

Stillness and Silence

An Essential Aspect of the Curriculum

As my Year 8 students entered the classroom the following discussion ensued. "When are we going to meditate sir?" says Jonathan, with a cheeky grin that I interpret as an attempt to get out of doing work. Other more responsible students join in the chorus... "We haven't meditated for ages!" I have just had four teaching periods in a row and so I respond half-heartedly, "We did it last term, remember, out on the oval.... we will do a meditation later in the term" Ashleigh chimes in, "But, we just had an exam, sir, can we please meditate?". This interaction is not untypical of an average Year 8-12 class at Westminster School. Over the past three years we have developed a very popular and successful program that takes seriously the students' need to appreciate and value stillness in their lives. Some of the features of this program are outlined below.

I emphasise the importance of silence and stillness by reminding my students of the stress and pressure on them. For example, an average school day for an average Year 11 student involves an early morning wake up, some organisational chores, lessons and lectures, noise and busyness throughout the day, co-curricular activities during and after school, more chores and 4-6 hours of homework and television (2-3 hours of HW if they are doing the required amount in Year 11) before they flop into bed. Added to this is the stress of physiological and psychological changes associated with late adolescence. Primary school students' lives are no less stressful and frenetic. Current statistics and trends suggest that one in five of our students will suffer from a serious mental illness at one point in their lives. This is a poignant reminder of the importance of encouraging good mental health by teaching student's strategies and techniques that will enable them to take time out from the busyness of their lives for 'stillness and silence'.

Benefits of exposing students to a program of silence and stillness include;

- helping students to focus and concentrate.
- reducing irritability.
- dealing with stress related headaches.
- resting the mind from thinking about the problems that cause stress.
- giving the body time to relax and recuperate and clear away toxins that may have built up through stress and mental or physical activity.
- slowing breathing.
- helping muscles relax.
- reducing anxiety.

- allowing for creativity.
- reducing blood pressure (all of the above applies to the teacher as well)

Stillness and Silence also enables children, young adults and adults to piece together aspects of their experience, to map their own values and meanings as a guide to their journey. Essentially the idea of meditation is to focus your thoughts on one relaxing thing for a sustained period of time.

Meditation

We are by no means experts in the field but at Westminster we have developed a programme that allows for the use of meditation with Years 3-12.

For those who are unfamiliar with the use of meditation with students the following ideas may be helpful.

How do I begin?

Location is very important. A quiet and spacious place in your school is ideal. Outside on the grass can be good if weather permits. Otherwise use a classroom by moving the desks aside. I have an area in my classroom



with beanbags. Sometimes we use a large carpeted area at the front of our school chapel. Play some soft music if possible at the start. We use "Enya" or an instrumental version of "John Michael Talbot". Most ABC shops have excellent array of relaxation albums.

Posture is important. I find lying down works best. Or the beanbags work well. Some occasionally fall to sleep but usually it is a light sleep where they participate in the visualisations anyway. Shoes off, if possible. If sitting then ideally this should be with backs against a wall with legs crossed and hands in their laps. If lying down students should be on their backs in order to allow for relaxed breathing exercises.

These simple breathing exercises are always a good way to start. The first time you do it, keep it brief. The initial meditation should take about 8-15 minutes. Eventually students should be able to cope with 30-40 minutes of meditation

When the students are settled ask them to close their eyes and focus their attention on their breathing. Explain that we are going to use our breathing as a way of relaxing those parts of our body where tension is stored.

(Speaking slowly) Fill your lungs with air and hold it for a few seconds....then as you breath out slowly and quietly relax your shoulders (use your own breathing as a guide), then filling your lungs again and holding it.... and then as you are breathing out slowly relax your arms....your hands...your fingers)..... then filling your lungs again and holding it.... and then as you are breathing out slowly relax your legs.... feet.... toes.... then filling your lungs again and holding it.... and then as you are breathing out slowly relax your face muscles, their jaw..cheeks..eyes..temples. Your body should be feeling relaxed, light and limp by now. If there is still muscles which feel tense use your breathing to relax that part of your body.

Another place where we store tension is in our mind. We are going to have a time of silence now. In that time I want you to focus on the word 'peace' Using your breathing again, allow your mind to relax. Each time a worrying or fearful thought comes into your mind use your breathing to let go of that thought and as you are breathing in replace it with a calm and peacefulness.

If your students are not familiar with meditation a breathing exercise can be good to start with. Leave the imaginary exercise below till later.

To finish off... fill, your lungs againand then slowly breathing out. Then in your own

time feel free to open your eyes and to sit up.

After the meditation ask students how it went. What was good and what was not so good. Make sure you include those who seldom say much...I usually get everyone to make at least a non-verbal response by nodding or shaking their head in response to the question. "Did you find the exercise helped you relax?"

Visualisations

Now we are going to focus on allowing our mind to relax by doing an imaginary exercise. (The following visualisations are adapted from the book "The Inner Garden" by Maureen Garth.)

After using the breathing exercise above instead of reflecting on the word peace I invite them to relax their mind by imagining themselves in a garden setting;

Imagine yourself walking down a path until you come to a closed gate that leads into a garden. You try to open the gate but it appears to be locked. You notice a large tree nearby. As you walk closer to the tree you notice pieces of paper pinned onto its trunk and a sign beneath saying, "Worry tree". You can leave behind any worries here, anything that might be concerning you, perhaps you have problems with school work or maybe difficulties in your

personal life. This tree will take any worries at all, no matter how big or small. This tree accepts anything that you care to place there.

Finding a piece of paper and a pen by the tree take some time now to write down your worries, and then see yourself pinning the piece of paper on the trunk of the tree left and as you do feel the weight of those worries being taken off your shoulders. Feeling a little lighter, less burdened, see yourself now walking towards the gate and finding the gate unlocked.... enter the garden now, closing the gate firmly behind you. As you do the colours of the garden spring to life, colours like nothing you have seen before....the beauty of the flowers.... the textures.... the scent. Take a few moments to indulge your senses. The grass is a vivid green. Feel the grass between your toes. In the distance is a beautiful blue sky with white fluffy clouds floating gently by. Birds gliding through the open sky in the distance...and nearby a large and stunning butterfly flutters from flower to flower. The warmth of the sun seems to be reenergizing you and brings bringing brightness and lightness to every part of your being. It is very peaceful in your garden, full of joy and harmony....



This will be sufficient for the first time you do a visualisation but later you can build on this by using visualisations that deal with such themes as overcoming obstacles, dealing with exam pressure and peer pressure etc. Further visualisations can be found on the website; www.dialogueaustralasia.org

Having spent some time in the garden, aware that you can return here anytime, see yourself now walking out of the gate and closing the gate behind you again notice the worry tree off to the side of the path. It is up to you, you can leave the worry behind or, now that you have had some time out, you might feel strong enough to deal with it, in which case see yourself returning to the worry tree and taking back the piece of paper that you pinned there not so long ago. Returning to the path... walking slowly now away from the garden.... With each step you feel a growing sense of confidence and courage to deal with whatever comes your way. A sense of calm resolve is now coming over you, as you bring your attention back to where we are now. The sounds, smells and images that are part of your school life.

To finish off... fill, your lungs again.... and then slowly breathing out. Then in your own time feel free to open your eyes and to sit up.

Again after the meditation ask students how it went. What was good and what was not so good? "Did you find the exercise helped you relax?" "What did the garden look like?" "Was the worry tree helpful?" What images came to your mind? What colour(s) were the butterfly's wings? (I once had a Year 11 student who saw a dolphin in her garden.) After discussing the meditation ask students to get up slowly...not to jump up.

Year 12 Testaments

Year 12 students also regularly ask to do meditations. We have fortnightly, fifty minute, Religious Education periods with Year 11 & 12 at Westminster and while it is difficult to structure lessons with so little time, these periods offer ideal opportunities for reflection and relaxation. After each meditation a journal entry is made and these are collected and collated at the end of the year in booklets called; "My Year 12 Testament". Each Year 12 student has their own Testament that will be presented at a valedictory service. While we do meditations with all year levels only the Year 12 students have a Testament that include regular journal entries. Their personal journal reflections are private and are only

added to their Testaments at the end of the year.

During Term 3, Year 12 students are given the opportunity to write in each Year 12 students Testament. They are invited to wish the students well for the future and write their own personal reflections on experiences that they have shared together over their time at school. In essence students are invited to affirm each other in writing. Students are told beforehand that teachers will not be reading their comments, but if other students are concerned that the comments are hurtful then they will be invited to rewrite their comment.

Overall the exercise is extremely positive with students delighting in the reflections made by their peers. It is not unusual for students to be brought to tears (of joy) when they read their own Testament. And they are very excited to see what has been written during the course of their final semester. It is hoped that every student in their year group will at least have the opportunity to write in each booklet and that it will provide them with a record of their experiences and larger lessons that they have learnt over their lives so far, a record they can read and reread in the years to come.

A recent and poignant addition to these Testaments this year has been a love letter from their parents. To help make these reflections more complete and meaningful we asked Year 12 parents to write a letter to their son or daughter. In essence we asked parents to write a letter of love, which accounted for how loving the student has changed them. Parents were asked not write of their disappointments, but rather the good changes that their son/daughter have made to their lives so far. Some parents found this a difficult exercise, but all agreed that it was very worthwhile. Students received this letter from their parents, together with their Testament as they reached an important transition point in their lives.

Prayer

"Silence and Stillness" is woven into the curriculum throughout Reception-Year 12, however, in Year 9 we pick up on the philosophical problems with petitionary prayer. "If God could act to cure a child at Lourdes or even help a person in some trivial way, why doesn't God also intervene in Stalin's death camps, the Kobe earthquake, the Holocaust or on September 11th in New York? Year 9's enjoy this level of philosophical debate as we explore answers to the various



issues raised. This leads on to a study of the different types of prayer and then the art of writing our own prayers. Here we use famous prayers, St Francis's Prayer, The Lord's Prayer etc as the focus of our meditations. In the past I have found Year 9 to be the most difficult year group to teach, but I have to say that by including times of 'stillness and silence', I now find this Year level most rewarding.

I hope that some of the ideas mentioned above might be helpful as you try to develop this difficult but essential educational strand into your curriculum.

In case you were wondering what happened at the end of the Year 8 class I mentioned at the beginning of this article. "Well... perhaps just a short meditation". (I think I needed it more than they did!)

RESOURCES FOR TEACHING SILENCE AND STILLNESS

- Michael Beesley
Celebrating With Silence Southgate (1993)
- Joseph Cornell
Sharing Nature with Children Exley Publications (1989)
- Jennifer Day Creative
Visualisation with Children Element (1994)
- Anthony De Mello SJ
The Song of the Bird Gujarat Sahitya Prakesh 1987
- Anthony De Mello SJ
Sadhana – A Way to God Image Books (1984)
- Anthony De Mello SJ
Wellsprings Gujarat Sahitya Prakesh 1989
- Maureen Garth
The Inner Space The Art of Inner Learning, Meditations for Students of Life Harper Collins Melbourne 1995
- Maureen Garth
The Inner Garden Meditations for Life from 9-90 Harper Collins Melbourne 1994
- John Hammond
New Methods in RE Teaching – An Experiential Approach Oliver & Boyd (1990)
- David Hay & Rebecca Nye
The Spirit of the Child Fount (1998)
- Mark Link
YouPrayers for Beginners and Those who have forgotten How Argus Com 1976
- Maureen Murdoch
Spinning Inwards Shambala (1987)
- Wanda Nash
People Need Stillness Darton, Longman & Todd
- Mary Stone
"Don't Just Do Something, Sit There" Mary Stone Religious & Moral Education Press (1995)
- Handouts from the "**Stillness and Silence**" Conferences held in each Australian state in 2000 are an excellent resource. These were put together by Dr Peter Vardy Heythrop College London and Judy Grill from Churcher's College Petersfield, Hampshire, England .

Matthew Wills
Westminster School
South Australia

