Now You Get to Raise Yourself: A Creative, Autoethnographic Inquiry into Wellness

by

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Abstract

This paper is an autoethnographic study on how myself and others in the Boone community define and enact wellness. This paper explores the myriad ways in which wellness becomes integrated into one's life. My body of research includes key academic texts and studies related to the theme of wellness, literature I have found essential in my own search for wellness, and numerous in-depth, interpersonal interviews with varied participants.

This project is a creative, literary-style, and reflexive blend of my experience with wellness and the insights from my interviews and literature review. Each informs the other and culminates in an ethnographic account that synthesizes a broad swath of topics that fall under the term of wellness (including the emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual characteristics of the term). This project also brings together my educational background (in communication studies and English) and a research orientation that finds productive overlaps between the personal, cultural, aesthetic, and scientific, following a rich transdisciplinary trend of narrative and ethnographic research in the academy.

Methodological Preface

I chose to make my honors college thesis project an autoethnography because of Dr. Chris Patti's class, "Ethnographic Storytelling" that I enrolled in my junior year. Dr. Patti wrote in his introductory e-mail to the class:

> Welcome back, and welcome to our class. We're in for an adventure this semester-- one that is somewhere between an Indiana Jones movie, a day at the library, and a feverish night in front of a blank computer screen in the throes of attempts to conjure a story. That's about the best I can explain ethnographic storytelling in a sentence.

As a creative writing major most interested in creative nonfiction, I was interested in a form of writing that was based in experiential field work (the Indiana Jones bit) and hard research (the days at the library) – that could also marry with a poetic voice reflecting more unified kinds of knowledge. My sensibilities guided me to write in a liminal space between "science" and "story." This idea is well-exemplified by the groundbreaking work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz. In his classic article, "Deep play: notes on the Balinese cockfight", Geertz writes:

> Every people, the proverb has it, loves its own form of violence. The cockfight is the Balinese reflection on theirs: on its look, its uses, its force, its fascination . . . it brings together themes – animal savagery, male narcissism, opponent gambling, status rivalry, mass excitement, blood sacrifice – whose main connection is their involvement with rage and the fear of rage, and, binding them into a set of rules which at once contains them and allows them play, builds a symbolic structure in which, over and over again, the reality of their inner affiliation can be intelligibly felt. If, to quote Northrop Frye again, we go to see *Macbeth* to learn what a man feels like

after he has gained a kingdom and lost his soul, Balinese go to cockfights to find out

what a man, usually composed, aloof, almost obsessively self-absorbed, a kind of

moral autocosm, feels like when, attacked, tormented, challenged, insulted, and

driven in result to the extremes of fury, he has totally triumphed or been brought

totally low (Geertz 84).

Geertz's assertions in this passage are not all strictly scientific, they are humanistic.

Although it takes a rational sense to understand, record, and sort observations of Balinese

culture and ritual, it takes a less quantitative and more poetic kind of intelligence and

representation to impress upon the reader what the Balinese cockfight *feels* like to the

participants and observers. In turn, how that feeling communicates what is at stake for the

Balinese during a cockfight—and what this "meta-social commentary" (Geertz 82) might

teach us about "ourselves"—back in the 50s when Geertz was there, in the 70s when his

piece came to scholarly attention and popularity, and even "today," decades later, as students

across the academy interested in experiential knowledge invariably face his work in classes

like Dr. Patti's.

For our final projects in the ethnographic storytelling class, each student was tasked with

designing his/her own ethnography. In choosing our ethnographies, Dr. Patti encouraged

students to think of questions that have been central to many of our life experiences, and in

the same way that Geertz examined what was at stake for the Balinese man in Balinese

rituals, he encouraged us to ask ourselves what has been at stake in the questions we asked

throughout our own life journeys.

The questions that I felt were (and still are) central to my life experience circle around a

quest for "well-being."

Behind much of my experience in college I've been interested in trying to understand our limited, human perspective more honestly, and in turn how understanding those truths have implications for the way we treat ourselves and others. My project became about learning what it takes to *be well*. The focal creative research question became, "What is well-being and how can I, and others, cultivate well-being in the chaotic and often senselessly violent world in which we live?" Wanting to use and pull from my own experiences, Dr. Patti directed me towards autoethnography – a form of ethnographic storytelling that allowed me to critically examine my own experiences and perceptions of those experiences. Craig Gingrich-Philbrook, professor of communication studies at Southern Illinois University, writes,

> Though sometimes thought of as a 'method,' autoethnography strikes me more as a broad orientation toward scholarship than a specific procedure. A primary component of this orientation involves an association with Michel Foucault's notion of subjugated knowledge – ways of knowing, lost arts, and records of encounters with power (Gingrich-Philbrook 98).

Foucault describes subjugated knowledge as, "a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity. . . such as that of the psychiatric patient, of the ill person, of the nurse . . ." (Foucault 82). Although subjugated knowledge may not be strictly quantifiable, that it is not to say that subjugated knowledge is without meaning. The psychiatric patient's knowledge of her/his own reality gives meaning just as the scientists who create psychiatric drugs give other meanings. The subjugated knowledge that is each unique human experience is what gives

autoethnography its richness and depth, and it speaks back, and adds new voices, to more traditional, authoritative and disciplinary knowledges.

The methods I've used to create this (auto)ethnographic inquiry have largely been taken from my class textbook, Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance by D. Soyini Madison. First, I began this project by conducting introspective research. This involved having conversations with close friends and family on particularly formative experiences, reviewing old journals, and using my notes from these encounters to do a lot of free writing about different facets of wellness. The only rule of free writing is that the writer must keep his/her hand moving at all times, with no regard for accuracy or a logical flow of ideas. Madison writes, "The purpose in keeping the hand moving is not to be in the frustrating position of creating ideas *and* editing them at the same time. Let the editor in you rest for a while and let the playful creator be free to express itself on the playing field of the page" (Madison 216). By free-writing for multiple twenty minute sessions, I began to see which of my personal experiences were central to this ethnography, and how these experiences connected to each other.

Second, I began to conduct interviews on the topic of wellness. Each person I chose to interview acted as a mentor to me during my time in college, helping to foster growth that I felt was central to this project. The interviews were centered around the interviewee's formative experiences with learning to take care of themselves. Although I created a list of seven or eight questions, the conversations led to other places naturally, and so the content of the interviews varies greatly under the broad umbrella term of wellness. I incorporated two forms of the ethnographic interview – personal narrative and topical – during the interview process. Interview participants included Professor Kirsten Jorgenson, Dr. Thomas

McLaughlin, Dr. Chris Patti, and Professor Marianne Adams (see Appendix A, "Notes on Interviewing").

Madison writes, ". . . critical ethnography reflects deeper truths than the need for verifiable facts and information. The beauty of this method of interviewing is in the complex realms of individual subjectivity, memory, yearnings, polemics, and hope that are unveiled and inseparable from shared and inherited expressions of communal strivings, social history, and political possibility" (Madison 28). Marinating in these "complex realms" helped me to make many of the connections that deepened my research. Not only did these interviews help to elaborate upon topics that I was already focused on, they also informed one another, creating connections between ideas that I hadn't found. For instance, Foucault's concept of "regimen" that Dr. McLaughlin discussed was related to the Buddhist notion of sacred routine that was discussed in several other interviews. "Routine" eventually became one of my three subtopics. Many of the personal experiences discussed in the interviews were connected by shared themes of vulnerability and suffering that spoke to and helped shape my own personal experiences that appear in the final draft of the autoethnography. After the introspective research and interviews were completed, I began the literature review portion of this project. The research chosen helped to augment, inform, and often change the trajectory of the autoethnography. In the story that follows, I weave in the literature most salient to my project, in order to broaden and connect my perspective to the many others working on the theme of wellness.

This concluded the data collection process, and I began to code the data. Madison writes, "coding and logging data is the process of grouping together themes and categories that you have accumulated in the field" (Madison 43). After compiling the introspective

research, interview transcripts, and literature review notes, I began to sort the data topically –

physically cutting apart pieces of data and experimenting with how best to organize them.

My first topic list included: routine, loving-kindness, vulnerability, shame, women-specific

wellness techniques, exercise, sleep, food, familial structures of health, importance of play,

and failure's relationship to wellness. Per my advisor's suggestions, I narrowed down the

topics until I came up with a shorter list that I could feasibly write under the inherent

restraints of a thesis. This list eventually became the three sections to my paper: space,

routine, and *Maitri*. After choosing my topics and leaving much of the data behind, I began

the process of making a "muse map" (Madison 212) – picking my way through the web of

connections in the data trying to form a coherent and "authentic" story—one that

meaningfully represented my experience, insights, and struggles—one that felt "real." My

hope is that it resonates with readers of this thesis and allows me to continue moving forward

on this journey of well-being.

Between Stimulus and Response

To know the spirit of a place is to realize that you are a part of a part and that the whole is made of parts, each of which is whole. You start with the part you are whole in.

-    Gary Snyder

During a creative writing class my sophomore year of college, I wrote a story about a college girl, Kate, who tried to balance schoolwork while caring for her grief-stricken father. Kate runs around like a superhero, trying to clean up her father's life and her own, not accepting help from anyone. When my story was work shopped in class, the professor looked up at me with a puzzled expression and said, "The question that is haunting this whole story is, who takes care of Kate?"

I looked down at my tan, plastic desk and couldn't come up with an answer. I felt stricken, but not sure why. Back in my dorm room, I stared at the tiled ceiling, the professor's question haunting me. *Who takes care of Kate? Why was I blind to the fact that no one in the story takes care of Kate?* My professor found the characterization of Kate unrealistic and her resilience inhuman. I hadn't been able to respond to my professor's question because Kate's self-reliance wasn't my own careful, intentional choice in her character development. Instead I had written, like the writing maxim says, exactly what I knew, drawing from my experience. I found it difficult to ask others for help, so Kate's self-reliance didn't seem strange to me. When my professor drew attention to it, I was forced to pause and reflect on the idealized standards to which I held myself.

This moment of pause became the birthplace of personal growth. I look back on this moment as resonant with the following unknown author's quote: "Between stimulus and response, there is space. In that space lies our freedom and our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our happiness." Although I've thoroughly searched for the original source of this quote, the best information I could find was that the quote is adapted from the teachings of Viktor Frankl - neurologist, psychiatrist, and Holocaust survivor (Pattakos VI). Before college, my habitual response to feeling overwhelmed was to push deeper inside myself, pull myself up by my intrapersonal boot-straps, and overcome the challenge – never asking others for help or sharing the hard time that I was going through. In Frankl's sense, I was not finding the space between stimulus and response where I could choose to act differently. My professor's comment in class created that space and allowed me to see that I could choose something different when I was, like Kate, trying to handle too much by myself.

During this moment of self-examination, I experienced my emotional state very directly. It was uncomfortable. I had to face my own loneliness, uncertainty, and limitations. Pushing these unsettling feelings away with distracting cat videos failed me. Some of my ego was wrapped up in being an independent, perfectionistic achiever who didn't need anybody else. Thinking of changing these habits and self-concepts made my stomach hurt. Luckily, during this time a friend recommended the books of the Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön. In Taking the Leap, she writes of an analogy used by her teachers to "describe the challenge of staying present to life's discomfort" (Chödrön 15):

> Humans are like young children who have a bad case of poison ivy. Because
> we want to relieve the discomfort, we automatically scratch, and it seems a

perfectly sane thing to do. In the face of anything we don't like, we

automatically try to escape. . . We don't know yet that when we scratch, the

poison ivy spreads. Pretty soon we're scratching all over our body and rather

than finding relief, we find that our discomfort is escalating (Chödrön 15).

My whole body was itching, and I could choose to deal with it differently or keep on

"scratching" in harmful ways. On my research journey into this issue, I spoke with Kirsten

who shared a moment in college when she too realized she was trying to find relief in

counterproductive ways. Kirsten grew up in a stereotypical, "buttoned down, cold"

Midwestern family. In her family, emotions were dangerous. Growing up, she "learned from

a really early age to be a balancer in my family. I learned that to take care of myself was to

try to take care of everybody else around me. Which, thirty-three years later I'm realizing

isn't actually taking care of myself" (Jorgenson, see Appendix A). She goes on to describe

how this led to a lot of control issues, and eventually an eating disorder. At the height of the

disorder, she came to the realization that, "I'm going to die if I keep doing this. Literally. I

was existing on 500 calories a day and working out insanely just so I could feel like

everything's completely in control. So I decided to stop doing that."

It helps me to know that others struggle with learning how to sit with uncomfortable

feelings. Experiencing the sadness and loneliness that I had been carrying with me wasn't

pleasant, but looking back I can see that it marked the beginning of a healthier way of dealing

with wounds. Mary Pipher, writer and therapist, wrote that, "I [use] the metaphor of a cut

finger to discuss the importance of allowing oneself to experience feelings. I would say to a

middle aged banker ashamed of his tears, 'If you cut your finger it bleeds. You may not like

blood, but it is the way healthy bodies deal with wounds'" (Pipher 64). Although I have

repeatedly referred to sitting with my feelings of sadness and loneliness as unpleasant, it was also coupled with a sensation of relief – the large amount of energy it took to resist my own feelings wasn't needed anymore.

My resolve to change how I valued and thought about taking care of myself sharpened. One of the ways I began to take care of myself was by taking better care of my relationships with other people. However, I began to find that conflicting messages from society sometimes hindered that process. Phillip Slater posits in his book, The Pursuit of Loneliness, that Americans, more than any other citizenry in the world, refuse to accept human interdependence. In his words: "Even within the family Americans are unique in their feeling that each member should have a separate room, and even a separate telephone, television, and car . . . We seek more and more privacy, and feel more and more alienated and lonely when we get it" (Slater 7).

Loneliness is also physically dangerous for humans. According to Holt-Lunstad at Brigham Young University, "Social isolation significantly predicts risk for premature mortality comparable to other well established risk factors. Thus, we need to take our social relationships as seriously for our health as we do these other factors" (as cited by Parker-Pope). Furthermore, researchers at the Center for Cognitive and Social Neuroscience have concluded that loneliness is self-perpetuating (Cacioppo 213). Therefore, engaging in the American cultural practice of extreme privacy and independence (relative to much of the rest of the world), is a behavior with the potential to seriously debilitate one's health and even threatens our cultural health. Spending time with loved ones is just as important to one's health as exercising. On days where that truth is difficult for me, I remind myself that I am neuro-biologically wired to need other people and that it's okay to not be enough for myself

all the time. In Snyder's language, it's okay to be just a part, and not the whole, and, as a

part, I am always-already part of that whole.

Routine

Choosing to write a section about routine, I am aware that I risk sounding drab. We all already know that we should eat right, exercise, and sleep more, right? It used to be that when somebody gave me this advice, I internally rolled my eyes. I felt beat over the head with these "helpful strategies" and "life hacks." I had heard them so much that they became empty words only embodied by perfect people who wanted to make me feel bad. Never mind the fact that on the occasion that I did work out or get a good night's sleep or have a balanced meal, I felt a lot better. For a long time, I didn't make self-care a priority, and so didn't have enough motivation to seriously incorporate those good habits.

I started thinking differently about routine when not having one got more in the way of my life than having one. When my course load increased and I simultaneously got a job, I couldn't do assignments the night before and get a good grade anymore. If I didn't plan my time, I couldn't do my one job (to get through college). It took me one over-worked, over-stressed semester and a failed class to come to the realization that something in my habits wasn't working for me. This is when I started to attempt to understand routine and create one of my own in the process.

Dr. McLaughlin said,

> I like to think that having a structure allows me to adjust to either external events that are a challenge or an internal desire for variety and weirdness. The image I have is 'stance.' Stance is really important to me in my physical life. I like to have my weight over my feet. I like to be solid on the earth. I've thought about this a lot from years of yoga and tai chi and dance and basketball. I like to have core strength, to be strong through my center and to be firmly placed on the ground. Then you can move with

speed when you have to, because you're grounded. And that's a metaphor for me too, not just a physical situation.

I didn't yet know how to have the grounded-ness that Dr. McLaughlin spoke about, but I knew that I sought a structure or "stance" that could help me navigate college in a better way than I had been. The Oxford English Dictionary defines stance as, "an attitude in relation to a particular object of contemplation; a policy, 'posture' ("stance, n.2."). One's own stance is the first thing that life challenges will come into contact with -both physically and emotionally - and so intentionally cultivating this physical and emotional stance (or choosing not to intentionally cultivate it) significantly affects how one reacts to life. Although at the time I had not yet formed language for why I wanted routine in the way that Dr. McLaughlin had, I felt a pull to shake up and reorganize my lifestyle.

I looked at my schedule and decided that every morning I would get up at 7:30. I'd make myself a big breakfast, go to bed by eleven, work out in the long break between my afternoon classes. I would be in the library from 3-6 to do homework. I'd start keeping a log of everything I bought so I could understand how to save money better. I looked at my neatly written schedule and posted it to my corkboard, thinking, "This is my new life, this is Olivia 2.0." I felt energized and inspired.

The first day of my new, sparkly, cork-boarded life, I did everything according to my schedule. The second day, I skipped the gym. The third day, I skipped the library and the gym. The fourth day I felt that Olivia 2.0 was an utter disaster, and so I missed my bedtime and wallowed, watching 4 episodes of Gilmore Girls – guiltily pressing my Cheetoh-dust encrusted fingertip on the "play next episode" button. Throughout the coming weeks, I went through several of these cycles. Some mornings I'd wake up and commit myself to another

life overhaul. Full of zeal I'd go about my business and usually manage to have one day

where I met my perfectionistic standards. But always the moment came where I deviated

from my Ultra-Life-Plan, and I'd feel like everything was hopeless, especially me. Then

came the Cheetoh-dust portion of this toxic cycle.

Looking back now, I can laugh at how intense I could be (although sometimes I still

catch myself in a frenzied panic, whipping up another one of those Achieve-Everything-or-

Die life plans), but it took some help, and I'm no longer unaware of these cycles. Some of

that help came from Jon Kabat-Zinn's book, Full Catastrophe Living, a book recommended

by my eventual thesis advisor Dr. Chris Patti. During this time of trying to figure out how to

help myself, I came across this passage:

> . . . at those times when you are feeling completely overwhelmed by the pressures in
>
> your life and you see your own efforts as ineffectual, it is very easy to fall into
>
> patterns of what is called *depressive rumination*, in which your unexamined thought
>
> processes wind up generating increasingly persistent feelings of inadequacy,
>
> depression, and helplessness. Nothing will seem controllable or even worth trying to
>
> control. . . When things do feel 'under control,' we might feel content for a moment.
>
> But when they go out of control again, or even *seem* to be getting out of control, our
>
> deepest insecurities can erupt. At such times we might even act in ways that are self-
>
> destructive and hurtful to others. And we will feel anything but content and at peace
>
> within ourselves (Kabat-Zinn *1i*).

This was the first time I had found language for what was happening when I would

give up on my ideal routine. Kabat-Zinn had me hooked. I read more and learned that

depressive rumination was so powerful because I was fully investing in obsessive thoughts.

Guided by Kabat-Zinn's suggestion, I began to pay more attention to the narrative that I was telling myself. I learned to observe my thoughts without being obsessively invested in them. I learned to listen to and witness myself. In those moments when I wallowed and gave up on the day because I had messed up a few times, my thought process went something like this;

> *You can't even get one day right. You really half-assed that homework today. Do you not even care about your education? You know, most people in the world aren't half as lucky as you, and yet you feel sad right now? Selfish…*

Thoughts like these were the ones that started up almost any time I made a mistake. The more I focused on them, the more I believed in them and the harder it became to get out of bed in the morning. Why start the day if it was a certainty that I'd feel inadequate and ashamed at the end of it? What really helped me was understanding more about the thoughts that were a part of depressive rumination, instead of automatically buying into them. Kabat-Zinn suggests keeping a meditation practice in order to do this. In How to Meditate, Pema Chödrön writes:

> Meditation works very directly with beginning to see what we're doing and beginning to realize that we have a choice in any moment to either return to the present or to escalate our suffering by letting our stories and thoughts take over. In any given moment, whether on the meditation cushion or in post-meditation, we begin to perceive more and more clearly – because of our meditation practice – how we are getting hooked, how we're attaching to a line of discursive thought, which is disastrous in terms of strengthening habitual patterns of suffering. We begin to see this more and more clearly, and we begin to realize that we can do something different (Chödrön 43).

Keeping in mind Chödrön's words while starting to develop my own meditation practice helped me to see space between my thoughts and the power I gave to them – the empty space that is present before I decide to attach to the line of discursive thought. Whereas before I had allowed most of my thoughts to have power over my perception of the world and myself, Chödrön revealed to me that I had a choice and that I could actually, "do something different." With this new approach to thoughts, the situation that I had been struggling with transformed from me believing myself to be ineffective in daily life to me seeing that my ineffectiveness was only a story I told myself, and in fact that story was more responsible for my struggles than my actual capabilities were.

This new knowledge changed my relationship with thoughts. For example, I gave an example earlier of depressive rumination, something I was very prone to before I started meditation. I was beating myself up and over-dramatizing occurrences in my life over and over, habitually, daily, many times throughout the day. After meditating, two things began to change about these bouts of rumination: First, I started to just notice them instead of engaging with them—in terms of mindfulness meditation, I began to notice "thinking" as "thinking." I started to notice how often I was being self-abusive. Noticing without judging the thoughts took away some of their emotional power, and it became easier to stick with my healthier routine, even if I couldn't do it perfectly. Secondly, the not-judging made it easier to start the much more difficult task of making friends with myself.

Maitri

The title of this project, "Now You Get to Raise Yourself," comes from a conversation I had with my advisor, Dr. Alexandra Hellenbrand, during freshman year of college. Upon listening to my anxieties about the future, she told me, "Don't forget to add taking care of yourself to your list of college plans. You're independent and *now you get to raise yourself*. Do it with the same care you would a small child." This was the first moment I had been exposed to the idea of intentional self-nourishment. It wasn't an easy thing to get accustomed to. Ideas like taking care of myself, slowing down, and nourishing myself all sounded kind of wimpy. I had been operating under the impression that long hot baths were for people who never got things done, and I did not want to be a hot bath type of person.

I didn't embrace the concept of intentional self-care right away because I felt that it had a close relationship with laziness. The perceived synonymy of self-care and laziness has deep cultural roots; the work ethic of the United States has been passed down from a large sect of its founders – Calvinist Puritans (Weber 77). Calvinist Puritans believed that economic success was proof that God approved of the work being done, and that enough hard work and wealth allowed one to enter into heaven (Weber 119). Given that the stakes were eternal damnation or salvation, it is easy to understand why Puritans emphasized diligence and hard work. Max Weber, author of, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, further discusses Puritan psychology:

> The Puritan, like every rational type of asceticism, tried to enable a man to maintain and act upon his constant motives, especially those which it taught him itself, against the emotions. In this formal psychological sense of the term it tried to make him into a personality. Contrary to many popular ideas, the end of this asceticism was to be

able to lead an alert, intelligent life: the most urgent task the destruction of spontaneous, impulsive enjoyment, the most important means was to bring order into the conduct of its adherents (Weber 119).

Alexis de Tocqueville famously wrote, "I see the entire destiny of America embodied in the first Puritan to land on its shores, just as the entire human race was embodied in the first man" (Tocqueville 322). Although Tocqueville wrote this in the early nineteenth century, contemporary research suggests that vestiges of the Puritan lifestyle remain in American culture. In a study conducted by Eric Luis Uhlmann and published in the Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, participants were tested in three different studies for any evidence of "implicit Puritanism in American moral cognition" (Uhlmann 312). The second study dealt specifically with the Puritan link between work and divine salvation. Participants, either American or Canadian, were assigned small mental tasks specifically framed as "work". Participants were primed before each work task with a sentence unscrambling task. Participants were tested twice, once with a scrambled sentence containing words related to salvation and again with a scrambled sentence containing non-religious, neutral words. Researchers found that American participants worked harder when primed with the scrambled sentence containing words related to salvation versus the neutral sentence. Canadian participants did not differ in performance between the scrambled sentence with religious words and non-religious words. Researchers concluded:

> The unique cultural history of the United States has continuing implications for present-day moral cognition. The judgments of contemporary Americans appear to implicitly reflect traditional Protestant-Puritan values regarding sexuality and hard

work. This is true not only of devout American Protestants, but also non-Protestant and less religious Americans (Uhlmann 319).

Considering both Weber's historical understanding of the Puritan ethic and Uhlmann's research that the Puritan ethic remains alive in contemporary American culture, one can conclude that Americans today still, to some extent, may relate hard work to salvation, believe that order and conduct are the highest attributes of a civilized society, and that spontaneity, emotions, and sensual pleasure should be rooted out of personality.

Being a direct recipient of this cultural heritage, I can understand why rest and indulging in self-nourishment (activities that contradict fundamental Puritan values) is a difficult concept for me to wrap my head around. Dr. Patti and Professor Adams also discussed trying to balance drive with rest and how difficult that can be in American culture:

Drive is good, but I think we live in a culture of overdrive, and that's a dangerous thing. . . I try to find a balance by letting myself be sad, depressed, or down if those things are there – it's okay if those things are there (Patti 9).

I was a kid in college that flunked out. I went to several schools, I started as premed, but I didn't know what the hell I wanted . . . I was into sex, drugs, and rock and roll. I felt behind my other peers and I felt stupid. But I look back now, and I don't regret any of that. . . I had to pave a way for myself . . . I think maybe more kids should flunk out. . . Parents by and large don't want to hear that. They want their kids to be in college and finish because it's 'normal'. . . But maybe it's good to spend a couple of months in the woods. . . I think we're in a society that says don't stop, for any reason (Adams 8).

The vestiges of Puritan culture remain in American society in the form of this "culture of overdrive" and in the belief that success means never stopping for any reason.

These vestiges may be making Americans sick. Slaughter writes, "For many Americans, life has become all competition all the time. Workers across the socioeconomic spectrum, from hotel housekeepers to surgeons, have stories about toiling 12 to 16 hour days (often without overtime pay) and experiencing anxiety attacks and exhaustion. Public health experts have begun talking about stress as an epidemic" (SR1). In a Pew Research study that examined parental leave policies for 41 nations, the U.S. was the only country to not mandate paid parental leave. College students report record levels of stress as student loans pile up and careers after college become more and more uncertain (Lewin A1). It is clear that something needs to shift in the way Americans think about hard work, rest, and self-nourishment. Although some of that work needs to address systemic problems– within mental health care facilities, education reform, labor reform – my own search for wellness as a college student has led me to believe that a lot of work can be done inside oneself as well. The most powerful concept I've come across to combat the stresses of life that are particularly American, like the adverse effects of our Puritanical roots, is the Buddhist concept of *Maitri*.

Maitri is the Sanskrit word for unconditional friendliness or loving-kindness ("Maitri"). Although *Maitri* is rooted in the ancient religion of Buddhism, it's applications in contemporary culture are numerous. Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a Tibetan Buddhist meditation master founded "The *Maitri* Project." The project's aim is to incorporate the concept of *Maitri* into psychological models of therapeutic healing. In its therapeutic applications, the focus is on developing *Maitri* towards oneself, and in turn towards the world. Casper further elucidates in his article, "Space Therapy and the *Maitri* Project:"

> The goal of *Maitri* therapy is to give a patient a sense of more inner space, more
>
> strength and intelligence, more acceptance of himself and the world. The clarity and

calm possible with such an inner space is the first step toward sanity . . . in a sense, the goal of *Maitri* therapy is to have the patient become more familiar and comfortable with ego, to make friends with his neurotic ways (Casper 57).

In a study conducted by the National Center for Bio-technology Information, researchers concluded that, "Loving-Kindness Meditation may provide potentially useful strategies for targeting a variety of different psychological problems that involve interpersonal processes, such as social anxiety, marital conflict, anger, and coping with the strains of long-term caregiving" (Hofmann 1126). In another study, loving-kindness meditation was connected to the lengthening of telomeres, nucleoprotein structures at the ends of chromosomes that shorten with chronic stress and mark accelerated aging (Hoge 160). Loving-kindness meditation is also making waves in education, being implemented in public schools across the country to help children "slow down and think" before reacting on overwhelming emotions (Brown A8). *Maitri* is everywhere, and incorporating it into my own life has also been a useful tool for personal transformation.

The first step for me in disengaging from a toxic cycle of depressive rumination was to begin a meditation practice. Alongside readings from Kabat-Zinn and Chödrön, I began to see my thoughts as just thoughts, and not hard, fixed realities. The next step in combating these moments of depressive rumination was to incorporate *Maitri* into my meditation practice and everyday life. Chödrön writes,

Sometimes we feel guilty, sometimes arrogant. Sometimes our thoughts and memories terrify us and make us feel totally miserable. Thoughts go through our minds all the time, and when we sit, we are providing a lot of space for all of them to arise . . . We just acknowledge them again and again with unconditional friendliness,

labeling them as just "thinking" and letting them go again and again and again (Chödrön 21).

With Chödrön's advice, I began to distance myself from the diatribe and even experiment with kinder ways of addressing myself. I can think of many times in my life that softening towards myself would have made a difficult situation much more bearable. For example, my sophomore year of college I deeply hurt a friend by miscommunicating some of my own needs in our friendship. My friend abandoned our conversation and wouldn't accept any apology. I was miserable and spent the next week trying to reach out to her while my inner dialogue was a tirade of self-deprecation. Eventually it got to the point where I skipped classes because I felt so poorly. It wasn't until much later that I was able to change my inner dialogue about that situation to something kinder: *Although I know I made some mistakes in how I communicated, I needed to talk about the issue I brought up, and I'm proud of myself for not shying away from addressing my own needs. I'm sad that she won't accept my apology, but I do feel that I've done everything I can to show her I'm sorry that I hurt her and that her feelings are important to me.* If I had spoken in this way to myself during that period of conflict, I could have skipped out on a lot of suffering instead of on my own obligations.

Being less harsh with oneself also has a positive impact on those around you. In <u>I Thought It Was Just Me</u>, Brené Brown writes,

> If, for example, we judge ourselves harshly and are incapable or unwilling to acknowledge our own emotions, we will struggle in our relationships with others. If we make a mistake and our self-talk is, 'I'm so stupid. I can't do anything right,' then we are more likely to turn to our child or partner who has made a mistake and convey

the same feelings (even if we don't say them out loud). Empathy and connection

require us to know and accept ourselves before we can know and accept others

(Brown 49).

This knowledge emphasizes the importance of self-compassion and of a meditative practice.

The practice or lack of practice will influence both the individual practicing and those around

that person.

My search for a better routine is what led me to these experiences and newfound self-

awareness. My beginning goal was to find a routine that would help me meet my

perfectionistic standards every day. Instead, I found a softer approach, one that allows and

accepts my flawed human-ness while also allowing me to strive to be better (but not perfect).

Chödrön states, "Meditation practice isn't about trying to throw ourselves away and become

something better. It's about befriending who we are already (Chödrön 11).

Accepting oneself is not something contemporary American culture teaches. This is

well-exemplified by consumer culture. According to Sheldon Garon, author of <u>Beyond Our</u>

<u>Means: Why America Spends While the World Saves</u>, Americans consume much more than

the rest of the world. He states:

> You can look at consumption levels and control for purchasing power over the last
>
> several decades, and America is simply in a league of its own. The only people who
>
> come close are people in Britain, but they are about 85 percent of the level of
>
> American consumption. Germans, French and others are in the 70 percent range,
>
> Japanese even a little lower. So Americans spend like no one else (as cited by
>
> Geewax).

Given that, "consumption is intimately tied to the creation and production of a sense of self" (Todd 48), this excess of consumption can be linked to an excess focus on the formation of individual identity – and American's high sense of individualism comparable to the rest of the world's is well documented (Luhrmann). The fact that Americans consume so much, plausibly to better their own identity, suggests that Americans believe that their own sense of self must be qualified by a collection of things – by the bigger house, nicer car, or more expensive clothes. Because there will always be something better to buy, there will always be a better identity to create for oneself. This obsession with identity qualified by product directly contradicts the goal of meditation stated above – not to focus on "[becoming] something better," but to, "[befriend] who we are already." Therefore, meditation can be a powerful tool to combat those aspects of American culture that encourage the belief that enough can't ever be enough. When asked what advice Professor Jorgenson would most like to give students, she said,

> Just you, regardless of whatever monikers you attach or shingles you hang from your door, you are enough. You don't have to have the perfect job, you don't have to have the perfect boyfriend, and you don't have to have the perfect body. You don't have to have the perfect anything. Being yourself is enough and that self doesn't have to be qualified by anything. I think this is a really important thing to cultivate, and it's really, really hard to do.

Embodying this belief, like Professor Jorgenson said, is really hard to do. For example, sometimes I can be a little fixated on clothing. I love feeling different textures of fabric when I'm shopping, I love the creative process of choosing what combination of clothes to wear, and I love finding interesting lines and shapes that clothes create on the

body. None of these things are *bad* qualities, but I have to be careful about how much of my own identity I attach to what I wear. I know that I've given away too much of my power when I spend an hour in the morning trying to decide what to wear – or when I go to the grocery store in sweatpants and feel bad about myself for that. Those moments are instances where I'm qualifying my own sense of self by something as arbitrary as the clothes that I wear that day. Dr. Patti shared another example of clinging to identity:

> Toward the end of my doctoral work, like most people, I was stressed out, not in a healthy place, and was forty pounds lighter than I am today. I decided to go see a counsellor on campus. I ended up working with an older lady that was kind of an existential, humanist therapist, and so we clicked. One of the really resonant things she said to me was, 'You're taking yourself really seriously. Stop taking yourself so goddamn seriously!' Somehow that was an awakening of 'Oh! What are you thinking? Nobody cares! You're taking yourself way too seriously!' I was clinging to this sense of self that doesn't work once we get back to ourselves on a more basic level (Patti 12).

Dr. Patti expresses the importance of letting go of identities that are too heavy and oppressive. American identity is rooted in many different things – Puritan influences, consumer culture, and individualism are just a few factors, but powerful in their effects on the way Americans construct stories about themselves and the world. Maitri and loving-kindness meditation are concepts that can act as "lens cleaners" (Patti 13) – practices that clarify one's perceptions, so that stories of identity don't become too fixed.

Conclusion: Waves in a Sea of Compassion

This project's title, "Now You Get to Raise Yourself," is a reflection on the new relationship I am learning to have with myself, one that is more careful, loving, forgiving, and willing to have a sense of humor. Having a sense of humor is one of the more important aspects of this new relationship. There is a Zen proverb that goes, "After enlightenment, the laundry." When I imagined myself graduating as a freshman, I imagined that I would *be* an enlightened adult. I would arrive in the adult world, beatific and with a gleaming smile because I floss my teeth every night. None of the messiness or laundry to deal with. Instead, this morning I meditated and later, when I was in dance class making well-intentioned but frantic, flapping movements, trying to ignore the professor's grimaces, I caught myself in a fantasy that involved knocking over one of my classmates whose utter gracefulness I found quite distressing. Some enlightenment. And I still don't floss.

I've adjusted my expectations since then. Now I don't try to find enlightenment in attaining perfection, but instead in noticing the ways I get stuck, and maybe even laughing at them. If I can laugh at jealous, victimizing thoughts in dance class, I can let go of them more easily, see them for what they are, and move on with my day in a more productive, helpful way. Noticing the impulse instead of over-identifying with it helps to stop the cycle of hurt, fearful people putting more hurt and fear into the world. It is this act of noticing that is deeply radical and deeply political.

Although this thesis is grounded in personal realization, the conclusion of this project wouldn't be complete without examining larger implications within these personal realizations.

A report published by the Syrian Center for Policy Research found that 11.5 percent of the

population inside Syria were killed or injured due to the current civil war (Syrian Center for

Policy Research 8). They write, "Taking into account the diminishing health system and

services and the deteriorating living conditions, the country faces human catastrophe

reflected in the dramatic drop in life expectancy at birth from 70.5 years in 2010 to an

estimated 55.4 years in 2015" (Syrian Center for Policy Research 8). Despite the desperate

need for a drastic global response, just 3.6% of the total Syrian refugee population has been

offered resettlement in safer locations (United Nations Refugee Agency).

Anti-immigration and Anti-Muslim rhetoric has proven to be a successful campaign

platform for president-elect Donald Trump. At a rally in Charleston, South Carolina, Trump

states, "Donald J. Trump is calling for a complete and total shutdown of Muslims entering

the United States until our country's representatives can figure out what the hell is going on"

(Page). When Trump announced his candidacy for president, he stated, "When Mexico sends

its people, they're not sending the best. They're sending people that have lots of problems

and they're bringing those problems. They're bringing drugs, they're bringing crime. They're

rapists and some, I assume, are good people" (Young). Trump's successful campaign

suggests that many Americans feel that it is better to reject Syrian refugees, and perhaps all

Muslim immigrants, than to risk allowing terrorists to enter the country. In an interview with

NPR, Jay Ginslee, governor of Washington, brought up America's shameful record of

xenophobia and compared the fear of Syrian refugees with the fear of Japanese Americans

during World War 1:

> I live on Bainbridge Island, this little island just west of Seattle. And it was the first
>
> place where we succumbed to fear, in 1941 after Pearl Harbor . . . We locked up

Washington and American citizens, and we sent them to camps for years while their

sons fought in the Army in Italy and were decorated fighting for democracy . . . We

regret that. We regret that we succumbed to fear . . . We regret that we lost moorage

for who we were as a country. We shouldn't do that right now (Inskeep).

The Editorial Board of the New York Times shared a similar sentiment in reaction to

the 2015 attacks in Paris:

. . . the world is again challenged by fear. With every bombing, beheading and mass

shooting, the dread spreads, along with the urgency of defeating this nihilism. But no

less a challenge for the civilized world is the danger of self-inflicted injury. In the

reaction and overreaction to terrorism comes the risk that society will lose its way. . .

Terrorist violence is terrifying, and it is natural to want to restore a shattered sense of

safety. But the best way to do that has always been to draw upon our greatest ideals

(The Editorial Board).

Both Ginslee and the editors at the New York Times express a need for a deep sense

of grounded-ness and interconnection in aspects of human character that are loftier than the

fear terrorist acts create. Some of the realizations and connections drawn in this project can

help to facilitate this grounded-ness. Mindfulness meditation has been associated with

decreasing negative emotions and characteristics of neuroticism (1158 Sedlmeier). It has

been proven to increase brain volume in four regions that are involved in memory

processing, emotion regulation, self-referential processing, learning processing and

perspective taking (Holzel 36). Therefore, mindfulness meditation is a tool that directly alters

brain structure and can have a profoundly positive impact on how reality is processed. Given

that the way that we process reality in our current cultural climate has major political ramifications, mindfulness meditation is a political act.

The practice of noticing the mind that spins narratives of jealousy and victimhood in dance class is also the practice of noticing the mind that spins narratives of xenophobia. The practice of noticing can result in a refugee population welcomed or turned away.

The Syrian refugee crisis is just one of the many situations of suffering that calls people to resist reactionary responses to fear and instead to consider more compassionate and clear-headed ways of understanding reality. Speaking about "human symbolic action," literary theorist Kenneth Burke used the term "collective revelation" to describe his insights about "a social structure of meanings by which the individual forms himself" (Burke 108). In this same sense of collective revelation, my thesis is nothing new, and is connected to many mindful trajectories that extend back millennia and are growing in the world today. Cultivating a more enlightened life through the practice of meditation has its origins in pre-history and offers rich and diverse discourses and practices on living in harmony with ourselves, others, and the world around us. The collective revelation of mindfulness has powerfully positive implications for the individual looking to form herself or himself in the face of a violent, often-inhumane world. The realization of this project is an additional, small ripple in this sea of compassion.

Appendix A: Notes on Interviewing

Interview Participants:

1. Kirsten Jorgenson

2. Marianne Adams

3. Chris Patti

4. Thomas McLaughlin

Sample Interview Questions:

1. What were your first introductions to the idea of *being well*?

2. How were you taught to take care of yourself?

3. What is your wellness routine?

4. Can you describe any formative experiences surrounding self-care?

5. Do you find any accepted notions in our culture particularly damaging to American well-being?

6. If you could give any advice to students on how to take care of themselves, what would it be?

*Interview transcripts totaled 68 pages, but will not be included due to printing costs.

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