane, North Carolina

Patricia Jennings, Garrison Institute, Garrison, New York

Pir Zia Inayant Khan, Sufi Order International, New Lebanon, New York

Judith L. Lief, Shambhala Publications and Vajradhatu Publications, Colchester, Vermont

Walter Link, Global Leadership Network, California

Rhonda Magee, University San Francisco, San Francisco, California

Dena Merriam, Global Peace Initiative of Women, New York, New York

Tamar Miller, Consultant, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Eric Nelson, Fetzer Institute, Kalamazoo, Michigan

Richard Rohr, Center for Action and Contemplation, Albuquerque, New Mexico

Diana Rose, Garrison Institute, Garrison, New York
Donald Rothberg, Spirit Rock Meditation Center, Berkeley, California
Deborah Rozelle, Garrison Institute, Garrison, New York
Brenda Salgado, Movement Strategy Center, Oakland, California
Robert Toth, Merton Institute, Louisville, Kentucky
Arthur Zajonc, Amherst College, Amherst, Massachusetts