Final Portfolio

Clay Kuznia

Stacie Rice

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Personal Essay Sketch

Sunlight floods my eyes as I wake up. My phone is attempting to wake me up with relaxing music, but I don’t exactly agree with my past self about waking up at this time. Eventually I will silence my phone, and sit up in my bed. The fact that it’s covered in thick memory foam makes that first step very hard. Then I pull the sheets up to my waist to stay warm and sit either straight or cross-legged. I take barely a minute or two and then begin my meditation process. Each session is slightly different. Sometimes I can focus purely and absolutely on my breath. Sometimes the air to too warm or cold. Sometimes I’m groggy, tired, or got some of the crappiest sleep imaginable. Regardless of the circumstances, I try to focus (or even un-focus) my mind. I normally feel different after each session. Either I’m more awake or just in an overall better mood. It only takes about ten or fifteen minutes before I’m ready to crawl out of bed and begin the day.

Meditation has gotten a very positive rap lately. A majority of people know that meditating regularly can help relieve stress. But I have a hunch that meditation can play a good role on one’s behavior. I am curious as to what kind of changes the brain undergoes during meditation, and if these psychological and/or physiological changes can affect one’s personality. My hunch comes from a high school English teacher who meditated regularly and had a very peculiar personality…

It was almost as if it were yesterday. The low lighting lit up my paper just enough so my writing was visible. There were about three to four lamps around the classroom, each fitting nicely in a corner. On one of those corners sat the teacher’s desk. My high school English teacher, Mr. Frode, was a slightly old, calm, and collected man. He was extremely open to almost any idea, never judged anybody, and couldn’t resist writing. He absolutely loved to write. He was very fitting as my English and creative writing teacher. Frode was interesting, so interesting that I took his creative writing class just so I could spend a little extra time with him. In that time I noticed his posture was erect and tall, but alternatively he swayed smoothly back and forth, almost with joy and comfort. It sounds rather weird to do this, but if you stare at him, you can almost see a thought come to his mind. I could see his body semi-convulsively react to the thought, his head and body would turn to the object/person of interest. Frode acted similarly when he wrote. His handwriting (or chicken-scratch) was so bad that - in a parallel universe - he could have been a doctor.

I would rank Mr. Frode as one of the most interesting beings I have ever been with. The man simply does not compare to anybody else I know. Patience comes easy with him. A student once stole his iPod touch, and the man hardly seemed upset. He always used it to play relaxing music during our writing sessions. “I’m almost certain of who took it” he said when I mentioned something about his iPod. “Are you going to do anything about it?” I asked, but his grunt and facial expression made it look like he was going to let it go. Another student flat out swore at him in front of his students. Frode completely shut the child down while remaining almost emotionally untouched. “You are more than welcome to leave class.” He stated sternly, but calmly. He was not there to argue, he was there to teach (unless the argument illustrated a point). I remember before each class he would stand outside the door to greet everyone that came in. Occasionally he would bring a whiteboard with him outside the door and write some sort of message to get your attention. One day he wrote “Smile?” just to see how many students, or faculty members, would smile back. In his creative writing class we always conveyed writing to be a magical way of transferring or converting thoughts, feelings, and events into another form. But there were thousands if not millions of different ways you could portray and perceive an event on paper. Each way it was written, with each word, and each syllable, it was different. The connotation of literature is extremely sensitive.

This was the world that my teacher lived in. He was like a mad scientist that dreamed of equations and formulas. Except for Frode those formulas were more like sentences or words put together in just the correct amounts in order to convey a perfect meaning or feeling. It didn’t take long for someone to realize he seemed a bit different from the average person. He wasn’t just there to teach you English or creative writing, he was there to teach you life lessons. A true teacher. It got to the point where I began to ask myself “Why him?’, “Why is it that he seems so different?” I figured he probably had an interesting background, so I began to ask around.

Many of my friends mentioned that he used to be a Trappist monk for about four years. Trappist monks typically refrain from speaking unless absolutely necessary. Because he was a monk, he got into the habit of meditating. I thought that was an important piece in his history. I knew meditation could have a variety of health benefits, and might be contributing to his overall state of mind. Of course meditation could not possibly be the only factor in determining Frode’s behavior. Each and every one of us behaves based on our genetics and environment. But I have a hunch that his meditation practices had a decent impact on his personality. This led me wondering not just about my teacher’s personality, but the shaping of the personality itself. Which in fact can be done through meditation (Keown, 98).

One day I came in after school specifically to question him about his meditation practices. “Just try it for 5 to 10 minutes when you’re just starting out. Your mind will wander, but don’t force it to stop wandering. Just refocus your mind.” This was my teacher’s tips about meditation when I finally picked his brain about it. The idea is to sit in a calm, quiet area - a place where I will not be disturbed. Then I am to sit upright, in a comfortable position, and focus on something of my choosing. This could be my breath, or just my body itself. One by one I attempt to relax each muscle, starting from the top or bottom of my body and slowly working toward the other end, until I have every muscle in a rested and comfortable position. Then I can focus on, for example, my breath. I may notice how my body feels and moves when I slowly breathe in, and out. I may notice the temperature of the air I breathe, and the amount of air my lungs take in. At this point the mind will begin to wander and daydream. Simply refocusing my mind onto my breath, or whatever I chose to focus on, will allow me to enter a meditative state. I keep doing this for as long as I feel is needed.

As a beginner it will be hard to meditate for even just ten minutes at a time. But once we are able to block out thoughts and truly focus, what happens? What process does the brain undergo during meditation? Damien Keown, a bioethicist on Buddhism, shines some light on the subject in his book *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction*. “Research suggests that the brain generates more alpha waves when in this [meditative] state, indicating a condition of relaxed creativity.” There is clearly something interesting happening in the brain during this mysterious process. I know that alpha waves are actually what the brain uses to maintain its sleep-wake cycle. Since these waves are prevalent during meditation, one might infer that a person may be in a lucid sleep state during while meditating. We’ve all had some exotic, crazy, and imaginative dreams. Perhaps meditation can administer a similar experience. Not to say that day-to-day relaxing sessions will cause hallucinations and lucid sensations. But it may allow the senses to be experienced from a different perspective. Just analyzing thoughts as they come in and out of consciousness can help to understand ones thoughts and feelings, and maybe even an underlying state of mind.

According to Keown, meditation can be defined as “an altered state of consciousness which is induced in a controlled manner” (98). This altered state of mind actually happens more often than one would think i.e. daydreaming or “zoning out”. I’ve driven my car for only ten to fifteen minutes and realized that my mind had wondered miles away. These experiences are often closely related to that of meditation. Unlike daydreaming or drug induced trances, meditation is a controlled and intentionally induced trance with no side effects or “bad trips” (Keown 99). It’s the “controlled manner” part that doesn’t happen as often, it’s hard to get a hold on our mind when it is running amok. Over time though, the urge for the mind to wonder during meditative sessions will decrease over time. Just like playing an instrument, or learning a new skill; Practice really does make perfect. Keown mentions in his book that after several months of consistent meditation, the mind becomes much easier to tame and control (101). The goal of meditation, from a Buddhist perspective, is “not to be ‘elsewhere’ but to be right here, fully conscious and aware. The aim is to ‘get one’s head together’, and become mentally concentrated rather than fragmented” (Keown 99).

I’m curious to know what psychological and physiological changes the mind endures over the course of meditation. The benefits of this activity are astounding. One may find an increased sense of calmness, mental stillness, and concentration (Keown 101). Keown says that “distractions, worries, doubts, and fears” fade away because the mind is living in the now. It makes sense really, there is no yesterday or tomorrow. There is only now; “before” and “after” are abstract concepts that society came up with. If I’m stuck worrying about the future, there is no room to enjoy the environment that I am in at this very moment. If I am not enjoying the only thing that truly exists, then I am hardly living a complete and genuine life.

As a freshman in college I am facing a variety of challenges that I haven’t personally come across before. I’m living on my own in my dorm. I have a new workload, a new job, and new people to talk to and be around. Some of those people I like, and some I’m not too fond of. These come along with many, many other obstacles and variables. But that’s just the beginning. Soon I will have to purchase all of my own food, pay my own bills, and take care of myself mentally and physically. College students, especially freshman, seem to be vulnerable to things like depression and social anxiety. I think that sometimes throwing somebody out into a semi-real world environment can make it obvious what they need to work on. Motivation and social issues can bubble to the surface. I don’t believe this happens to everyone but I think it happens to an awful lot of college freshman just getting a feel for the kind of environment that’s waiting for them outside their dorm walls. Perhaps if they could focus on the *now*, it might make the transition into college easier and less stressful. Meditation is a wonderful way of doing this. It allows one to let go of the past and future and let in the present. Doing this can even change the way your brain is physically wired (Keown 103). Buddhist’s practices are based on the belief that the brain is malleable and can be shaped and fitted to one’s liking. Neuroscience reinforces this idea with the discovery of neuroplasticity, which refers to the changes in neural pathways in response to a change in behavior, environment, and other factors. “For example, London taxi drivers have been shown to have a larger hippocampus probably due to the constant exercise of navigation skills” (Keown 103).

This actually has much to say about altering one’s personality. Buddhists’ general term for meditation is known as *bhāvanā* which translates to “cultivation” or literally “making become” (Keown 96). Buddhists see meditation as the high road for a journey on shaping oneself. It’s all about *making* and *becoming* a better you, whoever that “you” may be. Keown even states in his book that “meditation is the principal Buddhist strategy for making oneself what one wishes to be” (96). And if meditation can mold the mind and help shape us, it surely can shape anyone’s personality. It can help with stress, and has countless health benefits. Taking the time to relax and let thoughts run for ten or fifteen minutes each day – morning or night– can help to become a more relaxed, open-minded, and self-respecting individual. So why not start as soon as possible? College seems to be a very ideal time to start. If one creates good habits and breaks bad ones at a young age, it makes it easier down the road because those good habits are already in place. I encourage anyone, even the mildly interested, to try meditation for a short period of time.

Life is a journey; there will always be success, and failure. Everyone will come across new experiences and situations every hour of every day. It’s up to us to make those experiences worthwhile. Meditation is also a journey akin to life. It’s about change, and struggle, but not about the ending. If one always focuses their mind on the ending, they will never satisfy what leads up to it. If one enjoys the journey itself, I believe they will satisfy more goals and experiences then they ever thought they could. Frode exceeded my expectations on what a teacher encompasses. I was taught more than just papers, grammar, and how to read bad handwriting.

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Proposal Sketch

A child wakes up one morning and walks into the bathroom. He steps up onto a stool in order to reach for a toothbrush and begin brushing. The child accidentally slips off the stool and scrapes their leg. After crying for a moment, the boy gets back up, opens the cabinet, and grips a band aid in order to cover the cut.

People are taught right from the beginning how to take care of themselves. Each individual learns how to walk, talk, act in class, make friends, go to the bathroom, etc. The human race seems fairly fond of taking care of each other physically, but can we do this emotionally? Do we learn how to deal with common mental issues like failure, rejection, and loneliness? Guy Winch, a psychologist for over 20 years notices that “We sustain psychological injuries even more often than we do physical ones”. In his TED talk last year he highlighted the fact that a child may know how to cure a cut and brush their teeth twice a day, but not how to deal with emotional injuries like rejection and failure. Physical problems can seem obvious and imminent, while mental and emotional issues appear to be pushed away or even ignored.

Winch’s point is that we need to start teaching mental health until the basics of it are ubiquitous. This doesn’t mean to administer counseling or to simply educate people on the effects of, say, depression or anxiety. What he aims for is a basic “toolkit” per se that everyone can use to combat everyday mental issues. He, and I too, wants everyone to be educated on the basics of treating things like loneliness, depression, anxiety, and rejection. I agree with Winch, and believe that we need to show people how to handle basic mental disorders without having to seek for help. I personally know several people that think that drinking alcohol is a good way to relax and cope with a stressful event. It seems normal to have a glass of wine after a long day at work each night. But in fact that is not a healthy way to cope with stress (Smith, Robinson, and Segal).

According to John Grohol, an author of Psych Central, the number one myth about mental health is that mental health problems are uncommon. This is far from the truth when he states “In fact, nearly 1 out of every 5 Americans have a diagnosable mental disorder within their lifetimes”. One cannot just tell an individual that suffers from depression that “Oh you’re feeling depressed? Just shake it off, it’s all in your head”, imagine saying that to someone with a broken leg “Oh just walk it off, it’s all in your leg” (Winch). I have noticed that, specifically in males, people have a hard time opening up and allowing themselves to be emotional. Human beings are naturally emotional. Sometimes males (like myself) get the vibe that we are supposed to be strong. We are *supposed* to ask the girl out on a date, we aren’t *supposed* to show weakness. This is all wrong. Men and women are not supposed to act a certain way, any ways in which they act are all because of social and historical norms created by society only. Crying, feeling sad, guilty, or down are all normal feelings in moderation. I believe that everyone should be able to show emotion. The work environment doesn’t encourage emotion either, it often seems to encourage a poker-face. Every job is different, but typically an individual at work wants to be able to exude certain skills. An employed person may wish to stay focused, charismatic, and full of energy. Being positive, sociable, and easy to approach are good traits as well. But it is often hard to establish and work on these skills when there are deeper, underlying mental problems. In a high stress, fast paced environment there is little room for error and moments of emotion. Decisions must be made quickly and accurately. And people could get the wrong impression on one’s overall performance if that individual has unnoticed issues. I feel that it’s hard to stay above the water when it seems everything is against me. That’s why it’s of paramount importance that society is taught to deal with minor forms of mental health problems before they become major issues that affect our ability to function.

There is heavy evidence that America or even the world itself needs to start honing in on mental disorders. America has experienced far too many school shootings, 356,000 inmates have severe mental disorders compared to only 35,000 patients in “state psychiatric hospitals” (Rather). Mass homicides and suicides are the product of individuals with serious mental health problems with no one knowing and/or helping. I believe that everyone intends to do the right thing and be morally just. But I also know that mental instability can cause illogical and obsessive thoughts, which can lead to an individual making decisions that seem right to them, but are fundamentally incorrect. Society has been plagued with episodes of depression, eating disorders, anxiety, and various other issues. In 2014 Guy Winch mentions in his TED talk that “chronic loneliness increases your chance of an early death by 14%”. Mental health is the kryptonite of today’s well-being.

Although America may be suffering a mental health crisis, there are some actions we can take that would most likely help. In the same way that we teach kids about math, science, art, and many other skills – we can teach them how to handle their mental health. Mental hygiene isn’t something that only a few should practice, its hygiene, everybody should be doing it. Just as one may go to a doctor to check up on their blood pressure, one can assess themselves in order to treat their issue quickly and effectively and only then get help if external assistance is required. Anxiety, depression, loneliness, and fear are all far too common to have to see a specialist every time they come up. Instead our education system can be teaching the public how to manage themselves emotionally and giving them a mental first aid kit (Elmore). Simply knowing how to calm oneself down, block or omit negative thoughts, and logically and/or efficiently work in stressful situations can help sustain healthy emotions.

This works more than just in theory.

Now there are people who know how to do this. There are groups of people that understand why they feel the way that they do, and because of this they are better off not just mentally, but even physically as well. By understanding and caring for ourselves physically and mentally, we can set society up for success.

(Talk about what this mental “first aid kit” should be, how it should be taught and established, and also mention meditation)

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An Escher like World

A game hobbyist picks up the controller of their preferred gaming system, powers up the television, ramps up the sound, and finally relaxes on a comfy chair, couch, or possibly even the floor. “What am I going to play?” he/she may ask themselves. This is the frontline question that every gamer must answer. Battling it out in the new Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare may be fun, or maybe he/she could take a dive at racing… from the cops. Or this excited gamer could build a replica of the Empire State Building out of blocks in the famous game, Minecraft. Each game claims the title of a piece of art, or sometimes as a masterpiece created by many or even a single ambitious and visionary developer.

In Alexander Bruce’s Antichamber, released in 2013, the player is immersed in what Alexander was striving for - a masterpiece. He states in an interview that “Antichamber is a psychological, first person, exploration puzzle game set within an Escher like world.” (Tek Syndicate). Although there isn’t any of MC Escher’s art in the game itself, it does display scenarios and obstacles that seem impossible in the real world (Bruce). This is because the game works off of non-Euclidean geometry. An in-game example of this is the player’s first puzzle that they encounter. The player walks down a white hallway with the edge of each wall outlined in black; suddenly they see a fork in the path. On the left is a red staircase that leads downstairs, and on the right a blue staircase that leads upstairs. Say the player goes downstairs; he/she is wrapped around a corner to head down another hallway. Suddenly this new hallway has another fork; the player is presented with the exact same staircase as they just went through. Naturally the player would then try to go upstairs through the blue staircase instead of downstairs. After that the player is again wrapped around onto another hallway that contains the exact same staircases. No matter which path the player chooses the outcome is the same. The answer to the puzzle is simple, but not always obvious.

Antichamber is rich with brain teasers that range from simple and humorous, to near impossible. Instead of the player taking on each level one by one, the player is dumped into a vast world of puzzles and mind games. The world is big enough and the puzzles are complex enough that one could easily spend hours finding their way throughout the world. This gives a feeling of seamlessness throughout the world. Alexander Bruce tried specifically not to break the immersion in the game (Tek Syndicate). He mentioned that in another popular puzzle game called Portal, the immersion is broken when the player dies by falling into a pit of lava, and is then teleported back to the start. “That’s game logic, that’s completely ripped me out of the world and there is no story or explanation for that” Alexander states when posed a question about Portal. During the interview he also noted that “I want to try and make a game that doesn’t have death, and while I’m at it I’m going to do the same thing to menus. Because just having a menu pop up totally breaks all the immersion, I’m not happy with that.” Antichamber’s menu differs from normal menus due to the fact that you are still playing the game when one enters the menu (Bruce). When the escape key is pressed, the player is teleported to a room covered in black tiles. On one wall contains all the game options (i.e resolution, controls, mouse sensitivity, etc.). In order to change the settings you simply walk up to the wall and click on the enable/disable buttons. Another wall holds the map of the game, showing all the areas that you have explored, and also allowing you to jump to any location you wish – provided you have been there before. Keeping the player “in” the game kept it immersive and unique.

The art and graphics in the game also stand out. For a user that has played this game before, he/she could easily look at the screen and be able to determine if you were playing Antichamber. If you took some scratch paper, created simple geometric objects with a black sharpie, and filled some of those objects in with other colored sharpies, this is similar to what the world of Antichamber resembles. It’s a mainly a black and white game, that’s accented with bright colors. A very simplistic approach was taken for the graphics of this game; it gives you a clean, minimalistic feeling. Being that Alexander Bruce was the only developer for Antichamber, he most likely wanted to keep the graphics within the means of his ability. This does not mean that getting the graphics just right wasn’t difficult, no matter the level of graphical realism in a game, keeping a visual sense of a theme, convention, or style is challenging and important. The down side of Alexander’s piece of art is that it seems to bring out occasional headaches. After a roommate and I each played for an hour of two, we both started to get either a headache or slightly dizzy. Going from solid black to a vibrant blue, to deep red, and then to a pure white gives you a slow-mo strobe-like feeling.

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