What did you learn from this interview, which will benefit you as you contemplate developing or refining your own program or practice?

I chose my interviewee because they are someone I admire and respect. In getting to know them, I am constantly surprised by the breadth and depth of their contemplative practice, yet they continue to search for meaning. Despite their knowledge and skills, they are modest and do not set themselves apart as an expert. When I am with them, their presence encourages me to be a better person. They are supportive, encouraging and wise. They never make me feel inferior to their knowledge and experience and are the first to bolster my confidence when it is lacking. They live by ethics of compassionate and peacefulness but they are not pious. They truly “lead from behind”.

When thinking of the questions I would ask, I deliberately chose ones that were open-ended and allowed for them to choose the direction of the interview. I wanted to capture their narrative and not lead them into mine. As in many ways I view this person as a mentor, I wanted to know who their mentors were. I wanted to know how they came to have contemplative practices, where did they start and how did their practice evolve. I wanted to know what impact their practice has had upon their life and the people around them.

While I see the person often, I chose to conduct the interview over email while they were visiting their mother out of town. They have told that these visits in an area where there are deep winter months, are periods of retreat and quiet contemplation. I wanted to give them the opportunity to take their time in answering the questions.

Before reading the interviewee’s replies, I noted my emotions and thoughts. I attend to my anticipation and curiosity. I wonder what they will say. I notice my expectations and preconceived judgments. I decide that I will note my responses on each time of reading the interviewee’s responses. Like peeling back layers, I will go deeper each time I read them.

On first reading, I noticed how she set the scene for her contemplation, describing the ritual of tea and watching nature. In doing so it is easy for me to imagine sitting with her as she writes. I noted quickly the words that came up for me in their answers. PRESENCE. RELATIONSHIP. SLOW DOWN. ALLOWING. MEDITATION. HEART. NATURE. “THIRD THING” by Parker Palmer. I note quickly the many forms of practice described and engaged in through her journey. I notice the things that peak my curiosity. If she remembered being contemplative as a small child, does she believe we are innately contemplative and born that way? Tell me more about what happens in a sweat lodge.. Tell me more about healing and energy work…. What is a “disembodied experience of meditation”? I note the surprises, how what was said was not at times what I had expected? I noted what I had learned about her.

I read through her answers a second time, this time digesting the response to each question. I pulled out quotes from her writing that resonated or needed further pondering. I asked “What does the phrase “contemplative inquiry” mean to you?

She replied “presence….a way of being in relation to life as some aspect of life as it presents itself”. She referred to “deeper wisdom than my ordinary thinking mind” and described feelings of stillness in the body, being open in a peaceful way. Allowing responses to emerge freely and being open to all that arises. Fundamentally, I think I would describe contemplative inquiry in a similar way but recognize I may not have experienced it fully or to this degree. Her words reminded me of Zajonc Meditation as contemplative inquiry and the words of Heesoon Bai.

I asked what are your current contemplative practices. Their answer outlines the variety of practices both formal like sitting meditation and yoga of varied traditions with chanting and prana breathing. Meditation on sound and breath. Informal practices such as reading, poetry, walking, being in nature and within relationships. Through all arose a sense of allowing thoughts, sensation to arise without striving. A faith that if asked a question, the answer would arise without prompting. Contemplative practice as a means of connecting to the heart. It made me think of the word “heartfulness” which mindfulness is a reference to. She recognized how she can provide a contemplative space for others through deep listening but this is not without challenges for the listener. I am struck by the beauty of her words. Phrases themselves that are a source of contemplation. For example, “ it involves merging my awareness with the vast silence that is the infinite space at the source of love”. These words remind me of the words of Ram Dass.

I asked “How did you come to have a contemplative practice?”. She told me how she was a contemplative child who could find wonder in a leaf but was told to “hurry up”. She described the various forms of formal training in mindfulness, focus oriented therapy, mindful self-compassion. She acknowledges that she completed training to be a meditation teacher but did not teach in the end. Yet she describes how formal practices are not where it stops but rather these trainings and practices invite a way of being and relating to the world. I relate to her descriptions of how she was in childhood and similar accusations of “dawdling”. I wonder are we all innately contemplative or are some more than others?

I ask “ How has your contemplative practice evolved?” She answers by charting her journey through a variety of practices over the years and why she moved from one to another. I am in awe of the number and variety. I chart them all on a timeline, looking for patterns. There are surprises. Things I did not know but on finding out, mostly make sense. Her journey exceeds 25 years of practice from introspective and contemplative child to trying sitting meditation in her twenties. She expresses her initial frustrations with this practice- striving to control her thoughts and that she can’t do it. I can relate to this and have watched others now have the same challenges. There is comfort in knowing she has been there and has struggled too. Recognition that movement practices such as walking in nature brought with them a silence of mind not yet experienced through sitting meditation.

I am surprised to read about how she studied energy work and healing then proceeded to provide healing for others over a 10 year period. I am surprised at this as this is perhaps at the far limits of my acceptance, taxing my critical “that’s not scientific brain”. But I admit it makes sense and I have felt it. I challenge myself to ask more about this at a later time. To challenge my inner skeptic. And I do. I will note my sense of discomfort at the use of the word “psychic” but comfort at the use of the phrase intuition and gut instinct” We later will discuss this in more depth and how it left her with a sense of disembodiment. A detachment from the bodies felt experience after focusing for so long on energies above the neck. I still do not understand so I will keep inquiring. But I do respect that she has reached new level of trust and comfort in sharing this with me.

And so she progressed onto First Nations Healing Rituals such as sweat lodges. I have heard of these but have no knowledge of them. I am intrigued and will later ask her to describe what happens and why and what for like a child and an elder. She tells me she attended the workshops of a woman healer. She relates how she was sensitive to being perceived as appropriating the culture as a white woman.

I note that this is a period of time where contemplative practice is very much in the realm of relating to others and offers a forum for relating and providing service to others. This is powerful.

She tells me how she sought embodiment through a more somatic form of meditation in a Tibetan Buddhist tradition. She names her teacher, who was taught by Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche. I have heard the names but am not overly familiar. I make a note to research them.

From this point she enters into more familiar territory, Mindful self-compassion and training with Jack Kornfield and Tara Brach. This is where our paths have crossed. Her journey has come back to self and the importance of acceptance and compassion for self and others.

I noted at the beginning that I had some expectations, one of which was that she would talk more about art as a contemplative practice. I was surprised to observe art was not mentioned until the end of her answer when she mentioned her expressive arts therapy training.

It is perhaps in this answer that I derive more meaning and take more away for my own practice. I am humbled by the length of time she has had a contemplative practice. I am more humbled by the variety and breadth of her experience. Of her willingness to explore new practices and territories. In speaking with her later, she will tell me that she gained insight and confidence in her abilities as an experienced practitioner and potential teacher after completing this interview. It provided her with an opportunity to review and reflect upon her practices and conclude Yes I have done a lot haven’t I.

I have far to go and much to explore. I can not walk the path ahead in her footsteps like a child jumping in footprints in the snow. I must forge my own path and it is ok to diverge from the one she has laid out before me, gently and humbly.

I ask her “how has it affected your life” In her answer I sense her irritation. If contemplation is a way of being and not a way of doing “to” your life then we can not separate inquiry, practice and life. I feel gently scolded by her reminder.

I sense she is equally irritated and impatient with my next question “what impact has it had upon people in your life?” She remembers the demand to hurry up and states that still plagues her. How she still does not like to be rushed and draws the impatience of others. She wonders if one can be both contemplative and quick to react as needed, and be organized. I wonder too as I have yet to reach it.

She does recognize that she can provide a contemplative space through deep listening so others may benefit from this. I know this to be true as I have benfited on many occasion. I am intrigued to read she finds it hard to be in this deep listening and relating state and feels vulnerable. A state she admits she can not maintain for long. I can relate.

I ask what next? I secretly hope she will talk of our future work together. Our hope to bring mindfulness to others in our profession. And she does but she is discrete and brief.

I am struck, as I write, about how it feels to be inspired and led. How others inspire us to try, to explore and follow. How it feels at times a little disappointing to find out that you are not exactly the same as the one you admire. Almost like the first time you realize your parent is not a superhero and has flaws. How it then follows that we must acknowledge our flaws too but makes it easier if you have watched someone else reveal their first.

In many ways we are alike and in other ways we are very different but that is ok.