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nineteen sixty nine: an ethnic studies journal

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On the Way to Meditation

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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6ck6m0wg>

Journal

nineteen sixty nine: an ethnic studies journal, 2(1)

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Publication Date

2013

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On the Way to Meditation

Adela Nieves

I am in the midst of the process of mastering what it means to slow down and make quality decisions for a healthy life. No small task. After a series of burn-outs and quick-fix remedies, followed by more intentional and long-term deep practice¹, there are a few things I'm noticing about both my own healing process as well as my practice with others. In my experience with health and healing justice organizing, health practitioners, and friends, slowing down is often linked with meditation. Meditation can be a powerful practice for such healing, but meditation is also complex, at least in theory. It is generally a practice in which an individual trains the mind in some way, or works to bring on a mode of consciousness. It is commonly regarded as a way to induce relaxation, though there are many different meditative tools and forms, as well as goals. Are we meditating simply to achieve relaxation, focus a particular skill, or quiet our bodies and minds? Or is that relaxed state the route to something else, like spiritual growth?

Most important, for me, is the assumption that meditation must involve calm and silence. Despite the many ways one can approach the practice, this seems to be the limited way it has been adopted in the United States. Meditation as practiced and commonly understood in the U.S. is not always right for each person, and in some cases the practice and how it is organized can be triggering and painful, both emotionally and physically. As a healing practitioner, I am interested in practices that can help guide us to meditation with compassion and safety, and at the same time expand our understanding of meditation beyond sitting and silence to include other forms, which is how it has been long understood in other parts

of the world.

In a 2012 interview, queer Xicana artist Adelina Anthony spoke of how difficult making healthy choices for our own lives can be. Particularly, I think, for the activist community, where the pressure to be a warrior 24/7/365 is so great, and the work so crucial. But the burnout can be severe, and what's more, many of us – before we even begin – come to the work carrying considerable trauma, which is what often motivates us to do the work. As Adelina asks, what good does it do us or anyone else if we are toxic?² Finding time for calm activities, to slow ourselves down and address our own healing needs, is something I find essential if our work is to be sustainable and effective over the long term. For me, my traumas are noisy and chaotic, though I've tried for years to hide them. Western European (and American) culture emphasizes and encourages a stoic demeanor, even in the face of pain, as the only acceptable way to share or handle emotion. So in my experience with meditation, there is always something missing. Many of us can't go from chaos to silence in five seconds. The more I practiced, the more frustrated I became. Of course I recognize that learning to quiet the mind can be a frustrating process for many people. Learning takes time and beginning steps are usually the hardest.

A lot of this difficulty certainly has to do with being raised and conditioned in Western culture, where there is so much emphasis on linear thinking and suppressing emotion. As the West African writer and teacher Malidoma Somé has noted, public emotional expression in the West, especially for men, is generally not acceptable. "Anyone who desires to experience this type of reality [the sacred – spiritual, not secular]," he says "will have to deemphasize the analytical mind and reemphasize the heart. The heart is going to have to be allowed at least as much self-expression as the mind, if not more."³ While reemphasizing the heart as central to the healing process, there is also the question of approach.

Many of us hear about meditation and recognize the real benefits of the practice, but are discouraged from the practice for various reasons: the time it takes to learn, distorted messages we receive about who practices meditation ("it's for those people, not for me or my community"), or a specific form of meditation that isn't what is needed at that time. I had a phone call with a friend whose partner took their kids out for three hours to give my friend time to herself. She had her day all planned: she would create a calm, silent space in an upstairs room, light candles, get her favorite essential oils, take a lavender salt bath and meditate for a half an hour. What ended up happening was this: she spent almost all of her self-care time working herself into a frantic state because she could not quiet her mind. The more time passed, the more she blamed herself for being too "messed up" to ground herself, even when given the gift of time to do so. All she wanted to do was scream, but instead she curled up into a corner and cried until she fell into a despairing sleep.

This brings me to that something that, for some time, I have not been able to name. I now understand my own difficulties. When silence has been our place of punishment and we have been taught to be undetectable (seen and not heard), how do people of color (whose voices have been regarded by dominant/mainstream culture as holding little value) reconcile the supposed necessity of returning to a place of silence to find inner peace? Especially when many of us are just learning to use our voices, to be present in a room, and who often have not been allowed to be the experts of our own experiences? As Cara Page, one of the co-organizers of the 2010 U.S. Social Forum (USSF) Healing Justice Practice Space

asks, "How are we going to harbor each other without having a complete understanding of our history? We haven't really had the opportunity to unpack how many of our communities experienced, or are currently experiencing, genocide and historical trauma, that is now very much present trauma."⁴ In this context, for some, meditation can feel more like punishment than healing.

When we're talking about meditation as a path toward spiritual growth, the process can be even more difficult for many of us who assume spiritual growth will be positive. A great variety of meditative practices have been practiced for hundreds of years, most were intended to advance spiritual understanding and awareness; the use of meditation in western medicine as a technique for improving health is a more recent development.⁵ William Copeland, a poet, emcee and activist, stresses that spiritual growth can be very difficult, especially if meditation is divorced from study and practice. "It can be a deep level of unpleasantness. People meditate, or use other paths, for spiritual growth expecting to feel good, or feel better, and instead your trauma sometimes becomes more intense, and people don't know how to handle it." Or, when our sense of our own trauma intensifies, we decide the practice isn't working, instead of recognizing that discomfort can be spiritual growth. "So we don't know which one is which," William says. "If we're just talking about meditation as a technique, that's very different from spiritual growth."

This leads me back to the messages we receive around healing and meditation. Many of us who are attracted to the healing and spiritual potential of meditation are often intimidated or discouraged when it is understood—often rightly—as some magical, almost inaccessible entity. As an observer, it may be perceived as only those already born with higher consciousness—or, as it often turns out, from stable backgrounds, who can afford travel to distant lands or have an abundance of time to practice regularly with gurus—can attain that higher level of growth or guidance. This leaves many of us who do not have such luxuries discouraged when we cannot reach this pinnacle, and, as William suggests, fails to give us the full view of what deep practice requires. It often requires us to be uncomfortable, to face traumas and to sit with the pain of our histories. When healing modalities are presented as miraculous therapies, practitioners can deny people the full experience of a given practice, and the ability to identify their own experiences and work within, such modalities.

As healers and health practitioners, we have to be creative and inspired with our healing; it can't be "one size fits all" and applied as if everyone shared the same experiences, trauma, and comfort zones. The healers whose work I find most inspiring (i.e. Traditional Healer/Curandera Rita Navarrete-Perez, Temazcal Tonatiuh in Mexico City, Anjali Taneja, Medical Director, Culinary Extra Clinic at Iora Health in Las Vegas, Nevada and Tanuja Jagernauth, Doctor of Oriental Medicine, Sage Health Collective in Chicago, Illinois) are those who see each patient as a unique individual, without the expectation that what worked for the last person will work for this one. If healers/practitioners listen clearly to each person's experiences and respond accordingly, individuals seeking support can help direct their own healing.

This is not a piece against meditation. It is about guidance towards meditation and an expanded understanding of meditation to include a range of approaches. As I go deeper into my own practice and am more able to work with the emotions that come up for me when I'm silent, I find meditation to be one of the most powerful ways for grounding myself

and learning to nurture the feelings I have run from for so long. But this benefit did not come easily to me.

I have been to many classes, workshops, retreats, and conferences where meditation was offered as a tool for grounding, to help me become a more productive member of my community and a less toxic participant in movement work. What I found, however, was the more I was asked to be quiet and observe my thoughts, the more I needed to scream. Where was the room for my scream? And, why do instructors assume everyone is in the same place? In many instances, there were no steps leading us to this process; we weren't discussing our traumas or how we came to the places each of us were in. We just jumped into meditation. It is one thing to be in an intentional, purposeful space, devoted to meditation with supportive facilitators; it is another to include the practice in a workshop or a retreat without ensuring the safety of the space, or with little regard for what might come up for people, including whether they can even physically tolerate the practice.

"I'm someone who suffers from chronic pain," says Diana Copeland, Executive Director of East Michigan Environmental Action Council (EMEAC). "When I think about seated meditation, I already know I can't do it." Not wanting to feel like a failure – something I think should not even come up in a space devoted to healing – Diana does other methods, like yoga flow meditation, that allow for differently-abled people to participate. Once she took a breathing meditation class that sent her into a panic attack. "I didn't know how to deal with what was coming up for me, and there was no introduction from the instructor as to what might happen, what my body might do, or even that my body's reaction would reflect what it needed to do." As someone who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, she recognizes in retrospect that she shouldn't have even been there, that "it was a gateway to trauma." Hers is a clear example that sometimes certain forms of meditation are not appropriate, and creating an environment that meets the specific needs of each participant is crucial.

A good example of this kind of practice is the Sage Health Collective in Chicago. Sage has a checklist for the workshops and classes it offers, including opening ground rules; a variety of seating or laying options; frequent check-ins; a designated "vibewatcher" to monitor how participants are doing; established non-verbal options for expressing needs; a place in the room where folks can go to sit/lay quietly, breathe, receive acupuncture, and express emotions; and follow-up check-in options offered at the beginning and end of each session. Beyond these, the organizers do their best to create a scent-free environment for those who suffer from chemical disabilities or fragrance sensitivities, and they make room for suggestions. As practitioners, we won't always have the means or space to incorporate all that we'd like in order to create a fully inclusive and accessible environment, but we can start somewhere, while also maintaining a broader vision that helps us work towards our goals.

Diana's experience also speaks to the importance of being clear about the purpose of meditation, and about how the practice is framed; is the practice for healing, discipline, exercise, or spiritual growth? DJ Sicari, a nationally renowned DJ and co-founder of the 5E Gallery in Detroit, came to meditation with skewed expectations. "I have groups of friends who meditate, who shared these amazing experiences with me – arriving at another plane, seeing visions, new languages, things like that. So I'm looking for this great, amazing result, and being disappointed when all I came away with is clarity." Sicari felt like he was

unsuccessful because he was not coming away with a 'great meditation story,' which he described as "ego-based meditation," rewarding the illusion of what we think meditation should be. "I was just clearing my mind, quieting the riot."

There are several meditative practices that can help us "quiet the riot," achieve clarity, or come to any of the various goals we hope to reach with meditation, though they might not come to mind when we hear the word "meditation."

Tonita Gonzalez, a New Mexico-based Curandera/Traditional Healer describes the process of learning to come to a place of stillness as multi-layered. When people are suffering from trauma or have traumatic events happen in their lives, silence is not always the answer. Sometimes, some of us need to feel the cry in our whole bodies before we can release it. She says giving people only one option can be dangerous; and there are numerous ways to dislodge the constant negative self-talk and stuck emotions, eventually leading to a place of silence. "That is why," Tonita says, "I believe so strongly in the temazcal. Giving people a space to scream, as often as they'd like, with no expectations, can be a beneficial meditation." The temazcal is a Mexica sweat lodge representing the womb of mother earth; the temazcal bath purifies one's mind, body and spirit. Ancient ceremonies combine a cleansing sweat bath with herbs and flowers. The word temazcal comes from the Nahuatl language spoken by the Aztecs; it translates (roughly) to "bath house" or "house of heat." ⁶

My introduction to the temazcal, and learning to scream, gave me a sacred space to release. It was the first time I felt like I was given permission to explore who I am without being shamed. Anything that happens naturally is exactly what should be happening at that moment. It is similar to an experience of being naked without anyone pointing at your bruises or calling you out. Your whole body shakes; your guttural sounds spring back and forth from the walls to your body, and at first they are sounds you don't recognize. It is you without the disguise. For a moment, the noises are unfamiliar, yet they become all you want to hear—the pureness of your voice without protection. It is a new experience, one I cannot easily describe, but after participating in many temazcals, I am much closer to slowing down and loving myself without validation from others, and I am more peaceful and willing to explore meditation. But my scream had to come first. Growing up in a culture that rewards us for disconnecting from our feelings, I had to first learn to value the lessons my emotions could teach me before I could come to a place of silence. I do not see emotional expression and meditative silence as separate from each other, but as pieces of a puzzle in which neither can work without the other. The more I explore my scream—the more I discover my voice, get comfortable with its tone, and value its unique vibration—the easier it becomes for me to drop into wordlessness.

Auricular Acupuncture

In my experience as an Auricular specialist working with people in harm reduction programs, much of the feedback we hear is how with Acudetox they were able, for the first time, to quiet their minds without a pill or a drink. We don't call Acudetox "meditation," but that is essentially how it is described and experienced by many people. As the National Acupuncture Detoxification Association explains, an important purpose of this practice is to "create a zone of peace within which patients can begin to experience their own inner

strengths.”⁷

Sometimes these “zones of peace” are attained with practices we don’t often consider meditative. One such practice is movement. My partner says I go into a kind of meditative trance when I’m dancing. I’ve always said dancing to reggae helps me feel my soul. It is a time when I have no thoughts beyond the present, and I’m totally in the moment. It’s when I most feel oneness—bigger than myself, but also completely in myself. In the movie *Billy Elliot*, when a 12-year old from an English mining town is trying out for an elite ballet school, his audition panel asks him what it feels like when he dances. He responds “I dunno...sort of feels good. Sort of stiff, but once I get going I like forget everything. Then I sort of disappear...like I feel a change in me whole body, like I got this fire in me body. Just there, flying, like a bird...like electricity. Yeah, like electricity.” When I saw that scene, I felt for the first time someone was speaking my language, someone who understood exactly what dancing meant to me. It often feels so electric, I practically leave my body. Dance is part of my meditation. Dance is a meditative practice. In the Sufi tradition, for example, dance is identified as meditation.⁸

“Dance and movement are my primary forms of meditation and transformation,” says Sarah Sidelko, co-creator of *Fender Bender*, a bicycle education and training collective by and for self-identified women, transgender individuals, and members of the gender-queer community in Detroit, Michigan. For Sarah’s personal healing process, dance (which she does collectively with the *Detroit Dance Project*) was an essential piece of a larger, holistic approach to healing. “It’s one of the most amazing things that has ever happened to me. When I can dance with other people, we share energy, messages, information important to our spiritual growth. We recognize things we wouldn’t without each other. Our hearts connect.” Sarah has been in cognitive therapy for three years, in addition to personal somatic therapy, emotional freedom technique (EFT), and six years of naturopathic medicine for PTSD and adrenal fatigue. “It’s only been recently in my life that I’ve been able to meditate. Dance has helped me ‘be in’ my body. It has been my form of meditation, and at the same time dance helped lay the foundation for me to now come to silent, sitting meditation.” In Sarah’s case, dance mediation was her guide toward sitting meditation. For others, dance meditation can be the primary path for their own spiritual growth, healing, and transformation. Recognizing that meditation comes in a variety of forms and techniques can help expand narrow definitions and perceptions, which can allow for a diversity of experiences and paths that may lead to personal and spiritual growth

While dance can give individuals the space needed to be in their bodies, at other times our bodies may need a more cathartic, yet still relaxing practice so we can release strong emotions. In the mid-1990s some Detroit residents organized a Monday night collective event called “Noise Night” at Alvin’s, a college bar near Wayne State University. The organizers provided buckets, sticks, various percussive items, and there were also some traditional drums available. The participants would drum and beat on anything. It was a communal meditative process for people to come together and release energy, to use percussion and noise as a tool to let emotions or bottled up feelings out. Some would describe it as a drum circle, but it was designed to be more free, accessible, and, as the name implies, noisy.

Something like a “Noise Night” might seem more cathartic than meditative, but for some participants the practice definitely resonated as a kind of meditation. I should also mention

that more cathartic therapies, such as laughter, are important to consider as first steps that might allow us to be silent and quiet later on in our healing process. Laughter can bring clarity and relieve stress; it specifically releases anxiety, anger and boredom, and has the added benefit of being a pleasurable experience.

Writing is also a powerful meditative practice. Writer Joy Castro speaks of writing as a way for us to “manage painful truths” as well being both a great pleasure and source of power. “Hearing our own voices and exploring our own thoughts in a noisy world is such a soothing, beautiful, private thing that writing allows us to do.”⁹ There are many more alternative meditative practices we could add or imagine than those I’ve discussed. But I wanted to provide a few examples of other practices that can help us broaden the definition of meditation to include things we may not think of—things we have access to in our everyday lives that can help begin the process of demystifying what seems unattainable about many healing practices. Understanding and celebrating meditation as a valuable practice, can we at the same time expand our understanding of this powerful tool to include a wider range of practices, and to be accountable for creating truly supportive spaces for a variety of people (ie: people with disabilities or chronic illnesses, LGBTQI, People of Color, elders, youth, those new to the practice and more)? And can we as health practitioners and as society in general, recognize that not everyone is in a place where they can just meditate as the practice is commonly understood?

In 2012, I did an eight-day urban retreat with Center for Whole Communities. The retreat slowly introduced us to sitting group meditation. We started with walking meditation – quietly observing our surroundings, having meals together in silence, sharing stories of identity and history, engaging in fun activities like a three-mile bike tour, and later coming together in reflection and sitting meditation. The meditation teacher, Anushka Fernando-pulle, led most of the sitting group meditations. Anushka participated in all the activities with us throughout the retreat; having the time to get to know her and one another before being still together felt like a more nurturing way to approach sitting meditation. That model was a powerful example of taking time and intentional steps to cultivate both emotional and collective harmony. Anushka is also a teacher for the weekly Monday night sitting group meditations at San Francisco’s LGBTQ Sangha Center. The Sangha Center is a no-cost, donation-based meditation group. One line from their website struck me: “If you are new to meditation, you are welcomed to approach one of us for guidance and instructions to begin a meditation practice...”¹⁰ Having met Anushka, and having the opportunity to spend some time with her before we went into practice, I understood how beneficial it can be to have this kind of support when a person in need is just beginning, support in which people take the time to explain the process. This supportive approach can foster more effective long-term practice and help people feel much more at ease with their level of knowledge and learning process.

I view a more expansive definition of meditation through the Healing Justice framework, identified by Cara Page for the USSF Healing Justice Practice Space: how can we “holistically respond to and intervene in generational trauma and violence to bring collective practices that can impact and transform the consequences of oppression on our bodies, hearts and minds”?¹¹ Let us take steps that lead powerfully into meditation, recognizing where individuals are personally, working on trepidation and fear, and creating the space to ex-

press pain in their own way, rather than leaving people traumatized from the experience and never going back to it. "One of the most important things is to be safe," says Diana. "Even if you expect to be uncomfortable, and meditation can be uncomfortable." When meditation is made available from a place of compassion, humility, accessibility, and safety, the nurturing and healing is sustained and felt long after.

Notes

1. My own deep practice has included acupuncture to release stuck and stagnant emotion, daily journaling, regular yoga practice, new food lifestyle, placitas (heart-to-heart talks), temazcals, learning to be still, and eventually coming to sitting meditation.
2. Laura Luna, "Q&A with Queer Xicana-Indígena Artist Adelina Anthony," *xQsi Magazine*, May 30, 2012, accessed January 27, 2013, <http://xqsimagazine.com/2012/05/30/qa-with-queer-xicana-indigena-artist-adelina-anthony/>.
3. Malidoma Somé, "Between Two Worlds: Malidoma Somé on Rites of Passage," *SUN Magazine*, July 2010, excerpts from interview with Leslie Goodman: <http://archive.constantcontact.com/fs012/1101454195791/archive/1103527100328.html>
4. Cara Page is a Black queer artist, organizer, and healing arts practitioner in the South. She is building regional and national healing and leadership collaborations through her independent company, Deeper Waters LLC, and is co-founder and coordinator of Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective.
5. "Meditation," The Free Online Dictionary by Farlex, accessed, May 22, 2013, <http://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/meditation>.
6. "Temazcal," Wikipedia, accessed May 22, 2013, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tamazcal>.
7. "What is the Spirit of NADA?", National Acupuncture Detoxification Association, accessed January 27, 2013, <http://www.acudetox.com/nada-protocol/about-nada.html>.
8. "Dance Meditation," Wikipedia, accessed, April 13, 2013, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dancemeditation>.
9. Mandy Van Deven, "Born Again: A Conversation with Joy Castro," *In the Fray*, last modified January 25, 2013, accessed, January 27, 2013, <http://inthe fray.org/2013/01/born-again-joy-castro/>.
10. San Francisco LGBTQ Sangha@The Center, n.d., accessed January 27, 2013, <http://www.maxkelly.info/sangha.html>.
11. Cara Page, "Reflections from Detroit: Transforming Wellness & Wholeness," Last modified August 5, 2010, accessed, January 25, 2013, <http://inciteblog.wordpress.com/2010/08/05/reflections-from-detroit-transforming-wellness-wholeness/>.