*Co-Course Experience and Reflection*

For my co-course experience, I ate lunch with Duke student, Ellyse Hamlin, who was in a class called Positive Psychology. The overarching theme of the class was the importance in finding ways to be the most positive person you can be. While learning about their class was interesting, listening to their semester-long project they were assigned was fascinating. Each student had to pinpoint something in their lives that was making them anxious, upset or stressed. Once they had done this, they chose one of the techniques they had been taught that helps improve positivity, and do this for the semester to see if they would be able to become more positive about the original issue that was causing them such discomfort.

When Ellyse first mentioned this project to me I really liked the idea. Not only do I think that it forces us to tackle something that has been inhibiting our positivity, but it forces us to go outside our comfort zone. Too often, as Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt say in ‘The Coddling of the American Mind’, students are taught to have zero tolerance, and that it is ok to run from the things that cause distress. This project that Ellyse’s class was assigned goes against this concern to shield students from psychological pain, and instead has forced them to expose their weakness and find a way to become more positive despite it.

One year ago, Ellyse was told she had cancer. She was able to have a surgery just in time to fix everything, but the whole situation caused her severe stress, understandably so. The technique that Ellyse picked was meditation, which she committed to doing every day for the rest of the semester. While she struggled for the first few weeks, what she came to realize really helped her come to terms with this stressful experience, was unexpectedly this time that she devoted to herself to finally think in peace. She was able to really understand that these things happen but realized how grateful she is that she is alive, healthy, and surrounded by loving family and friends.

This lunch was so pleasantly surprising to me because, not only was I fortunate enough to listen to an incredible story full of bravery, but I loved listening to someone who had a similar meditation path as I did. We both struggled at first to let ourselves sit for a period of time as we are similarly restless people. Yet, we fought such restlessness and uncertainty and both have grown to really love and reap great benefits from sticking to a meditation routine.

To conclude, after speaking to Ellyse about her class, as well as her story, it made me think of the poem in the Poetry of Mindfulness book, called ‘To go into the dark…’, by Wendell Berry. Although the darkness is scary and a place in which we have learned to feel uncomfortable, the darkness too, “blooms and sings, and is travelled by dark feet and dark wings” (Berry, 2015). While it was really interesting to talk to Ellyse and hear someone else’s first experience with meditation, this co-course experience also taught me that we all have our own places of darkness that can cause negativity and stress, such as the death of a family member or physical injury. It is how we learn to live with that darkness that makes us the positive beings that we can be.