

4 Writing Witness Consciousness

Susan Walsh and Heesoon Bai

Closing eyes, focusing attention on my fingers typing, hearing the little fountain trickling, now my left hand rubbing my chest that feels heavy, constricted. Breathe, breathe, my breaths have been suspended a lot in the last few days, sadness coming up, drawing in a deep breath, now letting it out through the mouth—aahhhaa. Once more . . . once more. I look up and see the picture of my Lumina baby (28 years ago!) nursing on my breast. My nipple in her mouth, her little pinky finger delicately poised, she is asleep. My chest feels different now. Shifting in feelings and sensations. Gratitude. Eyes moistening, tentative smiles slowly forming, okay, I'm going to sit for a while.

I sit and immediately feel a pressure in the middle of my forehead. A deep sense of sadness arises. Teardrops fall on my wrist, my fingers, roll onto my lips, drop to the ground in front of my feet. I am aware of my desire to wipe them away. I breathe spaciousness, feel bright pink, a place to expand into, to allow what is.

how shall we proceed? witnessing
our own witnessing something about
intersubjectivity? set up witnessing
perspectives/stands (witnessing would have to
take place from a particular stand/stance/
pose/poise/perspective,
wouldn't it?) for you and me it will be
Buddhist and so we
could articulate what that is about/like am
I making sense? I will propose something more
concrete in the next couple days as my thought
turns on the matter

our methodology will also have to be one with
what we are doing which means not
imposing it from without from the outset but

letting it arise out of what's
happening with our writing a methodology
of recursive emergence witnessing reflecting
writing with warmth with care a few
fragments something will emerge

imagine endless possibilities with our collected
words Indra's net each word a bright liquid
diamond caught in the net reflecting
all other words this phase of witnessing our
own witnessing words would be like setting
up more mirrors to the previous
mirrors universe of mirrors everywhere we turn
a mirror that mirrors other mirrors
is the "mirror" imagery adequate? liquid
diamond liquidity vapours (qi?!!) continually
coming off the liquid (their) our witnessing as
an oceanic experience another phase of our (their)
witnessing project an echo chamber perhaps? a place
for reverberation feeling sound

~

Witness consciousness is the ability of our consciousness to watch and observe in non-judgmental ways its content and also the process whereby the content, occurring as events, constantly shifts and flows, thus creating a "stream of consciousness."¹ Ordinarily, we become easily—all too readily—identified with, and therefore absorbed into, the content of consciousness, thereby losing awareness at that moment. With awareness, we can just watch and observe the constant making, unmaking, and remaking of the content of consciousness. The overall purpose of our collaborative practice is to explore how writing can enhance our ability to activate and magnify witness consciousness, also known simply as "awareness," and what that means in terms of the ways we attend to one another, to ourselves, and to the world.

Witness consciousness creates a protected workspace, the "laboratory of the soul," within which raw and undigested emotions can be "cooked" and worked on. By virtue of witness consciousness, emotions become safer in the sense that they arise within a sturdy and non-reactive container, without threatening to become foul or explode. For example, the classic approach to witnessing one's anger arising is to watch a small flame of anger igniting and burning, and to acknowledge this by saying (silently to oneself), "Anger is arising." This way, one is not identified with anger, as when we say, "I am angry." The latter statement implies that one is possessed and consumed by anger. It also implies the existence of an "I," an ego self totally identified with its psychological content, one that is inclined to project itself

onto the world. In Buddhist teachings, the “I” (ego) as a solid and fixed sense of self is an illusion. Ego develops through the misrecognition of itself as separate from primordial spaciousness, thus solidifying form and initiating duality—the categorical differentiation between self and other, perceiver and perceived, and so on. Before the development of ego, “we *are* this space, we are *one* with it, with *vidya*, intelligence and openness” (Trungpa, 1973, p. 123).

Meditating alone is a practice of witnessing the mind, of training the mind. The terms “meditating,” “meditation,” and “contemplation,” like all words, have multiple meanings. In particular, we would like to point out that “meditation” or “contemplation”² can mean both the activity/process and the achievement/results; the two are not the same, and we would do well not to conflate them. We can engage in some kind of meditation activity (e.g., sitting, walking, Zen art-making), but we may not achieve a meditative state. From the state of consciousness point of view, there are no specific activities that will necessarily lead to meditative states of consciousness. By the same token, all sorts of activities, none of which may look like the usual meditation poses, could lead to contemplative states of consciousness that include a witnessing aspect.

Like meditating alone, writing alone can be a means of witnessing. In the collaborative practice that we have developed, however, we have found that writing together (collaborative writing³) can amplify the witnessing capacity. This is particularly so when our witnessing capacity is not yet ample and stable, especially when what we need to witness is difficult. We have the tendency to turn away or turn off our gaze of consciousness from what is painful to sit with and witness. This is where a friend collaboratively engaged in meditation can extend his or her witness consciousness to assist the person who finds it too painful to sit with her own emotions. The basis of this practice is primordial; when we were infants and could not handle and tolerate overwhelming stimuli, we might have been (physically) held and assisted by caring mothers, fathers, and grandparents. The existential quality of witness consciousness resides in this practice of “being with”: to sit with another being in a gesture of holding, attuning to, and being there for that person, thereby being able to share his or her emotional burden when needed.

In our collaborative process of witnessing through writing, we draw on our individual meditation practices—our long-term and ongoing processes of witnessing and training our minds—to inform our practice of writing together. In meditation practice, we attend to *what is* in the moment, our physical bodies, the patterns of thoughts we inhabit; we attend to something beyond the conceptual, listen deeply, non-judgmentally. In a similar way, through writing and witnessing together, we create generous spaces for the other to be-with-what-is. In the context of this chapter (as a print text), our writing-witnessing process materializes through various formatting features involving fonts and use of space. We create a textual *space-between* by recording Heesoon’s contemplations as italicized, right-justified text, and Susan’s as italicized, left-justified text. Echoes (represented as grey text and introduced/ended with ellipses) rebound back and forth, a sounding

space for deep and care-filled listening. The center of the text is occupied by found poems, poems created from words and phrases culled from our emails; derived from our everyday lives, the found poems provide a counterpoint to the right and left justified texts that emerged from more contemplative spaces. Traditional expository writing retains its standard font and formatting throughout.

Thoughts and feelings multiply. How distracting! I was trying to focus on the images of Susan, and I became distracted by other thoughts and feelings flooding in. Back to her. Back to the little 8-year old Susan in her class, wielding an ink-dipped pen. Was she wearing a red coat on that day, like I saw her many decades later, when she came to Vancouver on her sabbatical? My eyes are moistening again.

What's about me, about her, about us, about this universe with unaccountably enormous (here I go again) karmic connectivity?

Each of us, a tiniest mote in the cosmos— a note in the cosmic symphony! Am I going to go faint-headed again, just trying to wrap my head around this scale of things? Awe-struck. No wonder we suppress all these wonders that can so easily interrupt, disrupt, and distract us from doing our daily business, getting things done.

. . . thoughts and feelings multiply distracting back to the little 8 year old Susan in her class my eyes are moistening each of us a tiniest note in the cosmic symphony wonders that can so easily interrupt disrupt distract us from getting things done . . .

Another wave of feelings that are like silent sobbing inside me. At this rate I will never get back to a "proper" meditation on Susan. "Proper" meditation, eh? Something comical about all this, too. Now, I'm slightly convulsing with silent laughter bubbling up inside me. I picture myself being the teacher in young Susan's class. I would feel this urge to go up to Susan and hug her and all other young children, too, who are trying to wield their ink pens in their little hands, focusing so hard on the difficult task that probably some of them had their little tender tongues sticking out, quivering.

. . . silent sobbing silent laughing picture myself being the teacher urges to hug Susan and all the other young children . . .

I would feel these urges to hug (and probably my eyes would be wet, too, overcome by feelings) all the time, and I would be seen as psychologically unstable—crazy! My question is, though, how can anyone not feel that way? How can anyone be a stern and demanding and commanding teacher, scolding little children for their inaptitude and failures?! But, wait a moment: I know how, as I have done that myself with my own children, here and there! I know how.

. . . eyes wet seen as unbalanced crazy how can anyone be a stern and demanding and commanding teacher scolding but wait a minute I know how . . .

I know how that works. One trance after another, one sub-routine after another: there are so many of “us” inside me. Heesoon is not singular.

There is the Heesoon who would feel this urge to hug, physically or virtually, all beings, and there is the Heesoon who is (has learned to be) impatient, demanding, and commanding. My girls used to humourously call that Heesoon, General Bai! General Bai on the march, often grim and determined, jaws clenched, eyes sharply focused on her objectives.

Thankfully, these days, General Bai is aging and is often unable to clench or focus or execute other stressful moves. Blessings.

. . . I know how that works one trance after another so many of “us” inside us Heesoon who would feel the urge to hug and the Heesoon who learned to be impatient demanding blessings . . .

~

Our practice of writing collaboratively as an embodied, relational, and recursive process has also involved performance and rewriting. For example, at one point, as we pondered how we might “perform” our witnessing process, we considered the use of mirrors and echoes. As noted above, the echo/mirror, in turn, became part of the present text; in this print format, the repetition of words and phrases symbolizes the ways we reflect back, act as a sounding space for one another. At another time, we physically drew circles around one another to symbolize the space we were holding—enacting witness consciousness as a space of non-judgment.

We consider our process of sustained collaborative inquiry a practice in the sense that meditation and contemplation are practices, disciplined means of training the mind that nudge us gently out of the ordinary self, its seeming solidity—and into states of being that foreground aspects of consciousness different from the analytic and conceptual. Franklin (1999) notes that “when the mind becomes still as a result of disciplined meditation practice, an inner presence reveals itself, a form of witness awareness, an inner observer [w]ho gently pulls the mind back, without judgment, to the single thought [object of meditation]” (p. 3).

Given our attention to witness consciousness as an equanimous (calm and abiding) aspect of being that is increasingly accessible through ongoing meditative and/or contemplative practice, we name our overall practice *writing witness consciousness*.⁴ Initially, we allow whatever arises to arise through our meditation practice and also through contemplating each other’s words. Each of us meditates and writes in the virtual presence of the other in a way that transcends time and space. This is our form of

presencing. We email our writing across the country and then spend time with one another's words. We attend and attune to what the other has articulated, hold open space to see what words, images, and feelings arise as compelling. This is our way of *attunement*. We then contemplate whatever has arisen: we sit with it, open to it. We enter into reverberations of feelings, thoughts, images, bodily sensations, and so forth in response to each other's virtual presence. This is our experience of *resonance* (see Siegel, 2010).

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I just had to pause today and
 read your writing much appreciation
 for your words and for sending
 the video link I am moved
 to write a bit in response a
 welcome gift today may
 your day be filled with moments
 of peace with love

~

I contemplate words that Heesoon has written. How can anyone be a stern and demanding and commanding teacher, scolding little children for their inaptitude and failures?! As I sat down on the cushion, my first thought, even before settling into breathing was "can of worms." A junior high student saying I was harsh . . . and my disbelief at that, especially after I had care-fully spent time with him during a time of difficulty. How can I reread such experiences, my perceptions? What can I learn? Believing in, trusting our own goodness, the goodness of others—having compassion for suffering, our own and that of others. How do I reconcile this with the sense that being a woman in these contexts matters? Back to Heesoon's words, my body.

. . . how can anyone be a stern and demanding and commanding teacher can of worms a junior high student saying I was harsh what can I learn trusting goodness having compassion for suffering being a woman matters . . .

A sense of tingling on my skin a pulsating of sorts reaching from the middle of my chest up to my nose, through a few chakras. Sort of a pulsating on the skin. A sense of green. A feeling that I am wearing a hat, a hoodie (but I'm not). This sense lingers. I turn my head now and then to check. . . . I am not wearing a hat, and though I have a jacket with a hood, the hood is not on my head. Weird, it feels like it. Some kind of casing around my head. Restrictive, lightly so. An illusion? The

pulsating feeling is replaced with a more insistent pounding deep in my chest, where my heart is. A deeper, stronger, slower beating. I adjust my posture, sit up straight. Breathe into what I am sensing.

. . . tingling on my skin pulsating feel I am wearing a hat restrictive
lightly so more insistent pounding deep in my chest where my heart
is deeper stronger slower breathe into . . .

I get continual messages, Buddhist teachings, and the message is the same, repetitive even . . . something I clearly need to pay attention to. Compassion kindness, begins with the self. Maitri. . . sending loving kindness to the self, then extending outward to others. What does this say about the witnessing process that Heesoon and I have embarked on? And, how does compassion work into this?

. . . continual messages compassion kindness begins with the self
extending it out to others what does this say about the witnessing
process that Heesoon and I have embarked on . . .

~

Our contemplation is a form of affective meditation in that we are working with feelings and sensations evoked by words we read in each other's texts. At times, images or feelings from our own experience emerge in contemplation; at times bodily sensations and/or feelings speak loudly. We then write "back" to the other. In sharing the writing, we act as witnesses to one another's words, and also sometimes as witnesses to the writer-self. We have also found that rehearsing and performing pieces of our work in the context of conference presentations—working together in physical space and time—has helped us further *embody* and articulate the witnessing process. In particular, we are working with what is known in some Buddhist traditions as the "Four Immeasurables" or "Brahmaviharas": loving-kindness, compassion, empathic joy, and tranquility or equanimity (non-reactiveness). All of these are affective qualities of witness consciousness. Through intentionally engaging in affective contemplation with our exchanged texts, we practice becoming more and more conversant with ways of being infused with the Immeasurables. Loving-kindness and compassion are expressed in and also beyond the actual writing witnessing practice, for example, in the email excerpts and informal writings we include in this text.

~

am feeling the tenderness of this
experience quite deeply am

grateful for your willingness to enter
open into this process with care
your writing's been tenderly
received my cupped hands receiving
. . . with gratitude

sorry about this delay we were
without our internet connection since the
middle of last week and only
this afternoon got it back havoc stress work
piled up but all is well I will
send my writing in a day or two in the meantime
wishing you a beautiful new year lots of love

~

I have been wondering about witness consciousness—what this means and whether or not reading more about it can help inform our process of writing in this way. Heesoon and I have shared some pieces we have written, have sat with the other's words then written "back" . . . doorways into compassion (like the other day when I thought about my dad's siwash/sweater when writing about Heesoon's father's rock, how that image arose when I contemplated Heesoon's writing). I could feel my heart opening as I contemplated and later as I wrote.

I'm not sure. Can writing be a process of witnessing? In writing, we are at least once removed from experience, not in the moment (experiencing it bodily) but in some way reflecting back on it. (I'm not sure if I agree with myself here.) And, what happens in the process of contemplating, being with the words of another? We can only be in the moment of that experience. What arises.

I continue to be unclear about what (exactly) witness consciousness means—though I have the experience of watching myself in meditation and in my daily life. Watching myself react, for example, to a student who dominates "air" time in class, to colleagues who must question each little point of discussion in faculty meetings. Noticing the story-lines I begin to spin, the judgments—also the tightening in my gut, the quickening of my breathing, the tension in my shoulders, jaw. How the gap created by watching myself in these moments is transformative, a means of interrupting the habitual. In this gap, I can bring myself back to a view of seeing the goodness of all sentient beings, a space for opening heart, softening.

Right now I am watching myself want to know exactly what witness consciousness means in the Buddhist tradition so I can be accurate, precise. Searching through the databases, printing and reading articles, looking through my Buddhist books, checking the indexes for witness consciousness, double consciousness, contemplative consciousness. I am conscious of intellectualizing this process, of wanting to “get it right.” And also of projecting my own insecurities—feeling like I will be found lacking for not knowing. Not wanting to let Heesoon down. And yet, and yet, this is not about an intellectual endeavor but about resting with, relaxing into “home sweet home” (Trungpa, 2003, p. 133). I’m conscious of the irony of intellectualizing something that is not intellectual. I’m watching myself engaged in this process, not sure where it’s going. Or why I’m engaging in it. Still that little child gripping the pen, trying to do everything correctly . . . whatever “correctly” means to that little girl. How this interferes with just being, relaxing into.

~

maybe we could talk on
the phone or on Skype sometime
soon? early morning for
me works. I get up early. 4
hours difference between
us? my preferences would
be Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays.

What do you think? (I’m
starting to observe a rising
sense of worry as I
think about all I have
to do in the next month . . . I’m
watching it—and am sometimes
succumbing.) Can witness
consciousness undo worries
de-panic us, etc.?:-) we will
figure out something, I am
sure!! warm hugs in thought

~

I can write about many different things. Including simply aimlessly letting my mind wander and record as I/it wanders. That too could be some kind of “experiment.” But my wish is to choose to write: 1) from the space of a contemplative consciousness and 2) to nourish the self.

Do 1) and 2) coincide here? I think so!

Contemplative consciousness (Susan was researching c.c., wanting to get it right/accurate, had many questions. . .): words are like loose garments that fit over a body; or they can be too tight and make the wearer uncomfortable. C.c. is a word. Words do things: perform/function/make something happen. Why have we chosen c.c. rather than “mindfulness,” “meditative consciousness,” “Zen”? Do they refer to different states of consciousness? or the same (more or less the same) but perform differently for us (on stage?)? I find myself getting a bit impatient—I’m not going to do my “conceptual analysis”! I’ve done that enough in my life. Want to do something different. Ok, back to the garment metaphor. I used to be a fabulous seamstress. (I probably still could be?) I used to sew up all manners of clothing items for my family members, especially my girls. So, do that with my choice of “contemplative consciousness.” I have enough materials (all those books I read! all those hours I sat. . .) to make a garment. What kind do I want? What do I want it to do for me? For what occasion? How do I want it to look?

Not too tight. I never liked tight clothing. Soft, warm, light, comfortable to my body. Gently hugging; gently hovering. I want c.c. to be just like that. It covers me, protects me, hugs me, touches me, soothes me, gently holds me, watches over me, keeps me warm without making me hot and sweaty, etc. It does not make me drowsy and put me to sleep . . . does not make me feel itchy, confined, irritated, stressed. That’s the QUALITY of c.c. that I wish to create. Wearing c.c., I am comfortable and comforted, and I can look around and look at things, look at what’s happening inside and outside. Feel my thoughts, think my feelings, look at the gestures and expressions on others. (Avi finds it amusing and bewildering that I choose to watch a movie on the plane without the headset, without the sound! I turn the movie into a silent movie and watch the movements, expressions, landscape.)

Hui Neng, the 6th Chán patriarch, said: “The meaning of life is to see.”

I love watching little babies open their eyes and see/look. This is when they are comfortable enough, inside and outside, without wants and urgent needs that demand attention, without distractions, internal and external. They just look. My sense of c.c. is creating this condition wherein I can do this “just looking” and “just seeing.” This c.c. can be embedded in other activities, too. Back to the garment metaphor: c.c. can be like our undergarment, not showing but supporting the body intimately. (I thought of a little project just now: look for c.c. while I am doing other things, in public or alone. Oh? Isn’t this what I am doing right now? That’s right!)

Now and then, I close my eyes (as I write, and do “other” things) and “withdraw” my outward attention, re-turn to the “source.” Breathing is the vehicle of this re-turn. Feel the feel, think the thought, breathe the breaths . . . COMING HOME.

The challenge for me, as for others (I suspect), is to be “at home” wherever they go/are.

Snowing! On the 29th of February, it snows in Vancouver.

~

I think about the space that Heesoon and I are co-creating through our work together, one intention of which is to foreground witness consciousness through writing, a being-with what emerges. While I have frequently woven meta-texts about the writing process into my work—a kind of witnessing of my own writing process—writing with the intention of foregrounding witness consciousness in a shared space with Heesoon is quite different. I experience here a softness, a gentleness in the process that is new, fresh. More compassion, loving-kindness for myself and for Heesoon. When the pointy edges of feeling arise in the writing or (re)reading of her words or mine, I notice it, where it rests in the body (and sometimes write it down). I feel less attached, however, to the pain, to its sharpness. Not in the sense of denying it, but more in the sense of not wallowing in it—feeling instead the urge to listen to it, breathe into it, give it space to move, transform. I think that maybe in witnessing my writing process (previously), my intention was to rest with what arises, record it—then analyze it. And, by positioning myself as a feminist poststructuralist, my intention was to be critical, analytical. Not that loving kindness and compassion are not critical, precise; I think, for example, of prajna—embodied intelligence—as awareness that cuts through. However, the loving kindness, the compassion part was mostly missing, for myself and for others, except maybe in an intellectual sense. I acknowledge too that positioning ourselves in the Buddhist traditions makes a difference, invites a particular kind of sensibility, a particular way of being and knowing in the world. And, somewhat obviously, setting a specific intention about non-judgment, loving-kindness and compassion makes a difference too. Writing witness consciousness as practice ground for a particular way of being-in-the-world.

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This morning I sat with, read through the all of the words that Heesoon and I have shared over the past several months. My first impulse is to go to the computer and prune, begin some revisions. But wait, that's not what we're doing here. What does it mean to get out of conceptual mind—or the rush to action, re-action. To witness these. I catch myself

in the moment. Watch the impulse.

Instead, I go to the cushion and sit. Ask myself what arises when I rest with our words. I feel my shoulders relax into the breath, the familiarity of this posture. Quickly an intensity sears the third eye, a pressure so strong that my breath quickens. Watching this. The intensity radiates to my ears. I breathe into it. Mind wanders to tax receipts, emails I have to send. Gently, I bring my mind back. Words arise: gratitude, privilege. A sense of the heart opening. An image of being in a circle of teachers, surrounded by light. Warm, yellow, glowing. Goodness, humility reflected in the cosmic mirror.

The birds are loud outside the window today. Grosbeaks squabbling at the feeder, their yellow beaks flashing. The cooing of a mourning dove. Come back to the body, radiate outward.

Gently, with a playful spirit, to the e-file, our collated words.

~

my my how days are
speeding by a blur I
swish around madly knocking
off one task after another spells
of intensity (and my right
arm/hand/fingers are beginning to be sore!)

how about either Sunday
morning for a call (early
morning for me) November 11 or 12, or 13th??
yours . . . speeding, mindfully(!)
on academic highway

~

I've been feeling unsettled—since Wednesday morning when we lost our internet connection! Dis-connected from my virtual universe of work/communication. Utter havoc. Feeling slightly sick in the stomach even to think of how my virtual existence has been threatened. Unanswered emails piling up; cannot meet various deadlines; cannot communicate with my students in the two courses that I am teaching this semester. It's as though I've lost my senses and limbs: my virtual eyes, ears, hands, and legs. What's left of me? Which me?

~

An eight-year old girl barefoot in a lavender dress twirling in an unself-conscious way to a Chinese flute song: is this Susan? I try to picture 8-yr old Susan in lavender, twirling, twirling, as a little girl would do.

. . . lavender, twirling twirling little girl . . .

And now my mind immediately goes to another image my Lumina as a young girl of about 5 years I made her a pale pink sleeveless fine cotton dress that looked like a tutu marveling at the amount of fabric the tutu skirt part took to make a full gather. A skirt to twirl in.

. . . Lumina pale pink tutu a skirt to twirl in . . .

And Lumina loved dancing, with or without music, in that unself-conscious way. I wish I could see the little girl Lumina dancing again; I wish I could gather and pick her up in my arms and dance with her, laughing, singing, moving wildly. That's what was often missing or was not there enough! What was I doing? Not fully enjoying . . . not fully there in joy, with my little girl? Probably so. I was not as open, relaxed, and ready to play as I am now. My entire life up to that moment of studying hard, worrying and being anxious about my survival and winning, and always competing in school, and life was in the way, I suppose.

. . . dancing in that unself-conscious way I wish I could dance with her laugh sing wildly not open relaxed worrying studying hard competing . . .

Susan speaks, longingly, of "that sense of spaciousness," of fluidity, freedom to become part of the wind and the ocean like the kitesurfers at the beach. Panic, an experience she reports in her last entry, would be the opposite experience of being spacious.

. . . Susan speaks longingly, spaciousness fluidity freedom wind ocean kitesurfers—panic . . .

I remember well those times I experienced panic momentarily. One of those times was working furiously to the clock ticking down to the last second of submission deadline on a grant application! The feel of those moments: dry mouth, sensations of the heart in my throat, my neck and shoulders feeling rigid with tension, and so on. When I am panicking, I experience the world as if it's pressed flat right up against my face. No space, no spaciousness at all. And I cannot move my face or neck,

either. Cannot move, no room to play. To play well, we need spaciousness of heartmind, unless the game we want to play is anxiety, panic, and viciousness.

. . . world pressed flat up against my face dry mouth heart in throat
neck shoulders rigid no room to play anxiety viciousness . . .

Couldn't get my iPad to play music for me. So "danced" without the music while doing my zazen. I can activate rhythmic micro body movements while sitting! An embodiment exercise. With the regular training in neigong that I have been engaged in for the past two years, I know how to move my body in smallest movements while sitting "still." I feel happy, and my body feels more loosened up. A contemplative experiment.

. . . a contemplative experiment an embodiment exercise
danced with out the music move my body in smallest
movements feel happy more loosened up . . .

~

we are completely in the same
boat I was in the same
situation as you are in now
was late in sending my contribution . . .
I am still running a marathon!! just cannot
get out of it the best we can do
as always is to relax in the boiling
water smile and breathe deeply yes? :)
I'm sure gaps are there all
along and lots of them: we just
have to look for them with
a microscope! yours . . . with inner smiles

I have my microscope
out will continue to peer
through it love from Halifax

~

I've been haunted by something that Heesoon wrote back in November—her memory of Lumina twirling in a pink tutu that Heesoon had lovingly crafted. Heesoon's desire to pick Lumina up, dance, laugh, move wildly: her ruminations about not being fully there, open to such abandon with her child.

. . . haunted by an image Lumina twirling a pink tutu Heesoon's desire
to dance laugh move wildly ruminations not being fully there with
her child . . .

*I feel loss deeply as I read Heesoon's words, as they return to me.
A familiar loss, one that I carry. Tears start, my chest tightens; I am
holding my breath, can feel the pain across my chest intensify. The deep
sadness of missing my daughters: one now in Vancouver, one in New
Orleans, the loss of their childhoods, the little girls that they were. So
much rises up. My cheeks are wet; I'm sobbing. Can I sit with this, just
bear it for a moment or two? I take a couple of deep breaths. This is a
pain I feel I will always bear. Wishing that I could have somehow made
things perfect for them—whatever that means. Regretting that I did
not. I imagine gathering our small daughters, Heesoon and me, hugging
them and simply loving them. Have I escaped into books, endless work?
Has Heesoon?*

. . . loss familiar loss tears chest tightens pain deep sadness missing
daughters the little girls that they were wet cheeks deep breaths just
bear it for a moment regret imagine gathering small daughters simply
loving them have I escaped into endless work? . . .

*I was never the girl in the lavender dress dancing freely. I was the girl
lying on the cold floor of the dance studio, peeking under the door at
the girls who were dancing freely. I took more "serious" kinds of dance
lessons, the teachers exacting, harsh even. I can't remember ever twirl-
ing, though my sister did so endlessly in front of the mirror. I was too
busy practicing, preparing for competitions. Fulfilling expectations: my
own and those of others.*

. . . never dancing freely more serious teachers exacting harsh
practicing preparing for competitions fulfilling expectations . . .

*I'm getting a headache, a tight band across my forehead; my nose is
dripping. I wipe it on the sleeve of the big, old sweater I wear around
the house. Did Heesoon dance as a child?*

. . . headache nose dripping did Heesoon dance? . . .

*I invoke an image of all of our girl selves: Heesoon, Lumina, Serenna,
Casey, Erin, me: our mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters, cousins,
friends—all of us in flowing dresses, dancing freely, joyfully. Dancing
with open hearts. Dancing individually and together, joining hands.
Slow breaths, light, love to this image.*

. . . an image of our girl selves flowing dresses dancing freely joyfully
joining hands open hearts light love . . .

*I have a deeply felt sense that taking time to attend to Heesoon's writing
in this way is a healing process, a way of opening space in busyness.
Being spacious. Loving. A responsibility to the other to do so. (What I
might not take time to do for myself.)*

~

glad we are working on
this writing project together
moments of writing witnessing
our writing makes me smile seems
to fit well with my morning
meditation practice the quality of
the energy is similar softening yes

softening smiling gentling
listening hovering loving

~

I thought I had sent
you some writing about a week
ago but I cannot find
that email just
in case I am sending it again

thank you witnessed your
mind for another round

~

She joined my loss experience. Mutual resonance, empathic pain/suffering. I touched her heart and soul with my memory/story of loss (my Lumina's pink tutu story). Reading her description of pain intensifying in the heart area, I feel the same sensations and feelings arising: tightness in the chest, deep sadness, pain in my heart chakra . . . wow, this phenomenon of empathic pain/suffering is real! How marvelous to be human and be able to experience this. So amazing that we are animals evolved to have this capacity (shared by other mammals, such as elephants, chimps, etc.). It's also interesting how quickly I went from this deep sadness and tearing in the eye to awe and wonder, while the tightness in the chest and in the jaws is still there.

. . . mutual resonance empathic pain suffering touched her heart and soul tightness in the chest deep sadness pain in heart how marvelous awe and wonder while the tightness in chest and jaw is still there . . .

Susan asks herself: "Can I sit with this, just bear it for a moment or two? I take a couple of deep breaths. This is a pain I feel I will always bear." This is where empathic pain/suffering becomes ethical! I (mentally) bow to Susan, to her ability to bear the hard-to-bear. Here, I find myself spontaneously taking off my glasses, pressing my eyes with hands, taking in some urgent breaths. Interesting response!) Avi has been urging me to feel the unbearable. "Don't try to get rid of it. Go into it." My particular pattern of reactivity—externalizing first. Anger, even rage, comes up, and when that goes nowhere (does not satisfy me), then I go into a state of despair, sadness.

. . . Susan asks herself: can I sit with this, just bear it for a moment or two? Avi urging me to feel the unbearable go into it pattern of reactivity then despair sadness . . .

Compassion as an ethical state of being is not just the empathic suffering part. That's the necessary beginning that leads to the next part—bearing the suffering, with equanimity and clarity of consciousness.

Ha, I can theorize aright! The ability to theorize well what I cannot practice well enough!

. . . compassion an ethical state empathic suffering a beginning then bearing the suffering equanimity clarity Ha! theorizing . . .

~

In the process of writing and witnessing together, we open to one other, her words, and we also consciously engage in a process of witnessing the ego-self with the confidence that we can do so in a space of non-judgment (or if judgment arises, we can consider what it tells us). Our encounters with our texts—as fluid and changeable entities—yields different insights, all temporary, intransient. All is welcomed as instructive (like the guests in Rumi's poem, "The Guest House"). And, the resonances, reverberations sound throughout the text. Relationship is the medium through which we catch an angle reflected, something that compels us. Opening to another in this way helps to undercut the (illusion of) solidity of self. The process is gentler, more consciously care-filled. I think, for example, of my desire to "pin down" what exactly witness consciousness means at one point in this process. How I wrote about it and how Heesoon witnessed this but did not respond directly to it—continued with what arose for her. In that space of non-response

(of not being “rescued” perhaps), I came to my own peace about it. What might this say for teaching and learning? The pedagogical relationship? What might it say more generally about learning to live well with others in the world?

~

I look out the window. It’s windy today, Hurricane Maria off the coast of Nova Scotia heading towards Newfoundland, about to make landfall this afternoon. Outside, the sky changes quickly from cloudy and grey to blue with small white clouds skidding by, tree branches bending, the sound of leaves rustling. Gulls playing in the wind currents, about nine of them rise up, then together let themselves fall down, down, allow their bodies to drop, don’t use their wings. Trust. Embodied.

I love these dark and quiet winter mornings in Vancouver. Busy Granville and surrounding streets are still asleep. . . . I sit, I breathe, jot down words that come to me here and there. The little indoor fountain gently trickles, bubbles. . .

NOTES

1. We refer interested readers to Daniel Brown’s chapter in *Transformations of consciousness*, edited by Wilber, Engler, and Brown (1986). In fact, the whole book includes many chapters that contain scholarly discussions about mindfulness meditation and the nature of consciousness that are pertinent to our chapter.
2. Some scholars/teachers/practitioners distinguish between “meditation” and “contemplation,” and some do not. For example, Miller (1994) locates meditation as “one time-honored contemplative practice” (p. 26), “a form of contemplation that involves concentrated practice” (p. 3); he frames contemplative awareness as “seeing things as they are in the here and now” (p. 2)—“nondualistic experience” (p. 3) that involves the “development of compassion” (p. 2). Spiritual leader Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche (Mukpo, 2003) distinguishes contemplation and meditation. In contemplation, the initial object of contemplation might be a word, phrase, an image, or an idea. The instruction is to attend to the object, returning the mind to it again and again when distractions arise, and then to “let the words drop away” and rest with the “heartfelt experience” that arises (Mukpo, 2003, pp. 200–201). Meditation, in its most basic form, is a way of “train[ing] the mind” (Mukpo, 2003, p. xix) for “stability, clarity, and strength” (p. 5) through attending to the breath (see pp. 24–48; see also 2005, pp. 107–199). In our work, we use the word “contemplation” to indicate a form of object meditation where the “object” or focus might be a word, phrase, image, or feeling.
3. One of the earliest forms of “writing together” as a process of inquiry, memory work evolved as a form of consciousness-raising among women who attempted to “inscribe feminism into the Marxist framework” (Haug et al., 1987,

p. 23). In this research method, written memories of everyday experiences that include sensory detail serve as a ground for analyzing how women are subject to and also actively participate in reproducing social discourses; the process involves systematic analysis and rewriting of the memories. Related in terms of method, but located within a poststructuralist framework, collective biography also involves memory and writing as discursive sites for analysis about the ways in which subjects are shaped; Davies and Gannon (2006) note that one purpose of the work is to “produc[e] a textual base through which [the researchers] can explore processes of meaning making and the ways we become subjects and go on becoming subjects” (p. 7). Recently, collective biography has been theorized in Deleuzoguattarian terms, further shifting understandings about how subjectivity is constructed and lived in relation to others (for example, Davies & Gannon 2009; Gale & Wyatt, 2008; Gonick, Walsh, & Brown, 2011; Wyatt, Gale, Gannon, & Davies, 2011). Further, the use of textual and other arts-based in(ter)ventions in the inquiry process challenges “the persistence of the originating subject as the one who ‘knows,’ and who remains most authorized to speak and write the truth of memory [something which] has, at times, provided an awkward undertow in collective biography work that claims to be taken up within a poststructural paradigm” (Gannon, Walsh, Byers, & Rajiva, 2012, p. 6). The decentering of a subject who knows, its relationality and openness to the other and other-than-human world, and its existence on different planes align in some ways with the Buddhist ground of our work. In making connections between the Buddhist *puja* (ritual) and Deleuze and Guattari’s theories, Deleuzoguattarian scholar O’Sullivan (2001), for example, notes that attention is on “*affects* rather than meanings. [On] *experience* rather than understanding. And [on] *transformation* rather than representation. At stake here is a reconfiguration of subjectivity” (emphases in original, p. 118).

4. Although our work is distinct in terms of its intent and ground, we locate *writing witness consciousness* in relation to colleagues whose inquiry process also involves writing with others: for example, those involved with life writing/literary *métissage* (Chambers, Hasebe-Ludt, Leggo, & Sinner, 2012; Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009; Kelly, 2010), duoethnography (Norris, 2008; Norris & Sawyer, 2012; Sawyer & Liggett, 2012), memory work (Haug, 2000, 2008; Haug et al., 1987; Hyle, Ewing, Montgomery, & Kaufman, 2008; Walsh, 2003; 2006), and collective biography (Davies & Gannon, 2006, 2009; Gannon et al., 2012; Gonick & Gannon, 2014; Gonick, Walsh, & Brown, 2011; Wyatt et al., 2010, 2011). Though varied in terms of their roots, theoretical orientations, and purposes, life writing, duoethnography, memory work, and collective biography all share a common thread: individuals write about their experiences and work with their writing in relation to the writing of others as a means of (re)interpreting meaning. Those working with both life writing and duoethnography (see, for example, Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009; Norris, 2008) acknowledge roots in curriculum theorist William Pinar’s (1976a, 1976b, 2004) *currere*, a method of self study grounded in sociocultural and historical contexts that effects personal and social transformation; “indeed autobiography is the pedagogical political practice for the 21st century” (2004, p. 38). Life writing highlights the individual writing of stories in a variety of genres, as a “relational rather than solitary act . . . it is in and through the writing that relations, previously unrecognized become visible and audible for the writer” (Hasebe-Ludt et al., p. 29). Literary *métissage*, a process of juxtaposing the stories is “a creative strategy for braiding socio-cultural conditions of difference and points of affinity (Haraway, 1994) into autobiographical texts” (Hasebe-Ludt et al., p. 36). Similarly, through juxtaposition and also written dialogue, duoethnographers work

with a co-inquirer to “shatte[r] . . . preconceived views about a particular theme or event and one’s narrative relationship to that theme or event” (Sawyer & Liggett, 2012, p. 629), thus “promoting a conscious awareness of new constructions of meaning within a social context” (Sawyer & Liggett, p. 630). Please see Footnote 3 for a brief overview of memory work and collective biography.

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