Mentoring Psychological Resilience and Culturally-Inclusive Community Through Contemplative Self-Inquiry: An Introduction to the *Know Your Self* Curriculum

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Conference:
Contemplative Practice for 21st Century Higher Education
University of North Carolina/Chapel Hill
March 9, 2018
Presentation Adapted from:

A Person-Centered Approach to Psychospiritual Maturation: Mentoring Psychological Resilience and Inclusive Community in Higher Education

Jared D. Kass

Palgrave MacMillan, 2017
A Missing Pedagogical Component in Higher Education:

Undergraduate and entry-level graduate students require maturational growth as a foundation for professional and civic identity development.

This need was recognized by Ernest Boyer in his seminal study on campus life (Boyer 1990). The study documented:

- a proliferation of behavioral dysregulation
- the failure of universities to foster culturally-inclusive community.

Higher education must develop person-centered pedagogies that:

- help students cultivate psychological resilience
- help students develop interpersonal skills for constructive participation in culturally-diverse community

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Dysregulated Behavior in Students:

- Often interpreted through a model of individual psychopathology
- More accurately indicates *systemic* problems:
  - Pervasive, intergenerational presence of...

**Humanity’s Chain of Pain**

Includes:

- Racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, heterosexism
- Sexual violence and inter-group conflicts
- Tribalism, group-based social dominance hierarchies
- Dysfunctional family systems, self-soothing through alcohol & drugs
- Hopelessness, cynicism, and greed

This toxic, traumatizing wheel of suffering replicates itself perniciously by disrupting five dimensions of functional activity in self and society:

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Humanity’s Chain of Pain Disrupts and Conditions Five Dimensions of Self

**Bio-Behavioral:** Neural and physiological pathways regulating metabolic processes through which people respond to challenges, stress, and perceived threat

**Cognitive-Sociocultural:** Cognitive schema and sociocultural identity narratives that condition perceptions of self and other, and legitimize systemic *social dominance hierarchies* (Sidanius & Pratto, 2004, 1999)

**Social-Emotional:** Templates of attachment that shape the capacity for constructive interpersonal relationships, families, and community/organizational networks

**Existential-Spiritual:** Templates of attachment through which we experience, and derive meaning from, our relationship with the cosmos

**Integrative Worldview Formation:** The synthesizing lens through which we perceive, and respond to, life events and people

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I am a white Jewish male (cisgender, straight) who strives to be an ally to women, people of color, and other disadvantaged groups. My social justice commitments required personal and professional learning through which I recognized the power and privilege which comes from my position in society. This learning process was both painful yet liberating. It helped me outgrow the limiting aspects (emotional, moral, and spiritual) of my socialization as a white male and helped me develop an ethical imperative and pedagogical tools to participate in breaking Humanity’s Chain of Pain.

As a culmination of this personal learning process:

I participated with faculty colleagues from the Division of Counseling and Psychology, Lesley University, in a multi-year transformative learning project where we examined these issues personally and transformed our curriculum to include a social justice orientation in the courses we teach.

I served on the Steering Committee of the Boston Clergy and Religious Leaders Group for Interfaith Dialogue, in a multi-decade social justice initiative, where we examined how systemic forms of power, privilege, and oppression had an impact on the disadvantaged communities in our city.
These commitments led me to develop the *Know Your Self Curriculum*

- Students learn to interrupt attitudes & behaviors that reinforce Humanity’s *Chain of Pain* in themselves, others, and the social systems they inhabit
- A person-specific multidimensional process of mentored psychospiritual maturation:

**Bio-Behavioral:** Self-regulation of metabolic processes through which they respond to challenges, stress, and perceived threat

**Cognitive-Sociocultural:** Identification of sociocultural identity narratives that condition their perceptions of self and *other*, and legitimize systemic social dominance hierarchies

**Social-Emotional:** Development of attachment styles that strengthen their relational capacities for constructive interpersonal community-building

**Existential-Spiritual:** Contemplative exploration of attachment templates through which they experience, and derive meaning from, their relationship with the cosmos. Students experience incremental movement toward *Secure Existential Attachment*.

**Integrative Worldview Formation:** Development of a resilient worldview, Confidence in Life and Self

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Component 1:

Students Engage in a Self-Inquiry Project in which they write semi-structured “Self-Inquiry” essays

Opportunity to engage in “analytical meditation”: self-reflection, self-study, self-awareness

Each student’s self-inquiry project begins with a person-centered focus:

In this course, you will engage in conceptual and experiential explorations that help you:

Examine your personal responses to academic stress

Examine a personal behavior or attitude that harms self or others, which you would like to modify

This personal learning will be conducted in the service of:

• Your future work as professionals and civic members of a multicultural democracy
• Helping to build social systems that promote cultures of health, social justice, and peace
• Breaking Humanity’s Chain of Pain

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Component 2:

Students Write a Psychospiritual Autobiography:

A multi-session activity that helps them name and understand the complex variables that shape their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors—particularly the behaviors they seek to modify.

Practice “Critical Inquiry about Self”

Students explore and gradually share material about:

• Cultural, personal, and religious identities
• Current stressors
• Somatic, emotional, and cognitive responses to stress
• Existential worldview that shapes their behavior & responses to stress
• Sociocultural factors and family histories that shape
  • narratives about self, others, and life
  • behaviors in relation to self, others, and life

Collaborative Group Effort - learning to break personal links in Humanity’s Chain of Pain

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Component 3

Students Engage Interactively Building Culturally-Diverse, Person-Centered Community:
Structured activities & emergent interpersonal dynamics

Activities include:
- Intellectual discussion on relevant subjects: social justice; psychological and social well-being; neuroscience of stress and resilience; religion; sociocultural identity development
- Discuss material from psychospiritual autobiographies
- Discuss personal learning from self-inquiry project
- Sensorimotor work and expressive arts: hatha yoga, improvisational movement, circle dancing, singing
- Group meditation

Students learn to:
- become mindful of reactivity to stress, sociocultural differences, interpersonal interactions/conflict
- develop internal composure
- discuss their interpersonal reactivity with peers (in the service of building constructive community)
- strengthen constructive interpersonal reactions to stress & conflict

These interactive activities and interpersonal group dynamics becomes an *in vivo* laboratory:
Students learn to examine their relational styles and attachment-separation templates (Fricchione, 2011),
developing skills for constructive participation in relationships and communities.

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Component 4

Students Engage in Contemplative Self-Inquiry through Meditation: Concentration Practices, Mindfulness, Visualization Work

These modes of contemplative self-inquiry are taught in each spiritual tradition. They cultivate the capacity for four dimensions of contemplative awareness:

- **Mind-body relaxation & attentional focus:** concentration on an object of contemplation, interrupting intrusive thoughts & emotions
  
  (Benson, 1975; Patanjali 1983; Shantideva 2006)

- **Mindfulness:** capacity to observe somatic experience, intrusive thoughts, painful emotions, and traumatic memories without compulsion to react destructively
  
  (Bodhi, 2005; Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Siegel, 2007)

- **Receptivity to insight, intuition, and inner guidance:** as meditation generates access to deep structure of contemplative mind
  
  (H.H. Dalai Lama, 2014; Green & Green, 1977; Kass, 1991; Siegel, 2007)

- **Experiences of core self:** unconditioned luminous mind, unconditional altruistic love, unitive awareness
  

Enabling exploration of multiple layers of consciousness:
- **Daily Awareness**
- **Personal Unconscious**
- **Collective Unconscious & Formative Archetypes**
- **Ground of Being**

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Contemplative Experience

Explicated through multiple conceptual lenses

- Secular Humanist / Neuroscience of Meditation (Kass & Trantham, 2014)
- Spiritual Traditions (Kass & Lennox, 2005; Smith, 1991)
- *Know Your Self* curriculum does not privilege or impose a philosophical worldview

Curriculum explicates the spiritual traditions through the *Perennial Philosophy* (Huxley, 1945; James, 1902)

- Shared maturational goals and contemplative practices
- Students with diverse sociocultural identities and philosophical worldviews learn to participate in the curriculum through existential belief systems with which they identify and resonate

Participants include:

- Students of color & white students: women, men, LGBTQ
- Secular humanists (atheist/agnostic)
- Individuals who practice: Buddhism, Christianity, Goddess/Wicca traditions, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Taoism

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Contemplative Practice

The curriculum highlights current integration of Yoga Psychology (Buddhist and Hindu traditions) into emergent mind-body psychotherapies and contemplative care (Giles & Miller, 2012; Kass & Trantham, 2014; Schore, 2012)

• Buddhist Philosophy and Contemplative Practices (Eight-fold path; Samatha; Vipassana; Mehta; Prajna)

• Dhammapada (Easwaran, 2007)
  • “Our life is shaped by our mind, we become what we think.”
  • “Hatred can never put an end to hatred; love alone can. This is an unalterable law.”

• Hindu Philosophy and Contemplative Practices (Ashtanga Yoga; Yama; Niyama; Asana; Dharana)

• Yoga Sutras of Patanjali (Aranya, 1983)
  • “Yoga is the stilling of the modifications of the mind”
  • “Then the Witness rests in its essential nature.”

Yoga Psychology presented as distillation of the Perennial Philosophy taught in every spiritual tradition

• Shared maturational goals for ethical behavior
• Shared contemplative practices
  • to overcome conditioned, distorted, limiting perceptions about self, others, and life
  • to achieve luminous mind: intuitive receptivity to insight/wisdom
  • to experience relational attachment to the Ground of Being (“secure existential attachment”)

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Research Project:

Effectiveness of the *Know Your Self* Curriculum

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Research Methods

Quasi-experimental, mixed-methods design:

Experimental and control groups (similar demographically and educationally)
   Pre-test (T1) – Post-test (T2) = 14-15 weeks

Participants: 265 adult undergraduate and graduate students
   Experimental group (N = 127, seven cohorts)
   Control group (N = 138, six cohorts)

Qualitative data (experimental group)
   Written student narratives (40-60 pages/student)
   Narratives generated detailed data about psychospiritual learning/growth for each group member

Quantitative data (experimental & control groups)
   Statistical comparison of outcome scores on assessment scales

Sample Demographics:
   Primarily young adults, age 23-35 (63%)
   Female (89%), Male (11%) – typical of my institution
   White (97%), Students of Color (3%) – typical of my institution
   Birth religions: Roman Catholic (46%), Protestant (34%), Jewish (12%), Muslim (3%),
   Greek Orthodox (1%), Other (2%), No report (3%)
   LGBTQ (9%, Self-Report)

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Demographic Trend: Increased participation by students of color in recent cohorts, as *Know Your Self* curriculum gains cultural credibility in their student communities.
Qualitative Methods

Phenomenological Inquiry:

Tracked student learning in the experimental group
Students wrote 3-5 page self-inquiry essays following each class,
generating 40-60 pages of data per student (N=127)

Analysis: Grounded Theory Methodology:

Empirical and inductive approach to narrative data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998)
Effective for studying learning processes (Chamberlain, 1999; Strauss, 1987)

We coded student narratives for domains of growth and learning processes.
After inter-rater reliability was tested (86%), we refined coding categories.
Higher-order analysis of coded categories generated meaningful conceptual patterns.

Analyses produced:

Cross-sectional data on learning/growth in experimental group
Individual case studies that illustrated representative student learning

Note: Following data collection for the effectiveness study, additional narrative data collected from subsequent student cohorts:
N=99, six cohorts; similar demographic features

Total Narrative data reported in book: N = 226 students

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Primary Areas of Student-Selected Behavioral Change:

**Social-Emotional Impairments to Academic Performance**
- Procrastination
- Pressure to Overachieve and Somatic Symptoms of Stress

**Health Compromising Attitudes and Behaviors**
- Unhealthy Diet
- Cigarette Smoking
- Alcohol Dependence
- Negative Body Image and Depression

**Impaired Relational Skills**
- Sexual Promiscuity
- Fear of Intimate Relationships

**Existential Struggles and Spiritual Alienation**
- Existential Coping with a Chronic Illness
- Alienation from God and Religious Tradition

These behavioral change goals were quite diverse; however, they are often reported as figural or problematic on higher education campuses (ACHA, 2004, 2011; Boyer, 1990; CASA, 2007). Consequently, we considered these categories to have content validity and relevance for assessment of the curriculum (Kass, Baxter, & Lennox, 2015).
Numerical Quantification of Qualitative Results

Student Growth & Learning in Five Dimensions of Self:

**Bio-Behavioral:** 68% demonstrated improvement in their behavioral change goals, indicating increased self-regulation skills that promote individual and social well-being.

**Cognitive-Sociocultural:** 51% demonstrated maturation in sociocultural narratives about self and others, indicating growth in health-promoting and pro-social attitudes.

**Social-Emotional:** 55% showed evidence of repair to insecure attachment templates, indicating growth in compassionate attunement to self and others.

**Existential-Spiritual:** 48% reported contemplative experiences that reflected maturational growth in self-experience (from existential isolation to inter-connectedness between self, others, and life) in written narratives that indicated movement toward *secure existential attachment* and increased capacity for *altruistic love*.

**Integrative Worldview Formation:** 57% demonstrated growth in a resilient worldview, *Confidence in Life and Self*, in narratives indicating the ability to address life challenges constructively, with sufficient internal composure to derive maturational learning.

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Quantitative Research

Comparison of Experimental and Control Groups
Using Quantitative Measures

Hypothesis Testing

The *Know Your Self* curriculum will help participants:

- **Strengthen a resilient worldview, Confidence in Life and Self (IPPA)**
  
  (Kass, 1998; Kass, Friedman, Leserman, Caudill, Zuttermeister, & Benson, 1991)

- **Deepen capacity for contemplative experiences and movement toward Secure Existential Attachment (INSPIRIT)**
  
  (Kass, 1995; Kass, Friedman, Leserman, Zuttermeister, & Benson, 1991)

Triangulation: Potential Confirmatory Similarities with Results from Qualitative Analyses

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Quantitative Measures

Inventory of Positive Psychological Attitudes (IPPA)
(Kass, 1998; Kass, Friedman, Leserman, Caudill, Zuttermeister, & Benson, 1991)

Measures a Resilient Worldview: Confidence in Life and Self
Subjects describe current responses to stressful life circumstances
Two sub-scales:
  Self-Confidence during Stress (SCDS)
  Life Purpose and Satisfaction during Stress (LPS)
Combined sub-scales: Confidence in Life and Self (CLS)

Index of Core Spiritual Experiences (INSPIRIT)
(Kass, 1995; Kass, Friedman, Leserman, Zuttermeister, & Benson, 1991)

Measures Subjective Contemplative Experiences Commonly Reported During Meditation
Example 1: Secular Humanist (e.g. “Peace; Joy”)
Example 2: Spiritual / Religious (e.g. “Felt presence of God”)
Responsive to diverse belief systems:
  “People have many different definitions and images of the Higher Power that we often call God. Please use your definition.” Includes responses indicating no belief in a Higher Power.

Measures Key Features of “Secure Existential Attachment”

To examine sample copies of these scales: www.resilientworldview.org

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### Statistical Comparisons with Effect Size

**Mann-Whitney Test: Control and Experimental Groups**

**Growth in Resilient Worldview (IPPA): LPS; SCDS; CLS**

**Growth in Secure Existential Attachment (INSPIRIT): INSPIR, Q6, Q7**

(Kass, Baxter, Lennox, 2015)  

(Statistically significant p-value ≤ .05)

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|       | Δ INSPIR |       |                |      |            |             |
|       | Con  | 108       | 99.89          |      |            |             |
|       | Ex   | 111       | 119.83         |      |            |             |
|       | Total| 219       | 4902.500       | -2.357 | .018       | - .16       |
|       | Δ Q6  |          |                |      |            |             |
|       | Con  | 108       | 100.52         |      |            |             |
|       | Ex   | 110       | 118.32         |      |            |             |
|       | Total| 218       | 4970.000       | -2.550 | .011       | - .17       |
|       | Δ Q7  |          |                |      |            |             |
|       | Con  | 109       | 99.44          |      |            |             |
|       | Ex   | 112       | 122.25         |      |            |             |
|       | Total| 221       | 4843.500       | -2.658 | .008       | - .18       |

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Statistical Comparisons with Effect Size


Control and Experimental Groups

Growth in Resilient Worldview (IPPA): LPS; SCDS; CLS
Growth in Secure Existential Attachment (INSPIRIT): INSPIR, Q6, Q7

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Conclusions from Research Project:


2. Statistical analyses indicated: Experimental group demonstrated significantly more growth than the control group in a resilient worldview, Confidence in Life and Self, and enriched contemplative capacities for Secure Existential Attachment. These results provided triangulated, confirmatory evidence for the qualitative analyses.

Implications for Higher Education:

3. *Know Your Self* is a carefully designed contemplative self-inquiry curriculum that effectively mentors culturally-inclusive community and psychological resilience in emerging adults.

4. *Know Your Self* facilitates a process of person-centered psychospiritual maturation that can strengthen cultures of health, social justice, and peace on the higher education campus.

5. *Know Your Self* is relevant to multiple academic disciplines at undergraduate and graduate levels as a pedagogical strategy for preparing students to foster a culture of health, social justice, and peace in our multicultural society.
Illustrative Case Study

Female Muslim Student
Utilizing Contemplative Self-Inquiry from within Her Religious/Cultural Tradition

“Hasna”

Adult undergraduate
studying to become a Human Resource specialist

Female
27 years-old
Algerian-American
Muslim

During her self-inquiry project, Hasna explored her current alienation from God and from her religious tradition.
Personal Goals for Contemplative Self-Inquiry Project

1. Hasna wanted to understand her current alienation from Islam.
2. Hasna wanted to increase the frequency of her daily prayers.
3. Hasna wanted “to increase the peace within myself.”

NOTE: Throughout her written essays, Hasna used the words God and Allah interchangeably.
Summary of Psychospiritual Autobiography

• Middle class family leaves Algeria and immigrates to USA, following violent political turmoil that left traumatic emotional wounds in Hasna and her family

• Loses faith in God “as protector” during her difficult adolescence in the United States
  • Father dies from chronic illness when she was 17
  • Conflict between American and Algerian-Muslim cultural norms: sexual relationship with teenage boyfriend
    • Shamed by school counselor
    • Spiritual crisis: Is God nothing but “superstition”?

• In high school and college, “all of the new information I was learning in the academic world of science, philosophy, and anthropology” added to her doubts. “I could not bring myself to pray every night, or to accept that there is something divine out there.”

After writing about these issues in her self-inquiry essays, Hasna gradually chose to share this information with her peers in the Know Your Self curriculum. Initially reticent and guarded, students experienced a sufficient level of unconditional acceptance and respect in this multicultural learning community to allow themselves to be known at this depth (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1999; Palmer, 1983; Rogers, 1961). At the same time, students learned to listen to each other's stories, developing poignant bonds of empathic understanding, attunement, and compassion.

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Summary of Hasna’s Meditation Practice & Contemplative Experiences

- Difficulty practicing relaxation response, mental concentration, and mindfulness
  - Visceral and emotional agitation

- Emotional agitation increases: Hasna writes an angry letter to Allah

- After this expressive release of her emotions, Hasna experiences growing capacity for inner focus on her breath and an ability to quiet (and sometimes witness) her discursive mind

- However, her internal psychological focus yields many emotionally-charged images:
  - Fragmented and contorted bodies
  - A human figure that could not speak

- Hasna analyzes these images through autobiographical exploration and conceptual self-inquiry
  - Discovers they are symbolic expressions of the sociopolitical and family trauma she experienced as child
  - Her silenced self: speechless horror

- Hasna then experiences presence of an inner mentor (symbolic figure; archetype)
  - Inner mentor guides her emotional processing of these painful images/memories

- This female mentor becomes a numinous figure
  - Female mentor reveals an unwounded, core aspect of Hasna

- Through this experience of her whole, “unconditioned” self, Hasna feels deeper connection to Allah

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[My mentor appeared as a disfigured body. Then she] “shed her shell of hurt and scars.”

“I have not been able to get her back into the shell again!”

“This [meditation process] gives me a different picture of myself... I am an adult, not a scared child anymore…”

“So much of me was made by others. I can love them, without being afraid. I thank God for this opportunity.”

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Outcomes from Contemplative Self-Inquiry Process

“I was able to write down my self-defeating behaviors. I understand that these behaviors do not make me a lazy, stupid, or useless person. I am able to go back to different stages of my life when these behaviors began, and understand the reasons for them.”

“I am able to share my inner world with more than one person for the first time, without being so afraid of what they will think.”

“I feel a lot closer to Allah. I feel more at peace with myself. I have been reading and practicing my religion to a greater extent....My wish was to pray daily, three times. I am close to this goal.”
[The wounds in our heart] “can be a veil over our eyes and being.... [They] can take us to a place where we continue to repeat a pattern of hurt and anger, and not see what is underneath the hard cover of our hearts.”

[But the core of the heart is] “a vessel, which enhances our inner beauty [letting itself] be known to the rest without being afraid. It lets us know ourselves completely — where we do not feel incomplete and wronged.”

“Cosmos is not dark and lonely. Once we remove the veil of hurt from our vision, world and everyone changes — including ourselves.”

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Concluding Reflections on Case Study

1. Case study illustrates process of person-centered psychospiritual maturation and the process through which contemplative self-inquiry can mentor maturational learning in higher education.

2. Case study highlights results from the qualitative analysis which identified five dimensions of self in which this growth takes place: Bio-Behavioral, Cognitive-Sociocultural, Social-Emotional, Existential-Spiritual, and Integrative Formation of a Resilient Worldview.

3. Case study exemplifies results from the quantitative analysis. Hasna experienced growth in a resilient worldview, Confidence in Life and Self. In addition, the dynamic process of meditation that she experienced generated important and meaningful contemplative experiences that deepened her perceptions of secure existential attachment.

4. Case study and research project demonstrate the maturational value of *Know Your Self* as a vehicle for helping students become healthier, more self-aware human beings, who are able to deepen their own process of identity development while building inclusive community with others from different sociocultural identity backgrounds.

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Review of Conclusions from this Research Project:


2. Statistical analyses indicated: Experimental group demonstrated significantly more growth than the control group in a resilient worldview, Confidence in Life and Self, and enriched contemplative capacities for Secure Existential Attachment (INSPIRIT). These results provided triangulated, confirmatory evidence for the qualitative analyses.

Implications for Higher Education:

The *Know Your Self* Curriculum...

3. Is a carefully designed contemplative self-inquiry curriculum that effectively mentors culturally-inclusive community and psychological resilience in emerging adults.

4. Facilitates a process of person-centered psychospiritual maturation that can strengthen cultures of health, social justice, and peace on the higher education campus.

5. Is relevant to multiple academic disciplines at undergraduate and graduate levels as a pedagogical strategy for preparing students to foster a culture of health, social justice, and peace in our multicultural society.

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