

## BOOK REVIEWS

### **Making the Familiar Unfamiliar**

**Judy Halden-Sullivan, Book Review Editor**

Each book reviewed in this issue of *JAEPL* shows how little we may know about familiar things: human thought, textbooks, prayer, our minds.

For example, in her review of *Making Thinking Visible*, Karen Walker explores how authors Ron Ritchart, Mark Church, and Karin Morrison render palpable what all teachers strive to inspire in the abstract: students' deep thinking. Through carefully constructed pedagogical "routines," patterned with various "thinking tools," the authors demonstrate in vivid real-world examples how students can show their thinking as it grows more complex from the opening moments of a unit, through the synthesizing of various resources in the middle, and, finally, making associative connections that deepen memory and scaffold future thinking at the project's conclusion. But Walker's review also reveals what the term "routine" may *not* imply: that thinking is never neat, formulaic, nor linear. *Making Thinking Visible* delineates for our reviewer, who directs a secondary education program, that, while definable routines may serve as heuristics to open thought, the results of students' deep thinking are always open-ended surprises.

Another surprise sprung in this issue—one of a displeasing sort—is an exposé about textbook development, a process described in Beverlee Jobrack's study, *Tyranny of the Textbook*, reviewed by Timothy Shea, a professor of English education. Drawn sometimes from field tests or parent surveys or dictated by the adoption decisions of three enormous, dominant states (Texas, Florida, and California), the criteria for textbook creation rarely, if ever, are rooted in current substantive research. Ill-founded textbooks then become the quicksand in which curricula sink, Jobrack asserts in her scathing critique of contemporary American education. Jobrack shocks her readers, Shea explains, when she characterizes the textbook publishing industry as one that "stifles innovation, squashes competition, drastically limits choice, and creates a risk-averse development process that at best perpetuates the status quo," all for the sake of maximized profits (25). However, Shea detects the limitations of Jobrack's expertise in his review and counters them with pleasant surprises about the current state of educational curricula.

An unexpected analogy also awaits *JAEPL* readers in this issue: the mutual revelations possible when comparing prayer and rhetoric. Describing herself as "a professor of writing who also prays," Julie Nichols uncovers in her review of William FitzGerald's groundbreaking study, *Spiritual Modalities: Prayer as Rhetoric and Performance*, that, in her words, "while it's obvious that rhetorical analysis can shed light on what we're doing when we pray, it may be less obvious (but no less accurate) to say that a close look at prayer can illuminate what we're doing when we practice rhetoric." FitzGerald employs motives drawn from Burkean dramatism—scene, act, and attitude—to investigate prayer, revealing prayer as an ideal of rhetorical practice, a "relational and social art performed in concert with others across time and space" (FitzGerald 99). As Nichols asserts, "That people pray implies—actually *produces*—an acknowledgment of the divine . . ." Prayer embodies language that makes the divine manifest in ways transformative for both the

“pray-er” and the world.

And apparently so can our Buddha-nature, as it is explored by Donna Quesada in her study, *The Buddha in the Classroom: Zen Wisdom to Inspire Teachers*. Reviewer Edward Sullivan is an economics and finance professor, and himself a Zen teacher. Buddhist precepts surprise us with our own nature and its many pitfalls. For example, Quesada suggests that, in encountering the frustrations of teaching such as students’ tardiness, excuses, and rude behaviors, instructors should wake up to this simple realization: it is *not* all about them. Quesada advises teachers to seek a return to “beginner’s mind”—to become aware of our own thoughts so that we may dismantle preconceived notions and so be fully present to and receptive of what is occurring before us, as opposed to our projecting upon experiences our own stories. As Quesada advises, and Sullivan confirms, “It’s about entering into the intimacy of whatever this moment brings, without agenda-driven conditions” (22). No easy feat. As an aside, Quesada’s study and FitzGerald’s book remind us of opportunities provided by our sibling organization, the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, their *Journal of Contemplative Inquiry*, and their summer institutes for educators, such as summer 2013’s “Contemplative Pedagogy in the Classroom” (see [www.contemplativemind.org](http://www.contemplativemind.org)).

The books reviewed in this issue offer enlightened thinking about that which we might take for granted: the complexity of thinking itself; the extraordinary responsibilities of our everyday curricula; the invocation of and connection to otherness made possible in the rhetoric of daily prayers; and the ample invitations to spiritual awakening available in the regimen of classroom instruction. These studies surprise us with the familiar and remind us of our duty to persistently refresh our understanding of it.



Ritchhart, Ron, Mark Church, and Karin Morrison. *Making Thinking Visible*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2011.

**Karen Walker, Lebanon Valley College**

At present, high stakes testing, implementation of the Common Core, and extreme pressure to cover a large amount of content in a short amount of time are paramount in the delivery of the instructional program. Even with all of these pressures, educators are expected to provide a high quality curriculum and produce students who can deeply process complexity and be divergent thinkers. Providing opportunities for students to genuinely listen to each other, to profoundly think, to totally process ideas and information, and to intensely examine a variety of views takes ample time and lots of practice. Most educators are dedicated to doing what is in the very best interests of their students, even when under duress. The authors of *Making Thinking Visible* foreground their study with an analogy about hearing only half of a conversation: hearing a stance on an issue while being unaware of the thinking that went into the position as well as what prompted it. The goals of this book are to discuss and promote "...not only learning to think, but thinking to learn" and "... why making thinking visible and related themes are so important to learners" (xiv-xv). The authors want to give voice to the full conversation.

At the heart of this book are questions from the authors about what real thinking is. "Thinking does not happen in a lockstep, sequential manner," the authors assert, "for every type or act of thinking, we can discern levels of performance. Perhaps a better place to start is with the purposes of thinking. Why is it that we want students to think? When is thinking useful? What purposes does it serve?" (8). The authors then center their study on modes of effective questioning, listening exercises, documentation processes, and facilitative structures called thinking routines—small sets of questions and short sequences of steps—that all spur thought. Throughout their text, the authors provide numerous examples of what thinking has looked like in a variety of educational settings from pre-kindergarten through staff development training in Harvard's Project Zero, to Traverse City Area Public Schools in Michigan, to the Cultures of Thinking Project in Australia. This journey of implementing deep thinking throughout an instructional program begins by suggesting that students need to do more than scratch the surface of theirs and/or others' perspectives. The authors claim that utilizing thinking routines to stimulate and encourage thinking should be a continuous facet of any instructional program's culture (221).

The authors also examine the concept that many students who are successful in school are so not because of the quality of their thinking but because they are good at playing the "game of school", an issue explored in the last portion of this book (221). They have learned what the teacher wants; they have retained information in their short term memory just long enough to regurgitate it when called upon and then will promptly forget it. Meanwhile, other students have learned that the same few students will always answer the questions, so they allow them to monopolize classroom interactions. In order for meaningful thinking to be an integral part of the educational culture, *all* students must be actively challenged to think: "... when thinking becomes part of the daily practice of the classroom and teachers show an interest in and respect for students' thinking, then students who had not previously been seen as academically strong begin to shine" (221).

In developing a culture of thinking, students need to know what types of thinking will be expected. The authors suggest that a realistic amount of time must be provided for students to ponder ideas and information so they can make important connections. The physical environment should be one where it is clear that the learner is the heart and soul of the classroom, where students can share thoughts and ideas, as well as be aware of what their peers are thinking. This book provides a myriad of case studies about how to do this task at all age levels. Some examples of this are:

- Exploring the concept of time in second grade. Initial questions included: What do you think you know about time? What puzzles do you have about time? Rich discussion emerged from physically handling clocks, to learning to tell time, to designing a time machine (76).
- Understanding and accounting for social issues in middle school. When a social problem or issue was the focus of analysis, the students wrote newspaper headline from their point of view. Then they investigated each other's views and wrote headlines from *other* students' perspectives. This helped students think about the issue from more than one vantage point and address issues on their own (112).
- Developing concept maps of a character analysis. First, high school students individually produced factors that may have led to the character's actions. Next, each student placed the most important influences in the middle of a piece of paper, with those that were more marginal positioned away from the center in descending order. Students then drew lines that connected items that were related. From this point, the same process was repeated in small groups which had to reach a consensus. The process promoted ample and appropriate discussion, thus preparing the students to write a well thought out paper about the character and her actions (128).

When planning to implement ways in which to make thinking visible, the authors explain that the word "routines" is used instead of "strategies" because routines indicate on-going patterns that are continuously developing, while strategies are more immediate—often once and done. To structure and promote thinking routines, the authors suggest the teacher select the correct thinking tools that comprise each routine (48). The authors provide 20 highly practical examples of thinking tools that have been structured as progressive routines. For example, Chapter Four's see-think-wonder activity would be used early in a unit. One of Chapter Five's tools—a game called "I Used to Think . . . Now I Think"—assists in the development of concepts and ideas throughout the unit. Last are those heuristics such as Chapter Six's "What Makes You Say That?"—an activity best suited for the end of the unit so as to connect with prior knowledge. Always teachers' planning should include how the students' responses can and/or will be used to connect to the next level of complexity. Each thinking tool includes a brief description, its purpose(s), when it should be used, a detailed step-by-step process, how to assess it, tips, and an example of a real educational situation in which it was used. A DVD accompanies the book in which six of these tools are demonstrated along with a modeled protocol for teachers who are developing their own skills.

Because this book's information is based on years of exploration and implementation,

it concludes with a section on “Notes from the Field”, which identifies common snags worth analyzing and discussing (247). This section reminds educators that the critical actions for making thinking visible are: being very clear about the information to which they want students to return over time; remembering that, although each tool was presented in what might have appeared to be sequential steps, thinking often does *not* follow in a linear fashion; not putting the thinking steps on a worksheet, which cuts short the process; connecting past information and knowledge to what is currently being learned. Finally, the authors invite educators to be kind to themselves when implementing these new tools and establishing fresh routines.

*Making Thinking Visible* offers teachers ample opportunities for personal thought, analysis, and reflection.



Jobrack, Beverlee. *Tyranny of the Textbook*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2012.

**Timothy Shea, Millersville University of Pennsylvania**

Ever since public schools have been in existence, American citizens have worked to reform them. Their critical motivation and ideas of good education are as varied as there are schools: some communities look at low test scores and others at workplace inefficiencies as proof that our schools are failing. So, whether we're a "nation at risk," "leaving children behind," or losing our "race to the top," we are constantly reminded that we are failing as a nation and that our nation's future is in jeopardy. Cries of higher standards and teacher accountability pervade the airwaves, creating panic and distrust of our community schools. Schools respond with more testing, new teaching accountability measures, and better use of technology. Rarely, however, do they respond to the heart of good education: its curriculum.

At least that is what Beverlee Jobrack, the author of *Tyranny of the Textbook*, asserts, and she should know: for almost fifty years, she worked as a curriculum developer for Merrill Publishing and McGraw Hill and then as an independent consultant. She contends that the reason there is little change in the quality of education in the United States is because reformers rarely address the inadequacies of poor curriculum which she defines as "the teaching, learning, and assessment activities and materials that are organized and available to teach a given subject area" (xi). She further asserts that the key component to any curriculum is the textbook and that the main reason why these textbooks are ineffective in changing the quality of learning is that they are developed "based on tradition and competing products"—and not on educational research (xvii).

Jobrack proceeds to explain her own educational development from a student to a teacher to a curriculum consultant, and builds a case for her knowledge and experience in the publishing world. She describes from the publishers' vantage point the processes for choosing textbooks and shows how this process constrains best research from ever infiltrating the final product. In the textbook publishing world, there are "state" and "open" adoptions in which school districts use a range of processes for selecting their choices, from parent input to field tests, rubrics to state standards correlation. Whatever the process, however, it boils down to the decisions of three large states—Texas, California, and Florida—as to which texts are included for possible adoption. When teachers give their input, it's rarely based on research but more likely reflects what they have *already* been doing, enhanced by the promise of greater ease and a wider variety of resources. She also notes that it is usually the least experienced teachers who are involved in this development process.

Jobrack then explains the business end of publishing and how economics affects textbook development. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the free market opened school curricula to a wide variety of competing materials that provided options for schools and created a rich educational experience. In the past thirty years, however, as the publishing industry has attempted to maximize its profit, it has consolidated into a "monolithic industry that stifles innovation, squashes competition, drastically limits choice, and creates a risk-averse development process that at best perpetuates the status quo" (25).

She examines the development of materials for the three big publishers--McGraw-Hill, Pearson, and Houghton/Harcourt—and asserts, “Textbook publishers are in it for the money, not accuracy or thoroughness. To mollify the special interest groups, the history books are now 1000+ pages that have more graphics than substance. The authors are selected because they have written books previously, not because they know the subject matter” (29).

After this expose of the creation of American public school textbooks, Jobrack critiques past “solutions” to our educational inadequacies, ranging from standards and testing to technology and professional development. She explains that

Phonics, whole word, whole language, mastery learning, open classroom, team teaching, constructivism, discovery learning, multiculturalism, learning modalities, multiple intelligences, and differentiated instruction have all had their days in the sun. The educational pendulum swings from teacher-directed to student-driven instruction. Adults recognize that these techniques were used on them and have concluded that they have provided no lasting benefit to themselves. (xix)

Later, she makes this claim: “Enough years have passed to prove that a teacher’s seniority or advanced degrees, smaller classes, smaller schools, and higher teacher pay have not improved student performance” (164). This is where her argument veers from its powerful possibilities.

Had Jobrack focused on that about which she is an expert—understanding the creation and implementation of textbooks—she would have made a much stronger case: textbooks are the heart of American curriculum, and, as they are created without consideration of current research, we need to rethink and revise the ways we consider and adopt them if our curriculum is to be strong. However, Jobrack delves into territory where she is *not* an expert—the actual pedagogies in our schools—and dismisses some of the best ideas as ineffective and not of use. Yes, there are ways we can and should reform what pedagogies we use, but there is merit to using what can work if we reconsider why it does not work.

Jobrack’s criticism lacks evidence that these specific pedagogical approaches have inhibited reform. For example, in her critiques of past reform efforts such as small class sizes, differentiated instruction, application of technologies, writers workshops and other aspects of progressive pedagogy, she labels them as merely “trends.” (58-65). Then she asserts that these approaches have been tried before, and because some problems persisted, they “obviously” do not work. She further concludes that most traditional teacher education programs are not effectively preparing teachers to teach effectively. Though she attempts to explain how and why, her judgments ignore ample, research-based evidence to the contrary as she brushes off these efforts as ineffective (see Hansen, Tomlinson, and Ravitch). Her primary solution—revamping textbook development procedures—is too generalized and ignores the complexities of American public schools.

Like many reformers, Jobrack claims that the state of American education is crumbling by comparing our schools and students to those in other countries, purely based on test scores—a faulty and non-contextualized endeavor at best. In spite of this being the crux of her argument, Jobrack does not explain what the other countries are doing that is so

effective. In short, she makes accusations without viable solutions. So, while her analysis of textbook development is intriguing, it only provides a limited picture of American educational reality.

Grounding her argument in America's seemingly low comparative test scores, Jobrack fails to acknowledge that our schools are actually *not* in a state of crisis. The truth is our country is more diverse than most, and we try to educate a broader range of students more comprehensively. We are actually doing an effective job at this: according to the 24 April 2013 edition of *Education Week*, our students' National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores in both Math and Reading have gradually been increasing ever since they were first administered in 1971 (23). Not only are we educating a broader range of students, but we are doing it pretty well, too!

Perhaps the greatest flaw in Jobrack's argument is that she equates the textbook with curriculum. A textbook should be a tool that supplements the curriculum; it should not *be* the curriculum, even if busy teachers prefer it. If teachers are misusing this tool, then they need to be trained to create rich curricula that draw from a range of relevant texts and resources to help their students learn effectively. It would have been helpful to know ways she would envision our students moving beyond the textbook as the core of American curriculum. Some would assume this notion could lead to a watered down curriculum but, if curriculum returned to *local* control, was rich and varied, and incorporated a range of texts to strengthen it, then perhaps our schools would be more effective in preparing our students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

I wondered who Beverlee Jobrack hoped would read and use this book. It bogs down in wordy textbook language and heaped with contradictory, condescending claims. Moreover, it does not provide practical suggestions for ways teachers and administrators can change the expectations of their textbooks and use them to develop a stronger curriculum. So, while we are all made more aware of the flaws of the textbook development process, we are not shown what to do about it. Also, Jobrack is fixated on the idea that revising our curriculum is the *only* way our schools can truly be reformed. She ignores research that shows many factors necessary to bring about lasting change in our schools. Curriculum is just one piece of this puzzle.



### Works Cited

- Hansen, Jane. *When Writers Read*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001. Print.
- "A Nation at Risk 30 Years Later: Where are we now?" *Education Week* 32.29 (24 April 2013): 22-23. Print.
- Ravitch, Diane. *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*. New York: Basic Books, 2010. Print.
- Tomlinson, Carol and Jay McTighe. *Integrating Differentiated Instruction & Understanding by Design: Connecting Content and Kids*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2006. Print.



FitzGerald, William. *Spiritual Modalities: Prayer as Rhetoric and Performance*. University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2012.

Julie J. Nichols, Utah Valley University

Politically and ethically, prayer is problematic for public educators in the United States. It's an especially thorny question for educators who regard spirituality as a fundamental human trait. By demonstration and example, as well as by direct instruction and experience, we may see a need to address within the educational system such issues as reverence, gratitude, and right action. In private, many of us acknowledge our dependence and interdependence in the world, invoke a divine power, stand in an attitude of reverence—in other words, we pray, using any of a number of forms. In public, in the classroom, during lessons we teach or meetings we attend, we may see opportunities for certain kinds of discourse or behavior that might be labeled prayer, or prayerful practice, as a corrective for inaccurate self-perceptions; as a source of comfort in the midst of difficult personal or environmental conflicts; or as an occasion to discover connections with others, to build community where it's sorely lacking. The aforementioned conditions can obstruct learning. Prayerful discourse could help.

But we are constrained. Our nation's founding *ethos* asserting the separation of church and state raises questions regarding whether or not prayers are appropriate in any school situations, and although talking *about* prayer is hardly *verboten*, praying itself may be, especially when it seems to advocate a particular religion or discriminate between or among religious disciplines. So we're frustrated and deterred. Our students deserve to understand and be able to use prayerful discourse, just as surely as they deserve to know and be able to use argument, or the language of mathematics, or electronic devices in order to accomplish the goals they set for themselves in school and in life. Many of this journal's readers are teachers of language arts who gravitate toward such definitions of rhetoric as Francis Bacon's—"Rhetoric is the application of reason to imagination 'for the better moving of the will'"—or Kenneth Burke's—"Rhetoric is rooted in an essential function of language itself, a function that is wholly realistic and continually born anew: the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols" ("Some Definitions"). "Wherever there is persuasion," Burke says, "there is rhetoric, and wherever there is rhetoric, there is meaning" ("Some Definitions"). In other words, when we consider our goals in teaching writing and language arts, we assume as foundational such values as right use of individual will and social cooperation. We assume, too, that language can be recruited to further those values and that the better our students know how to use language, the more effectively they can promote the values they choose to adopt.

Since both language and a notion of the efficacy of prayer matter to many readers of *JAEPL*, William FitzGerald's *Spiritual Modalities: Prayer as Rhetoric and Performance* may offer a number of juxtaposed concepts which illuminate these matters. To put it rather more simply than FitzGerald does, his thesis is that while it's obvious that rhetorical analysis can shed light on what we're doing when we pray, it may be less obvious (but no less accurate) to say that a close look at prayer can illuminate what we're doing when we practice rhetoric. For several interesting reasons, prayer can be seen as an ideal of rhetorical practice. "Indeed," FitzGerald says, "'prayer' is a name assigned to practices of

a better rhetoric" (6). To undertake this analysis is to give educators, rhetoricians, and pray-ers insight into their respective and communal work—and thus, perhaps, to loosen constraints and make us better practitioners.

FitzGerald uses Kenneth Burke's theory of "dramatism" (from *A Grammar of Motives*) to investigate prayer, particularly the three primary motives of *scene*, *act*, and *attitude*. As *scene*, prayer is "a complex auditory scene involving a range of *audiences* positioned as hearers and overhearers in relation to prayer's human speakers" (8; emphasis FitzGerald's). As *act*, prayer—in particular, *invocation*—is considered "a rhetorical encounter with 'the real'" (9). And as *attitude*, prayer requires *reverence* in order to *be* prayer. Chapters are dedicated to each of these three aspects of prayer as rhetorical practice. Two further chapters address prayer as an act of memory/commemoration and prayer as a "complex encounter with the real through the virtual, the spiritual through the material" (10). Readers are led to conclude that prayer is not only a legitimate rhetorical act, but an exemplary one.

"Prayer serves, above all," FitzGerald says, "as a practical meta-rhetoric whose ultimate purpose is to sound out the limits and possibilities inherent in social cooperation imagined at its most thoroughgoing" (10). Quoting Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner, he defines the *scene* of prayer as "a radical receptivity to God's love. Experience of need . . . an experience of *blissing*. Discovering prayer is equivalent to discovering our real situation in the world" (15; emphasis FitzGerald's). "The critical task," FitzGerald says, "is to understand prayer as a set of strategies for sizing up situations" (17). This, of course, is the critical task of all rhetorical situations, if they are to be effective, but prayer's goal is elevated to the level of cosmic: "To attend carefully and to respond fittingly to one's real situation in an ordered cosmos is prayer's critical and ethical task" (21).

As "the human side of any human-divine encounter," the *act* of prayer recognizes the present, material human being within a relationship that includes both other humans and other audiences not present, but sharing linguistic ground (35). This notion of the role of language in human-divine relationships is one of many intriguing concepts in this book. FitzGerald is emphatic that real prayer is "not a one-way principle of projection. It is address to and apprehension of the real" (45). In the act of prayer, reality is summoned, defined, and co-created—just as in all rhetorical situations. That people pray implies—actually *produces*—an acknowledgment of the divine. Just as when people engage in the rhetorical acts of naming, describing, persuading, and arguing, so then human perceptions, logical faculties, and capacities to act are not only implied, but also certainly made more concrete, more accurate, more acute—in short, more real. FitzGerald claims that the "performative challenge of prayer is to discover one's character within [the scene of the prayer itself] and to remain in character before the other whom one addresses. In a phenomenological sense, prayer is a discovery of whom one stands before in a scene of address and who one is in standing" (49). In all effective rhetorical acts, rhetors must declare their identities and must know the identities of their audiences, but in prayer, the implications are larger, more inclusive, and more consequential than in any other situation.

Thus, it makes sense to speak of the attitude of reverence that attends prayer. FitzGerald asks, "Is prayer, finally, a form of address to specific beings apprehended as divine? Or is it a *manner* that infuses various modes of performance with an ethical dimension? Can recycling be prayer?" (83) Here again the implications of FitzGerald's

exploration are intriguing: absent the apprehension of a condition of need or dependence; absent audience and present speaker; or absent reverence—what do we have? Certainly not prayer. Prayer is “a mediating and mediated discourse,” a “relational and social art performed in concert with others across time and space” (99). And in the absence of any of these aspects of any rhetorical situation, “what we have,” according to FitzGerald, “is our present situation with respect to many relationships”—in other words, an absence of true communication, true connection, true efficacy (96).

FitzGerald’s “relentlessly intellectual” voice may be off-putting. He recognizes this as a danger from the outset, foregrounding his study by qualifying that “*Spiritual Modalities* articulates principles governing prayer in terms that may be alien to the practice and understanding of the discourse communities it examines” (5). However, these qualities of FitzGerald’s work are supremely affirmative:

- The gradual layering of multiple, open-ended definitions of prayer
- The persistent assertion, argued both in principle and demonstrated in well-chosen examples, that prayer deserves rhetorical analysis and illuminates the practice of rhetoric
- The implication throughout that prayer is a fundamentally human behavior that *does* things, both for the pray-er and for the material world in which she or he lives

As a professor of writing who also prays, this reviewer was ultimately enlightened and well-informed by this book. It does not address questions of politics, appropriate institutional programs of study, or pedagogy. But, as a legitimization of the discipline of prayer in terms of the discipline of rhetoric, for both members of AEPL and readers of *JAEPL*, it is sure to be a rewarding exploration.

+

### Work Cited

“Some Definitions of Rhetoric.” <http://www.stanford.edu/dept/english/courses/sites/lunsford/pages/defs.htm>. Web. 16 May 2013.

Quesada, Donna. *The Buddha in the Classroom: Zen Wisdom to Inspire Teachers*. NY: Skyhorse Publishing, 2011.

**Edward Sullivan, Lebanon Valley College**

Let's say you've been teaching for ten years. Have you ever imagined singing this ambivalent duet between a teacher and her inner critic, expressed by Donna Quesada?

*I'm so burned out / You have it so easy/ I sing the same song every semester/ Be grateful you have work.* (218)

I suspect that you recognize the sentiments in this ditty, with its alternating lyrics of despair and gratitude. Donna Quesada artfully identifies the daily frustrations of dealing with exasperating students, overcrowded classrooms, and the nagging question of "Why am I still teaching?" As a philosophy professor at a community college in California, Quesada has paid her dues. Her book is a rumination on teacher burnout and her own attempts to rediscover "the joy that had been progressively declining" (ix). Her solution is to apply lessons learned from practicing yoga and Zen, with a particular emphasis on Zen.

Quesada divides her book into three parts: "The Burned-Out Professor," "The Classroom," and "Philosophizing Burnout." Chapter One begins with her driving to school on the first day of the fall semester. She writes, "For a teacher fighting the onslaught of burnout, driving to the classroom is worse than being there. It is where you anticipate your day and where you torment yourself..." (6). Sound familiar? With each chapter, Quesada includes a Dharma lesson and possible antidote for exhausted teachers. In this case, she recommends that you don't suppress those nagging thoughts. Instead, you simply observe them. Of course, those readers familiar with mindfulness-based, stress-reduction techniques (MBSR) will recognize her approach immediately. By observing our thoughts, we slowly begin to lose our identification with those thoughts. The solution, as one bumper sticker succinctly notes, is "Don't believe everything you think."

As someone who has meditated for many years, I can say that this is easier said than done. And here is where I encounter my only serious objection to this book: readers with little or no experience with a contemplative practice (Zen or otherwise) may find the author's recommendations very difficult to implement. On the other hand, it may inspire the burned-out teacher to investigate meditative techniques.

In the second chapter, Quesada deals with an important symptom of burnout—boredom. Suppose you've been teaching the same course every semester for the last ten years. Yes, you've tried to make the material more "relevant" with contemporary examples, collaborative exercises, more class discussions, but you're bored, and the students are bored. Even your best students are stealthily checking their phones for new messages. Is this class salvageable? Yes, and Quesada offers a solution by way of the following pithy Zen maxim: "*When the water is clear, you see infinite possibilities* (22)."

Huh? OK, let's make this statement a little more accessible. Clear water represents a clear mind, a mind that is free to respond effectively to the situation at hand. How do you attain such a state of consciousness? Quesada recommends that you "Turn your attention wholeheartedly to your students. They'll come alive, and you'll no longer have

to goad yourself on. You'll enjoy the interplay again. You'll be part of it. There is a magical shift that occurs with this simple shift of attention" (23). While I understand what she is saying, I am only partially convinced of her approach. Certainly, a bored teacher is most likely to teach a boring class. So, getting out of such a mindset is an important first step, but I am skeptical that the student napping in the back row will notice the change in me. Beyond that, there's another problem we confront, which she doesn't address: some of the things we need to teach *are* boring—the rules of grammar, the rules of calculus, the rules of (yikes!) accounting. I fear a shift in attention will do little to dissipate the inherent ennui of some material.

The longest section of her book, "The Classroom," is devoted to the day-to-day problems an instructor is likely to encounter while teaching. Consisting of sixteen chapters, Quesada's list of problems includes student tardiness, talking in class, cheating, and grading. Quesada does not offer pat solutions to any of these problems, but she does propose several guiding principles. Take, for example, students arriving late for class. How should one deal with these disruptions? Some teachers lock the classroom doors. Others, including Quesada, dock points from a student's grade.

While these external solutions are nothing new for most teachers, what I found interesting is her *internal* response to these offenses. This observation leads to what I would call her first principle: it's not about you. There may be a hundred good reasons why a student is late. Yet, tardiness makes us angry which, in turn, causes us to suffer. The trick, Quesada argues, is to find the "balance point between 'anything goes' and rigid intolerance" (61). Just how do you find that point? Well, it helps if you don't react from a place of anger. This is important advice. Recall the last time you caught a student cheating. Short of being a Zen master, you probably got angry; you probably took it as a personal affront. And that's her point—generally speaking, students don't see cheating (or being late) as an affront to you. Rather, it's an action born out of desperation or bad luck ("My car really did have a flat tire!").

The second guiding principle Quesada offers us is see issues with a "beginner's mind." In Zen, beginner's mind asks us to drop our expectations when coming into a new experience. Why? Because every situation is unique, and how a situation resolves itself is often different from what we expect. In Chapter 12, for example, Quesada deals with two students who talk while she is lecturing. After unsuccessfully warning them twice to stop talking, one of the students yelled at her before obeying her command for them to leave the classroom. After dealing with a torturous suspension process, the student who yelled at her in class was prohibited from taking an exam. Predictably, this student, the older of the two, dropped her course. The unexpected part of the story is that the other student became quite serious and committed to his studies. This was possible because Quesada did not presume the student was a troublemaker and police him, nor did she respond as with anger, unlike the older student who did. Did she know that the younger student would change his ways? No, but by maintaining a beginner's mind, this possibility was never excluded.

The final section of her book is entitled "Philosophizing Burnout." The author is, after all, a philosopher. In Chapter 20, Quesada challenges the notion that we must be passionate about our jobs. As someone who has been in the academy for more than a quarter of a century and has read too many job applications where young, aspiring

professors assure me that they are “passionate about teaching,” I read this chapter with great interest. As the author notes, many exhort us we to follow our passion. But Quesada claims that the folly of simply following one’s passion arises when one pursues a career for which one has absolutely no talent. In response, Quesada points to the Buddhist notion that we need to stop being a slave to our passions. What’s a presumably competent professor, whose passion for teaching has inevitably waned, to do? Here, the author suggests we accept, adapt, and abandon hope. “To accept is to simultaneously stop resisting,” Quesada suggests (209). When we stop resisting, we have a chance to enjoy our lives. Acceptance, in this context, is easily misunderstood as passivity, as giving up on teaching. It’s not. Rather, it is having the wisdom to know when something cannot be changed, at least for the time being. In Zen, there is a chant that begins, “The Great Way is not difficult for those who do not pick or choose” (Ming 8). Sure, you can have an agenda, but don’t get so attached to it that you make yourself miserable. Instead, abandon hope. Does this mean we should despair? Of course not. An old Taoist saying advises us not to push the river. Sometimes we really do need to “go with the flow” and get some peace of mind. A peaceful teacher, the author reminds us, is a good teacher.

Finally, Quesada compares the Buddhist way to existentialist approaches to life. She focuses on Jean-Paul Sartre, whom she asserts, “. . . never had a day of despair in his life” (215). Quesada notes, “Sartre’s freedom has more to do with *conscious choosing* than one’s *consciousness*” (217). Zen, on the other hand, says that free will emanates from our ego-driven consciousness, which is the source of our unhappiness. To elaborate, Quesada invokes another Zen saying: “*When the water is clear, you’ll know what to do*” (221). Knowing does not refer to concepts or ideas. Instead, Quesada says it is “a quality of uncluttered presence that inspires grace in action” (221). Put less poetically, I have found that when grappling with a difficult problem, an intuitive solution sometimes appears as a result of my meditation practice.

If you are experiencing career burnout, I would recommend reading this book. You won’t find an answer, but you might find out more about yourself—and therein lies the answer.



### Work Cited

Ming, Hsin Hsin. “Affirming Faith in Mind.” Sutra Book—In-house Publication. Baltimore, MD: Zen Community of Baltimore, 2001. Print.