

## Sources of Enlightenment: Faculty and Administrators Who Challenge and Inspire

---



Laurie L Patton

Professor of Religion and Dean of Arts and Sciences,  
Duke University  
BA, Harvard University; PhD, University of Chicago

---

Interviewed by Pamela Crosby, *Character Clearinghouse* Editor

---

1. You write about the joy students experience when they “fall in love” with their subjects ([Phi Beta Kappa Welcome](#)).

*(a) How might higher education and society discourage the intellectual love and the life of the mind?*

I think that we frequently tend to focus on a transactional mode of education, rather than a contemplative mode.

***(b) How can colleges and universities cultivate “intellectual love” in their students?***

I have been thinking recently about how we move beyond the checklist. How we, in our greeting and spending time with students, can move beyond a transactional mode of education, where students simply come to get the logistical help they need, and we distractedly deliver to them the educational goods. The problem is that it is very hard to do that when we ourselves have constructed a curriculum that is complex enough that we actually do need a checklist in order to negotiate through it. I had to admit, begrudgingly, that the checklist is somewhat inevitable in a complex curriculum.

But here’s the key for me: our attitude toward the checklist is not. We do not have to be bored when we go through the check list. We do not have to be only task oriented when we go through the check list.

As a result, here are the questions I want always to keep before us: How can we move beyond to a place where we find a space to reflect on every item on the list, to savor the intellectual possibilities in every item? What does it mean to take a seminar the first year? What does it mean to take a writing course? What will the experience be like for that particular student, sitting in front of us with excited or anxious or exuberant or terrified eyes?

***(c) How might sustained reflection relate to “intellectual love”?***

It is quite simple, in one way. I think intellectual love arises when people stop to take the time to reflect. When a person falls in love, whether it is with a person or a subject, they delight in slow movements. They lose track of time, and they stop fighting with time. They take the time to move slowly and contemplatively as they get to know the person or thing they are in love with. I think love is a way of stopping time, and this is no less true of the love of our minds as well as of our hearts. In fact, with the cultivation of proper habits, I think that love of mind and heart become ultimately indistinguishable.

And I think we have an ethical obligation to point this potential of intellectual love out to our students. For example, I noticed that, before she came to Duke, one of my advisees wrote that she was nervous because she has a flaw—she gets distracted by falling in love with a topic and then doesn’t get her assigned work done. I am going to spend some time with this issue, and tell her that this part of her character is not a flaw, but a virtue.

**2. How has your work on early Indian Mythological and ritual texts and the use of mantra in narrative and ritual influenced your attitudes about the role of meditation practices in daily life?**

My books on Indian myth and ritual have profoundly shaped my ideas about meditation practices in daily life. As I studied both public and domestic manuals about how to use mantras, two things became clear to me: (1) Narratives about mantra show that they are transformational in everyday life. For example, in one story, a mantra is used by a sage who has been thrown into a tree by an angry king. In another, it is used by a young priest to win a king's daughter with whom he has fallen in love while performing at a sacrifice. I learned about these uses of mantra in everyday situations while writing my first book. (2) Mantras are in themselves "mini-rituals," which are designed to cope with everyday situations. People in ancient India used mantras to address any number of life situations. For example, there was a mantra to dispel fear when setting out on a journey. There was a mantra to counteract the bad omen of a dove flying into one's kitchen. There was a mantra to greet cows with joy. And so on. I learned about these ritual uses of mantra while writing my second book. In ancient India, mantras are ways of reflecting on daily situations. And we can learn a great deal from them.

**3. At Emory you helped to present justification to put in place a program in contemplatives studies "Contemplative Studies and the Art of Persuasion," Patton, 2011). Are similar initiatives in place at Duke?**

I think every university should follow the natural path of its faculty. Emory's relationship with the Dalai Lama and a series of hires of people interested in contemplative work made this initiative a natural move. At Duke, there is more interest in religion and the public sphere, an equally key topic for scholars to turn their attention toward in the twenty first century. So I am working with that natural interest and building upon that with a series of initiatives on that theme. I do see a connection between the two: in my view, people who develop contemplative practices are also able to work well in the public sphere; they develop the patience, and compassion, and even the capacity for strategic thinking, which are so necessary for service in the rough and tumble public sphere.

**4. Please describe your own personal reflection practices.**

I try to meditate every day, and I follow the Buddhist *vipassana*, or "insight" tradition of meditation. Recently I have begun the practice of watching the breath while swimming laps. It is an extraordinary meditative practice because you are watching your breath while your body is at its most vigorous, and some major insights arise as a

result. As a dean, I have also become deeply committed to the practice of “contemplation in action”—a way of cultivating contemplative mind while in the midst of a high-speed professional life of minute by minute executive decisions. This practice really came home to me when I was working on the translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

If you cultivate a mindful approach to executive decisions, you are able remind yourself of the grounding principles behind every decision you make. In addition, if you are committed to being present, fully present, to everyone that walks in your door, that is also contemplation in action. This kind of meditation is also like meditation while swimming. You are in the midst of high speed vigorous mental action and high speed interpersonal action, and yet are committed to cultivating a mindful center at the heart of all of it.

**5. You write that you were inspired by Simone Weil’s *Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with A View to the Love of God* (1951). You argue that “study is itself a form of contemplation, and needs to be marked that way—ritually marked” (Patton, 2011, p. 40). Discuss your concept of “framing” a text before one begins to study and how this relates to contemplation.**

Even more these days, because my time for writing and research is so precious, I think it is important to honor and frame the time and the activity of study. One of the most frequent things young scholars tell me is how difficult it is to switch gears, from teaching to research, in particular. And I think this switching of gears is difficult because we tend not to mark out the sphere of study as a sacred activity. When I studied at the University of Edinburgh in college, my study carrel was next to a monk who would pray whenever he sat down to prepare for the next day’s classes. At first I was distracted by it, especially because he would do it all the time—even after he got up to use the bathroom and then came back. But then I would miss it if he wasn’t there. And soon I found myself doing something similar, in my own more secular manner, as a way of marking the passage from engagement in the world to study of the world. The Jewish tradition also has a ritual of saying a blessing before studying the Torah. I find this very helpful as a kind of everyday meditative practice which marks a key transition. There is a Hebrew saying that “Scholars create peace in the world.” And I think such an insight begins with an understanding of the sacredness of study.

**6. In what ways are our colleges and universities encouraging students to multitask? How do you think this practice, which is becoming more common in contemporary life, might be related to students’ communication and thinking skills and behaviors?**

According to many curators, scholars, etc., we are living in an age of

multi-tasking, distraction and a society of run-away minds. I think for students especially, their lives are not exclusively challenged by the quality of the material world, or their quality of relationships, or the quality of their society. Their lives are challenged by their quality of mind. We have a world of focusing exercises because it is impossible to focus. The practice of meditation has increased dramatically and so has the number of distraction-related accidents at home and on the road.

Among the growing new science of attention, there is mounting concern about the number of devices we use at one time, even when we are not driving, and scientists now argue that a good social experiment is *not* to give people new devices and see what they do with them but rather to take away all devices from people to see what they can do without them—if they can exist, if they can work, if they can live without a sense of deprivation similar to that of the detoxification tremors that people undergoing treatment for drug addiction sometimes suffer. In response to this, there is the “slow media” movement—a group that encourages us to move away from such mental states.

But at the same time, a variety of studies suggest that a certain kind of organized multitasking, where activities are foregrounded and backgrounded, can be quite productive. I think this productivity might be harnessed in the classroom. In my experience, students like the idea of switching from computer to writing to discussion and back. And sometimes they learn better when they do so. Students also understand sociality, and connectedness, through on-line media. This is not a loss of relationship, but a way of living in relationship both on and off line. I use this on line and off line sociality all the time in my teaching. Students’ hunger for learning is no different, even if their hunger is mediated differently.

I don’t think this necessarily goes against contemplative practice *per se*. Even the slow media movement does not ask us to get rid of computers, cell-phones, I-PODS, and all the other accoutrements of our communicative lives. Rather, it encourages us to have an entirely different mental attitude to our electronic gadgets, in which we no longer use them to distract us but to understand the universe in a slower, more contemplative way.

**7. Why do you argue that study and sustained attention are very vital in academic life (Patton, 2011)? How might we “connect the act of sustained attention with the disposition of rigorous analysis” (p. 42)? How can sustained attention practices be integrated in the physical and virtual classroom?**

I think there are a variety of ways in which we can integrate

sustained attention practices into the classroom. The first is to slow down classroom discussion to allow students to think out loud. In a classroom of good students, there is a tendency to produce rapid-fire debate. I do this myself, all the time, and love the give and take of such debates. And I am one of the most distracted people on the planet. But in recent years I have slowed down my own response time and my own questions of students, as a way of modeling the fact that we can allow each other to think, even as we are engaged in debate.

Second, I think we can take time in the classroom to focus on small things, such as a single sentence in a translation, and its multiple possibilities of meaning. This is a straightforward thing for a student of literature, or language, for example. I had a colleague who taught Sanskrit very slowly, and some people complained about the speed. Others were transformed by it, and loved the language because of it. But I also think it can be true in the sciences and social sciences as well.

Third, I think it is key to introduce the idea of contemplation in action—particularly verbal action. How do we inspire the Buddhist idea of “right speech” in our students even in the midst of academic debate? I consistently give my students conversational rules of debate—about the role of respecting persons even in the midst of vehement disagreement. I tell them about the service of helping their fellow students to make their arguments better. This idea of contemplation in verbal action is essential not only to in-person debate, but also in on-line behavior. The work of Lance Bennett in encouraging civil discourse and digital citizenship on line is crucial to this idea of contemplation in verbal action.

**8. How do you think social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) have influenced students’ reflective time and quiet time? Are there ways to integrate social media such that they can enhance students’ contemplative life?**

Duke is a leader in the world of digital learning, and it is a great blessing to see how we are using social media to help focus attention. I have learned a great deal from my colleague Cathy Davidson on the potential of social media for education. There are now world-wide chat rooms that are essentially 24 hour, global study groups where students focus on helping each other in solving key problems. Duke students use these all the time. Students are organizing for service-learning in Durham through social media. These are all ways in which could harness both educational and contemplative potential. For example, at Duke there are researchers such as Kate Hayles who are creating more contemplative texts, which help the reader focus on a single word and read more slowly, through electronic media. I think we have only begun

to explore the contemplative possibilities of electronic media.

**9. You are a professor of religious studies. There is a certain paradox about inclusive worldviews: for example, some campus leaders and students might say that pluralism is only one interpretation of religion or worldview, and being *inclusive* is actually having an *exclusive* worldview in that *pluralism* by its very definition excludes non-pluralistic views. How would you address a group of students and campus leaders who might bring up this paradox?**

I have begun to write about this idea in a variety of formal and informal venues. Here's the way I see it: The study of religion is forced to partake in the perennial paradox of liberalism. It must insist on tolerance and inclusion of others' religious voices even as it argues with those religious voices which are not tolerant.

As Wendy Steiner (1997) describes this paradox:

[I]n a state controlled by fundamentalist ideas, the liberal cannot speak, but in a state controlled by liberal ideas a fundamentalist cannot act. The ideas of a fundamentalist are exclusionary and performative, i.e., valid only when turned into actions; an article of faith is not a mere topic of discussion to the believer. Thus, the liberal, in insisting on tolerance, is insisting on not only his idea but his practice. In the considerable commentary about the Rushdie affair in America, the absolute value of tolerance or free speech emerges as a point of dogmatic blindness for some and a logical embarrassment for others. Leon Wieseltier states without irony, "Let us be dogmatic about tolerance," but for Norman Mailer the issue is not so easy: We believe in freedom of expression as an absolute. How dangerous to use the word absolute." (p. 123)

The scholar of religion insists, and has traditionally insisted, that everyone must practice tolerance even as his or her analytic categories imply judgment. This liberal paradox is also related to another feature of our odd sort of arbitrary pluralism: our zeal to "locate" ourselves in the multiple, shifting universe. In the early twenty-first century, we are coming face to face with the failure of the great, unacknowledged Romantic Ideal of the post modern perspective—that if we only *locate ourselves* that somehow it would be all better. Naming our locatedness has not made it all better. It has not necessarily produced better scholarship. And it has frequently made those who would prefer *not* to be located more angry. This is the sad challenge of our generation of historians of religion.

But in all this sad and blooming confusion, the secular study of religion in all its blooming confusion is alive and kicking. If we

define the secular study of religion as the number of undergraduates enrolled in religion courses, or in the number of PhDs in the field, we have seen a marked increase in the past two decades in both areas. We are 1/20th of the majors in the country; we offer 38% of the courses in any given semester's curriculum; in our doctoral programs we have gone from a very low percentage of departments offering courses in non-Christian traditions three decades ago, to 59% in Buddhism; 49% in Hinduism; and 49% in Islam. Even more intriguingly, such tradition-specific courses in religions other than Christianity are on the whole 20% more frequently offered at public and private, non-sectarian universities and colleges than they are at Catholic and Protestant institutions. If such courses define the secular study of religion, we have grown enormously. (Religion and Theology Programs Census, 2001). Hardly evidence of a dying field.

Now these statistics could be evidence, perhaps, of a certain kind of decadence—the kind of intellectual society that thrives on decay, the last efflorescence of an organism. Or the study of religion might resemble James, one of the main characters in Elizabeth McCracken's fine first novel, *In the Giant's House* (1996): James is an adolescent boy who grows a foot each year, and quietly knows that, because of his gargantuan growth, he is going to die soon. Perhaps as a relatively new field, the study of religion is in that kind of adolescent overdrive that can lead to death. Or perhaps many of the very recent trends in higher enrollments in religion classes could simply be due to the aftereffects of 9-11, and the vague public sense that people do very extreme things for ostensibly religious reasons.

### **10. What is your favorite personal academic Dean story so far?**

My favorite Dean story has to do with the matching of dreams. Another institution was chasing after phenomenal faculty member—something that happens a lot at Duke. And when I asked that faculty member what his dreams were about building intellectual community, they happened to be the same as mine. And as a result, we were able to build something together far faster than I had thought. While the job has its enormous challenges, at its best, much of being a dean is like that—the acceleration of one's dreams into reality.

### **11. Class sizes are becoming larger, and many more courses are offered online. Universities are becoming small cities, where individuals make few personal contacts. Will teaching students to find alone-time and to be contemplative and reflective increase their sense of isolation?**

I don't think so at all. I think students need that time to do three

things: integration, adaptation, and integration. Here's how I argued for it in my first Arts & Sciences address:

As I see it, our job in Arts & Sciences is not to educate our students for *our* world, but rather to prepare them for their own. The culture that we create must anticipate the future; it must predict, with a fair degree of accuracy, what kinds of skills a person will need four years from now in order to make those everyday decisions that create a reflective, engaged, connected, and meaningful life—in other words, a life worth living, and a life connected to the big ideas and other people.

I have come to the sense that a twenty-first century education requires three skills, all of which I believe an Arts & Sciences education at both the graduate and undergraduate levels can uniquely provide. Those three skills are **innovation**, **adaptation**, and **integration**. We know these three words. We probably use them in our everyday decisions. In fact, I have chosen them because I have heard them in everyday conversations since my arrival at Duke. But I think they are uniquely situated to help us continue to be an international example in interdisciplinary approaches to knowledge.

Let me begin with innovation. Innovation is not only the capacity to discover new laws of nature and society. It is sometimes defined, and I think well defined, as a change that creates new meaning for the stakeholders in a culture. Our innovations therefore are, in the re-mix, information-laden culture we now live in, as much in new combinations of information, of data, of social networks as in the discovery of new laws of nature. Both forms of discovery are important for innovation to occur. But we would have not included research into and about databases, and thoughtful consideration of the economies of scale in data collection, in our undergraduate students' research plans twenty years ago. Only a few of us would have considered such kinds of innovation as a skill which our students need to make everyday decisions in their lives. We do now. Additionally, at the graduate level, such skill in assessing and mining information is needed in almost all the forms of specialization Duke provides. We are teaching our students to learn to innovate and put those innovations to use in the world.

The second is adaptation. Adaptation is not only the ability to be

flexible, but the ability to imagine ways of thinking and working and living that have never existed before. On the one hand, this is a major challenge. It is a challenge because of what Tom Friedman in a recent article also circulated by Provost Lange, called the need for “The Start up of You” (2011).”

Students today need to respond to changing conditions more quickly than ever before. I put Friedman’s point slightly differently: the life-script for students, both undergraduate and graduate, is barely legible today. In my parents’ generation in America, there was a script, and those who did not follow it were the clear exceptions. In my own generation, there were larger numbers of people who departed from the script, but they knew the script from which they were departing. Today, it is harder and harder to discern what the script is. When students graduate from college, they increasingly must create their own job. When they receive a PhD, they increasingly must find ways to adapt their specialties into the marketplace that may not immediately see the relevance of that knowledge. So adaptation becomes a paramount skill—indeed a crucial one in a world where everyday decisions have consequences that we can predict less and less. In the Arts & Sciences, we teach our students to imagine those ways of thinking and working.

And finally, we have integration. Integration is not only the ability to put things together, to make new connections, but also to find new ways in which knowledge fits into the world. We live in a world in which the discreet, siloed forms of knowledge remain some of the most powerful driving forces in our lives. Fields of knowledge confer identity, even on our undergraduates as they try to decide their major. Our students are constantly trying to pull those discreet forms of knowledge into a single whole. At the graduate level, the forces of professionalization have created a world where specialization has reigned for the last half a century. That has brought us untold riches. But it sometimes has not helped the integration process. Yet, if that process of integration does not occur, young people are left with a kind of incoherent life, a jumbled story to tell about their lives that they do not want to tell. In the Arts & Sciences, we help students learn to make those connections and make their knowledge fit, as they build their lives.

In my view, taking time out for contemplation can help students do all of this educational work of integration, adaptation, and innovation better, and with longer lasting results.

**12. Higher education’s sophisticated and highly complex knowledge has become so esoteric and specialized today that disciplines have splintered off into many sub-disciplines. Students are expected to**

learn more and more information and skills as well as learn how to use the technology that helps make it possible to draw from, apply, and incorporate this knowledge. Furthermore, many students have so much debt that they need to graduate quickly and begin earning income. The rush to "learn and earn" leaves few options for students to do anything else but the minimum with their time. How is it possible in student contemporary life to carve out time for meditation and sustained reflection?

I think it is a problem of the management of time—which of course is never simple at all. The new way of thinking about college is not just eight semesters; it is eight semesters and three summers. With all of their newly intense college commitments, students are at risk of over-commitment and the burn-out of too much choice. I worry about this all the time. However, students are also managing time better. And this is an opportunity. I think if students can carve out time for double majors, summer experiences, and internships, they can learn to create the time for contemplation. That is because students understand better than their professors about the role of sustainability, including the sustainability of their own energies. My own sense is that if we present it in this way, students will not only learn from us, but they will take the lead.

**13. Some critics think that college students should stick to work that relates only to their academic education. In other words, it is not the business of higher education, at least public universities, to teach students to be good citizens, virtuous people, or caring souls. How would you respond to these comments?**

In my view, the best of liberal education in all cultures is about the formation of souls. In fact, I view administrative work both as "contemplation in action" AND as "the care of intellectual souls." I have an even more radical view than that: I think the best of professional education, and technical education, is also deeply formative of character. You can't create a person who has skills without also creating a person who has dispositions. And dispositions are the basis of character.

**14. In college life today students are encouraged to join many activities and options at a time of considerable personal freedom. Do you think that a college can encourage students too much to be involved in co-curricular activities? Why or why not? Do you think there should be more efforts in connecting student activities to their academic experiences? Why or why not?**

Yes, absolutely. At Duke we are working very hard to connect the extra-curricular with the curricular. Indeed, we have some

intellectual leaders at Duke who actually don't even use those terms anymore because they reinforce a dichotomy. Some of those strategies include the gathering of data on what courses students take after a particularly transformative extra-curricular experience. They also include integrating study abroad and social service elements into as many different classrooms as possible. You don't go outside the class for these so-called "extra-curricular" experiences. Rather, the experiences themselves become curricular. You stay inside the class and complete the requirements for the course.

**15. Please include any information you would like to share about your work, practice, or teaching that has not been covered in the questions.**

I would only add that I think the more we move into a service and digital economy, the more important it is for us to develop contemplative practices which are integrated into our work lives. We can't afford just to complain about our work spaces and professional lives and then go and meditate. We have to develop contemplative practices where we are, even as we work to change where we are.

---

## References

- Friedman, T. L. (2011, July 12). The start-up of you. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/13/opinion/13friedman.html?scp=15&sq=thomas%20friedman&st=cse>
- McCracken, E. (1996) *In the giant's house: A romance (P.S.)*. New York: Dial Press.
- Patton, L. (2011). Contemplative studies and the art of persuasion. In J. Summer-Brown & F. Grace (Eds.), *Meditation in the Classroom* (pp. 39-44).
- Religion and Theology Programs Census. (2001, fall). *Religious Studies News*. Retrieved from [http://www.aarweb.org/programs/Department\\_Services/Survey\\_Data/Undergraduate/RSNAARCensus1.pdf](http://www.aarweb.org/programs/Department_Services/Survey_Data/Undergraduate/RSNAARCensus1.pdf)
- Steiner, W. (1997). *The scandal of pleasure: Art in an age of fundamentalism*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.
- Weil, S. (1951). Reflections on the right use of school studies with a view to the love of God (E. Craufurd (Trans.)). In *Waiting for God* (pp. 105-116).

### See also

Patton. L. (2004). *Bringing the gods to mind: Mantra and ritual in early Indian sacrifice*. Berkeley: University of California Press.