

CRANIUM

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THINKING ABOUT NOTHING IN PARTICULAR: THE VALUE OF CONTEMPLATIVE THOUGHT

Like most students on this campus, Eva Payne's life is a whirlwind. Juggling academics, a job, a spot on the UW Varsity Crew team, and membership in Le Salon to name a few, Eva's varied activities and interests keep her constantly committed, active, and sometimes frantic. But there is an activity Eva participates in that she values above the others; one that provides her with a significant albeit brief respite from the struggles of everyday life.

That activity is contemplative thought. While many think that this is an exclusively Eastern tradition, in fact it has

strong origins in ancient Greek and Roman thought (Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and Marcus Aurelius all emphasize its importance), as well as ancient Hebrew and medieval Christian thought. With origins in philosophy, religion, and scholarship, contemplative thought is an expansive and varied field. Emphasizing attention and detachment at its most basic (and meditation, would be only one form of contemplative activity), contemplative thought serves as a conduit for one's own thoughts, beliefs, and desires to be widened into a more objective understanding of the world around us. Aristotle, in his classic *Nicomachean*



Ethics, explains that contemplative thought is "an activity of wholeness, excellence, and virtue rather than getting lost in the parts of something". In order to attain true happiness, one must attain a "virtuous mean" in one's actions via contemplation. For Aristotle, happiness does not consist of amusement [p.3]

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WHO SAID IT FIRST?

"The punishment which the wise suffer who refuse to take part in the government, is to live under the government of worse men."

WHO SAID IT FIRST?

Benjamin Franklin once said "Nothing gives the author so much pleasure as to find his work respectfully quoted." In order to bring to light a few notable quotes from quotable folks, Le Salon is introducing a new feature in its newsletters. In each

newsletter, a quotation will appear by one of the authors studied in an ILS course—but it will be missing its author.

Your task, as a reader, will be to find out who originally said the quotation, and email the re-

sponse to Le Salon at:

lssb@yahoo.com

Better yet...the first person to respond will win a choice of a valuable prize [from movie tickets to gift certificates!]

LET THE GAMES BEGIN!

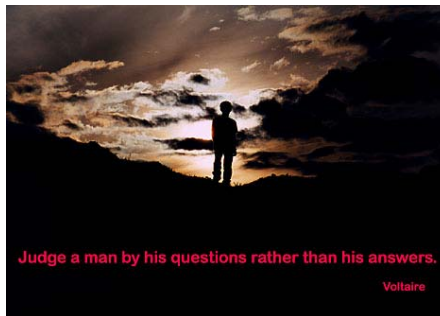
They gathered in groups, eager to test their skills. In teams they faced off against the masters, each hoping to go home with a prize. It isn't the newest sport to hit the arenas—its ILS Jeopardy night! With questions on everything from Aristotle to Herophilus, students of ILS faced off against questions from their professors to see how much they had learned [or not learned] in class.

Robert Probst led the questions as a dignified Trebek, with Eva Payne and Lisa Valenti-Hein assisting as prize mistresses, and Lisa Photos stepping easily into the role of "The Enforcer" [of rules, regulations and the suchlike].

Not only was the student body well represented, but several members of the ILS faculty were able to be pre-

sent for the games—and perhaps to see who had been paying attention in class!

The contestants breezed through approximately 100 questions, which included facts about the history of science [trivium and quadrivium], the history of art, and the history of politics. It appears that many were paying atten-



Let the games begin!

tion, because a majority of the questions were answered without a hitch.

Many thanks go out to Professor Sell for her help in the compilation of questions and their final format as a PowerPoint presentation, to Melissa in the ILS office for her work on gathering the questions, and to all those who contributed questions or time. Without the help from all members of the Integrated Liberal Studies Program, the night could not have taken place.

All participants received prizes, ranging from gift certificates to the Soap Opera on State Street to tickets to the Orpheum. Pay attention for future game nights and other events from ILS—hope to see you there!

COMING SOON: ILS AWARDS BANQUET

Its time to celebrate the achievements of the students involved in ILS not only through Le Salon, but also by their dedication to other aspects of the Integrated Liberal Studies Program. The ILS banquet will honor not only those people who received awards from the ILS program, but also those students who

"The ILS banquet will honor not only those people who received awards from the ILS program, but also certificate students."

are graduating with a certificate in the program.

A few of these notable folks are:

Danielle Netzer, winner of the Robert B. Fowler best written award, named

after Professor Booth Fowler, a former professor in the ILS department.

Jesse C. Walter, Winner of the Miek-lejohn Travel Assistance Scholarship. This scholarship was named after the founder of Integrated Liberal Studies. It is awarded to people who are pursuing the ILS certificate, with preference given to those studying abroad over the Summer.

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FOCUS: TIM ALLEN, PROFESSOR OF BIOLOGY

Professor Allen started out as a general biologist with a focus on ecology. He quickly found a joy in teaching and the particularly thoughtful and appreciative students in ILS brought him into the program during its Renaissance in the early 1980s. He remains certain that it was one of the best moves he ever made. He won the Emil Stiger Distinguished Teaching

Award in 1987. His research is in the new science of complexity, which involves hierarchy theory, artificial intelligence, issues of scale, organization and far from equilibrium thermodynamics as they apply to ecology and natural resources. His coauthored books include *Hierarchy: Perspectives for Ecological Complexity*; *A Hierarchical Concept of Ecosystems*;

Toward a Unified Ecology; and with his wife Valerie Ahl, *Hierarchy Theory: A Vision Vocabulary and Epistemology*. His latest moves are into ecological economics and the coming global crisis. His teaching style and content is influenced by his being a systems analyst, giving a stark contrast to the conventional atomistic approach that prevails in biology.

THOUGHT THINKING THOUGHT [FROM P.1]

but instead in “goodness”, which necessarily entails a virtuous and contemplative lifestyle.

But the philosophical musings of an archaic classical western philosopher couldn't possibly have any ramifications on students lives in the 21st century, could it? Indeed, many would believe as much. But to embrace that idea is to fundamentally misunderstand how we as humans function and what negative implications our inability to truly relax and reflect can have on us.

Dr. Kathleen Sell, ILS professor and former Associate Vice President of the 26-campus UW System, notes, “[I]t would seem that one's mental state has a lot of bearing on more than intellectual aspects of life... perhaps we emphasize too much the linear, reductionist mental kind of state rather than other states we could occupy”. This much has been shown by UW's own neuroscientist Dr. Richard Davidson, whose preliminary studies have shown contemplative thought to reduce anxiety, improve the immune system, and increase activity in the brain in areas associated with positive emotions.

For Dr. Sell, however, the modern conventions of efficiency and productivity have largely eliminated this essential element of wider reflection and reason in organizations and in one's personal life, adversely affecting the mental and physical status of those who rush to succeed and achieve. She believes that a purely scientific reductionist conception of life, while useful for scientific progress, when extended to all of life, can be severely detrimental, as its purview is limited to narrow constructs and disciplines, and fails to grasp the larger picture. We also emphasize in our consumer culture too much distraction, amusements that Aristotle indicated should be a more moderate proportion of our activity. As a result, she believes so strongly in contemplative thought because of its “emphasis on a complete kind of reason, involving multiple kinds of knowledge, and the recognition of the need to balance activity with reflection, and

that the imbalance today, egged on by the emphasis on technology and productivity, is destructive”.

Eva echoes Dr. Sell's sentiments in a similar fashion. She makes a concerted effort to engage in contemplative thought every day, whether it be walking to class, on a jog, or laying in bed at night. In the prime of the information age, there are few limits to where one can be reached, and those moments where one can take stock of their life are few and far between. But this is continual and complete rush of information permits no exceptions for really critically thinking about what we're exposed to. As Eva noted, “[A] lot of times we're pursuing facts instead of ways of thinking”.

A skillful 21st century whole person would 'do be do'
~ Dr. Kathleen Sell

At first blush, that sentiment may seem counterintuitive. But the philosophy of contemplative thought values knowledge in a very deep and meaningful way, one which is not necessarily amenable to a statistic or graph or equation. That is, it values wisdom over information alone. And even the most gifted and intelligent persons of our time, people like Albert Einstein or Winston Churchill, recognized the value of taking a step back and evaluating their respective projects in a detached and holistic matter. Dr. Sell pointed out that some of Einstein's greatest revelations came to be him while he was taking a walk, and that Churchill, as a prominent head of state, would read poetry, paint, and take walks to help him decide the most vexing of questions.

Sell was also careful to point out that this notion of reflection is absent from the crammed schedules of most of today's leaders, educators, and students. As a result of the modern dictates of efficiency and expediency, we

as decision makers often fail to adequately assess our options, and instead live in the moment when we make often reaction rather than proactive choices. As a result, “[M]any people get that first job (out of college) and 20 years later say ‘Oh, what I really wanted to do with my life was X. We have a sort of midlife crisis because we're put onto tracks that where we're constantly pursuing material wealth, goods, and distractions”.

To that end, the ILS program seeks to provide an alternative to the somewhat more narrow educations most singular fields of study will provide. As an interdisciplinary program, ILS engages in an intellectual project of integration; one that evaluates problems from multiple perspectives instead of the typical binary problem-solution mindset that plagues most science. The hope is to develop students who recognize the value of deep thought, reflection, and evaluation.

Sell is currently finishing a book on contemplative thought at the moment. She has been assisted by a number of undergraduates, including Eva, this year as part of an undergraduate research project on the subject. The intention of the project is to acknowledge the overlooked discipline in the West's post enlightenment lexicon, and to bring contemplative thought into focus as a viable option for the 21st century person. As Dr. Sell half jokingly pointed out, “[A] frenetic American would ‘do do do’, a medieval monk would ‘be be be’, but a skillful 21st century whole person would ‘do be do’”.

For further reading on the subject, check out these resources:

Hare Brain, Tortoise Behind: How Intelligence Increases When You Think Less

by Guy Claxton

Wisdom, Information, and Wonder by Mary Midgley

Wherever You Go, There You Are, by Jon Kabat-Zinn

“Mindfulness in Plain English” by XXX

~ Article by Robert Probst

