

Introduction

An Angel Museum

Don't just teach because that's all you can do. Teach because it's your calling. And once you realize that, you have a responsibility to the young people.

—Maya Angelou

The first story I share every semester in my sociology class, Consciousness, Creativity, and Identity, is the real-life history of the Angel Museum.

It all began in 1976, when Joyce and Lowell Berg were vacationing in Florida. They happened to stop at an antique shop, where they fell in love with an Italian bisque figurine of two angels on a seesaw. They immediately bought it and brought it back home to Beloit, Wisconsin, where it became the first cherished artifact in what would eventually become a very grand collection of angels.

With my students, I usually take some creative liberties with my story about the humble beginnings of the Angel Museum. I imagine Joyce and Lowell scouring the world for angel imagery—passionate in their obsession and abundantly inclusive. I know for a fact that they find angel imagery at rummage sales. They save plastic angels that come on the tops of cakes (with the frosting still encrusted on the bottom). They hunt down angels at craft shows and antique fairs. They look for angels in shops and in garages, and they happily embrace every angel they find.

I imagine Lowell coming home from work one day and exclaiming to Joyce, “I can't live like this anymore! The angels are taking over our home!” There are angels on the wallpaper and on the countertop, rows of angels in special handmade cabinets, and punch-out windows with angels dangling

from fishing wire. Joyce, of course, sees her cherished angels as art; she knows her collection is worthy of a great museum. She envisions herself as the caretaker of the angels. Her passion is so great and her heart so generous, she dreams of sharing her love of angels with the people of Beloit.

Joyce and Lowell begin their search for a new angel home in earnest. At first, there are some who doubt them—people who wonder if the world really needs an angel museum (especially one that includes “dollar-store special” angels stamped *Made in China*). But Joyce and Lowell prevail. Eventually, they find an old church building to lease. They load up a truck, and they set up shop. The angels are reframed, cleaned, put behind glass. Bright lights highlight the shining stars, and a small gift shop graces the lobby.

I imagine the first days as quiet—Joyce in her angel costume at the front door, Lowell wringing his hands over slow ticket sales, a trickle of friends wandering about admiring the eclectic and somehow strangely inspiring collection of angels. And then, suddenly (I pause here when I am speaking for an especially dramatic punch) . . . Oprah! Oprah hears about the Angel Museum and donates her collection of more than six hundred Black angels. Now, busloads of visitors arrive from across the Midwest to share in Joyce and Lowell’s dream. The Angel Museum is a legitimate tourist attraction.

I share this story with my students for many reasons. On the surface, the Angel Museum story offers them an example of the infectious power of a shared dream and an allegory for how we construct meaning as a culture. It illustrates a central theme in the academic field of sociology: that meaning is created, not inherent or fixed. I share with my students my guess that the Bergs’ angel collection grew innocently and organically. The angel from the top of the cake was licked clean of frosting and placed on the shelf above the kitchen sink. Years later, when placed under glass and lit from behind, it resonated in a completely new way. The collection gained status when it moved from the Berg home to a museum building. And it gained prestige when the powers that be, including Oprah, the local press, and funders, celebrated its worth. What was once considered kitsch became museum-worthy art under the loving gaze of the Bergs.

I also share this story with my students because it’s a powerful metaphor for the creation of my class, SOC 322: Consciousness, Creativity, and Identity.



When I tell people that I teach at an art and design school, they immediately assume that I am a working artist. I never dispute their assumption. While I teach sociology, I view my work as art. I envision culture as a tapestry of sorts—understanding how it is woven together allows us to see the ways our life patterns are entrenched in our society. As Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “But relations and connection are not somewhere and sometimes, but everywhere and always.”¹ What excites me about sociology is that by investigating these connections, we begin to understand how we fit in—or don’t fit in—with our culture, and by understanding how we are connected, we gain the power to more clearly feel and grow empathy for ourselves and others.

Being a student of cultural patterns for most of my life has convinced me of one basic truth: compassion is the source of human happiness. We see this in personal relationships, in community initiatives, and in every sphere of public and private life. Where there is compassionate action there is social justice, where there are compassionate relationships there are healthy families, and when we suffer collectively from natural disasters or national tragedy we seek compassionate leadership. Compassion and loving-kindness serve as the root source of the best aspects of our human culture. And where these qualities are absent, we suffer in lonely despair and darkness.

Compassion serves as the golden thread that runs through the cultural tapestry I envision. As a sociology teacher working at an art and design school, I became obsessed with weaving this gold thread through my classroom. I asked myself repeatedly: Is the way that I am teaching sociology inspiring my students to understand their interconnection to each other and the broader world? Do these art students, who work so brilliantly with their hands and eyes, recognize that their lives are equally important works of art? Using the theme of compassion for oneself and others, I began to wonder what would happen if I tried to weave together three separate strands of influence into a single braid in my classroom. How might I bring objectivity, subjectivity, and unity together in the classroom? And would an environment that included all three of these approaches to knowing produce a better student, a more compassionate citizen, a happier individual?

I set out to design and implement a class with the goal of exploring these questions. The process of designing the curriculum included three

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Spiritual Emerson* (London: Penguin, 2008), 184.

important components. First, a syllabus with the expected titles of a midlevel sociology class. Second, the creation of a unique research paper assignment: the self. And, third, the inclusion of a meditation practice to allow students to feel the unity that underlies all experience. Together, these three approaches cultivate the silence and self-awareness needed for true introspection and profound thought.

The class's academic subject matter has been developed around the idea of investigating the impact of contemporary culture on the development of personal identity. Sociologists have developed a multitude of ways to define different identities. These include our race, class, and gender as well as our role identity, social identity, and collective identity. Each of these identities is related to an individual's self-concept. We use these different identities to navigate the world, as they help us infer our similarities and differences with other people. But, how do we teach students to see and understand our connections and the sameness that underlies all our experience—our common humanity?

This question led naturally to the second component of my class: the self. In order to inspire my students to integrate the academic concepts in sociology with their subjective experience of themselves in the world, I challenge them to write a paper in which they explore the sociological concepts we study through the lens of several of their own life experiences. By applying critical analysis of the texts we study to their own lives and integrating both objective and subjective insight, these young people begin to discover the full potential of their minds. Moreover, instead of just a grade—a number or a letter—my students receive personal letters, letters from me to them. Following each assignment, and at the end of the course, each student receives a letter that offers not just guidance, critique, and reflections on their academic work, but mentorship, support—and yes, love—for them as students, as learners, and as individuals. (Here, I must offer the caveat that my approach to this class is linked to my broader mission to gain an understanding of the impact of consciousness-centered educational programs. I recognize fully that it would be difficult for most teachers to provide such time-intensive, tailored feedback to every student enrolled in their classes. This is not to suggest that the work done in other classrooms is less substantive: rather, it is an acknowledgement of the unique conditions of my situation.)

The third component of the class, meditation, required a bit more thought. In fact, I considered implementing several different meditation styles. It was important to me that my students be taught by professionally

trained meditation teachers. My goal was to be able to measure the impact of the integration of the practice, so I wanted to approach the meditation from an evidence-based perspective. This process is more clearly outlined in chapter 2. In the end, I chose to include a mantra-based meditation practice. My own twenty-five year practice is rooted in this tradition. As a result, it seemed natural, and I felt the most prepared, to offer my students the same technique in class. Initially, my students learned Transcendental Meditation, and later Primordial Sound Meditation—both mantra-based practices.

Combining the objective process of intellectually questioning the boundaries of identity with the subjective experience of transcending those same boundaries offers students a unique opportunity. As the great sages of history suggest, when a person is able to transcend the experience of living as a finite self with a limited ego, they touch the universal spirit that connects us all to the eternal, unchanging, infinite unmanifest that pervades each and every one of us. This is the knowledge and the experience I seek to share with my students—that we have a “here and now” identity and a timeless connection to the infinite beyond.

By integrating the skills of introspection, silence, and reflection with intellectual engagement, I offer my students not only a formal introduction to the academic disciplines of sociology and identity studies, but a guided opportunity to learn for the sake of self-discovery. Throughout this book I refer to this model as consciousness-centered education.



When I first proposed the idea of integrating meditation into the core curriculum of my class, I was met with deep skepticism and resistance. The idea of sitting in silence seemed to threaten the idea of classrooms as active spaces designed for learning. Fortunately, things have changed significantly in higher education circles since then. As the growing body of research on the benefits of mindfulness and meditation has evolved, educators have become significantly more open to the idea of integrating silence into the classroom. There are programs designed specifically to reduce delinquency, improve test scores, and enhance creativity. While 2009 marked the first annual conference of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society at Amherst, today that same organization sponsors dozens of webinars, conferences, and training retreats.

Part of the pleasure of developing this course stems from the excitement of being part of a new wave of innovative initiatives in the

academy. Driven, in large part, from an increased understanding of brain science, meditation in education is undergoing a renaissance of sorts. Recent research in the field of neuroscience offers evidence that “every sustained activity ever mapped—including physical activities, sensory activities, learning, thinking, and imagining—changes the brain as well as the mind.”² We now know that the brain we were born with changes over time and is influenced both by experience and practical exercises, including mindfulness exercises and meditation. The research is conclusive: We can rewire our brains to think and feel differently. As a result of this new information, contemplative pedagogies in the classroom are viewed with less skepticism and often as a vehicle for transformational growth.

And over the last decade, my class has become one of the most popular offerings at the College of Creative Studies (CCS) in Detroit and was the subject of a short documentary film, *Tuning the Student Mind*, from which this book takes its title. Directed by my former student, Chelsea Richer (who now goes by her married name, Chelsea Jackson), the film shares the transformational journey of three students enrolled in my class. In addition to being nominated for a Social Impact Media Award, the film aired on Detroit Public Television and at the Freep Film Festival. Since then, I have enjoyed the opportunity to share the film with hundreds of college students and faculty members on college campuses across the country. During follow-up conversations and correspondence with teachers, students, and higher educational administrators, it has become obvious to me that there exists a sincere interest to learn more about the content and structure of my class.

This book shares my own story of working to create opportunities for students to look deeply into their own personal development and life as a part of the interconnected web of human experience. I invite you to join my students and me as we journey together through the class, exploring issues of identity, consciousness, and creativity at the individual, communal, and global levels. Each chapter in this book covers a week of the class and focuses on a different concept in the sociology of identity studies. I share some of the stories and activities I use to teach this material, as well as the pedagogical theories behind consciousness-centered education. I also include personal stories from my own journey that highlight how

2. Norman Doidge, *The Brain Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science* (London: Penguin, 2007), 288.

the teacher-student relationship is one of reciprocal learning. Each chapter concludes with an excerpt from a student paper discussing how the sociological concept discussed in the chapter applies to his or her own life. It is followed by an excerpt from my personal response to the student's paper.

Choosing the papers that are included in the book was an intuitive process—frankly, the papers that ended up in the book were some of the best written, most heartfelt, and most obviously related to the themes discussed in class. In short, I felt that these papers revealed awakenings—qualitative evidence that students gain a new way of seeing the self as related to culture, family, and past events in my class. These excerpts of student work and teacher responses illustrate how consciousness-centered education transforms and enriches the student-teacher relationship.

In creating a new type of college course, I did not at first intend to radically disrupt the usual student-teacher relationship. But in reflection on a decade of the practice, I see that my students and I have done just that. My attempt to engage the whole being in the educational process forces me to move beyond intellectual discourse. It forces my students and me to engage emotionally, spiritually, and ethically.

As a result, this book is deliberately personal and subjective, because it makes the case for bringing these qualities into the classroom and highlights, through its form as a personal memoir, that there are levels of understanding that cannot be accessed by objective accounts alone. It is not intended as a comprehensive overview or an objective defense of contemplative practices in education. Rather, it is essentially a teaching memoir that offers one subjective account of incorporating meditation practices and subjective reflection into a higher education course.

It is my hope that my story will resonate with professors working in contemplative studies and education departments at the college level. I also see this book serving as a resource to teachers in training who may consider incorporating meditation practices into their future courses. But, if truth be told, it is my most fervent hope that this book appeals to college students who may see themselves in the shared stories of their peers and feel inspired to know that there is a viable pathway to expanding their sense of self and their educational experience.



When I first started designing my class, people looked at me sideways. Similar to Joyce with her collection of angels, I was that eccentric lady

with a weird hobby she can't shut up about. Slowly, with persistence and consistency, I have proven to my institution and administrators that this model for education is transformative. Student feedback, research evidence, and institutional support are the legitimizing forces that validate my model. This book is a guided tour of my museum.