

CRW 4930

The Poetry of Mindfulness



Course Syllabus Spring 2021

Class meets Tuesday Night 6:30 – 9:15 ET Online synchronous, Teams

Office hours Tuesday Afternoon 3:00 – 6:00 ET Online by appointment, Teams

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Dear Students,

In this course, we practice reading poetry with the intention of developing skills of mindfulness, leading to deeper self-awareness, heightened observation, and increased compassion.

Reading and writing mindfulness poetry, along with meditation, are powerful practices that help us

- explore the mind-body relationship
- connect to our feelings
- expand our sense of who we are, beyond fear and self-judgment
- discover inner resources that can change our everyday life and our habitual reactivity
- awaken a deeper capacity for insight and wisdom
- transform our worldview from one of isolation and confusion to one of connection
- broaden our perspective and deepen our courage, based on seeing things just as they are¹.

This course is meant to offer many mindfulness and writing options and to introduce you to resources for further study, based on your personal interests and passions.

We'll use the following “gates” to enter our study and practice: Silence, Listening, Observation, Walking Meditation, Conversation and Mirror, Self-forgetting, Joy, Wisdom, and Inquiry.

As you practice this semester, you may find yourself becoming more patient, more chill, and more compassionate. You will see your core writing skills—insight, observation, clarity, detail work, and sensory engagement—improve significantly.

I invite you to sample everything with an open mind, and then take what's useful, and leave the rest behind.

Welcome to our class!

--Warmly, Dr. Heather Sellers

• ¹ Some of the language here comes from the [Insight Meditation Society](#).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

MINDFULNESS AND POETRY: AN OVERVIEW	4
HOW OUR COURSE WORKS	5
TEXTS REQUIRED	5
WORK REQUIRED	6
ASSIGNMENT DETAILS	6
FINAL PROJECT: INQUIRY	6
DISCUSSIONS IN CANVAS	7
DAILY DIARY	8
DRAFTS OF POEMS & WORKSHOP PARTICIPATION	9
CLASS PARTICIPATION	9
COURSE CONCEPTS	11
CORE POETRY WRITING CONCEPTS	11
MINDFULNESS CONCEPTS	11
CALENDAR AND SCHEDULE OF CLASSES	12
CLASS AND MODULE FORMAT	12
SPRING 2021 IMPORTANT DATES	12
SCHEDULE OF CLASSES	12
INQUIRY PROJECT: RESOURCES	13
BOOKS—SINGLE AUTHOR	13
BOOKS—ANTHOLOGIES	14
APPS	15
BASIC MEDITATION	15
WEBSITES	15
POPULAR TEACHERS	16
PODCASTS	16
FILMS AND VIDEOS	17
BIPOC RESOURCES	17
POETRY AND MIND	18
MEDITATION RESOURCES	18
SHORT MINDFULNESS VIDEOS ONLINE	19
INTERVIEWS WITH POETS	19

This is the *Course Syllabus: your guide to the content of the course*. The important policies that govern the course are located in a sister document: *Course Syllabus: Policies*.

Mindfulness and Poetry: An overview

Mindfulness is a buzzword these days, whether in health and wellness, parenting, education, the workforce, counseling, spirituality ... but what does it mean? Here's one way to understand it: *Mindfulness is keeping our heads and hearts where our bodies are*. Moment by moment, we sustain a deep, nonjudgmental awareness of our thoughts, emotions, physical sensations and surroundings, right where we are.

In reading this [web]page, for example, you invest your full self in the act of reading. You're right here, right now, experiencing the text ... until a moment arrives when you're not. Sooner or later, that moment will come. Guaranteed. A sound or smell will distract you. A stray thought will lead you into a thicket of ideas. You'll be snagged by sentiment or caught up in a rush of feeling. That's okay. Once you notice the drift of your attention, you return to the page. *Gently*. Rather than blame or scold yourself for wandering off, you accept that it happened and bring yourself back.

We cultivate mindfulness throughout our days by returning to the present moment, again and again. This allows us to actually live our lives instead of just going through the motions. The more mindful we become over time, the happier we are. Studies reveal that regular mindfulness practice reduces stress, promotes health, stimulates learning and creativity, enhances relationships, helps us face suffering and loss, and strengthens our compassion for others.

Many resources for mindfulness practice quote snippets of poetry or even publish entire poems. The website of the [Center for Mindfulness at the University of California San Diego](#), for instance, will provide you with links to around eighty poems used in its Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction classes. [Jon Kabat-Zinn](#), [Sharon Salzberg](#), [Joseph Goldstein](#) and other esteemed mindfulness teachers regularly invoke poetry in their books and workshops. What accounts for this popular coupling of poetry and mindfulness?

As its very appearance makes plain, poetry invites a different kind of reading than prose. The white space around the text slows us down. Like an island on the page, its shape appeals to the eye. It begs for attention. It wants to be heard. When we choose to listen, we bring the poem to life. Our voice revels in the musicality, our breath is shaped by the lines. The imagery heightens our senses. The language revives our spirits.

The act of reading a poem—any poem—can therefore become an exercise in mindfulness. And our experience of the poem is magnified when its *subject* is particularly mindful. The poem might demonstrate what mindfulness is, recount an experience of it, or offer advice on how to practice

it; perhaps it fleshes out a mindfulness theme, such as acceptance, impermanence, non-clinging (“letting go”), compassion, or the unity of all things. Such *mindfulness poems* inspire us to live better, and to make our world better; at the same time, they grant us a taste of being good enough, just as we are, in this world, just as it is.

Poems will teach you about mindfulness without your asking.

— From “The Invitation,” introducing *Poetry of Presence*

How Our Course Works

Each week, we meet together on Tuesday night to read a set of mindfulness poems together and to learn about poetry and ourselves.

Your engaged presence at these sessions is essential. You do not have to read the poems in advance, but of course you may. And you do not have to write responses to the poems. Instead, during the week you will be experimenting with various mindfulness-based activities, including writing original poems.

Attend the lively lecture and contribute to our live conversation. You’ll also bring a poem each week, in which you are practicing the course concepts, and you’ll meet in a small group with trusted peers to workshop the techniques we are studying. I will sit in on your groups to offer support and guidance. Most students say the three hour session pretty much flies by.

Throughout the course, you will respond to other students in Canvas Discussions, regarding their poems-in-progress, and you’ll update us on your personal mindfulness explorations as well. There is not one specific approach to mindfulness in our course; all opinions, backgrounds, and personal interests are welcomed.

Lastly, you’ll spend the month of April on a personal inquiry project, where you delve into the material that is of greatest interest to you: a specific mindfulness teacher, for example, or a mindfulness poet you really want to get to know in depth. You could listen to a series of interviews with poets or pursue a short course in Christian poetry or Zen basics. I’ll help you devise a do-able and meaningful no-fail project, and you’ll submit your results and a couple of terrific poems as your final project.

Texts Required

All readings are posted in Canvas Modules. There are no required books to purchase for this course.

Work Required

Final Project: Inquiry	20%
Discussions in Canvas	25%
Daily Diary	10%
<i>6 posts + peer reactions</i>	
Posted Poems + Responses on Canvas	15%
Workshop Participation	15%
Class Participation/Attendance	15%

Our class is a community and your presence is necessary and valued. Please make every effort to attend class and come prepared to contribute wholeheartedly to workshop.

If you miss workshop, you must a) have a reason and b) submit a detailed written response to each poet in your group, copied to me via USF email in order to get credit for workshop participation.

Assignment Details

Final Project: Inquiry

Objective: embark on a sustained in-depth inquiry into a specific aspect of mindfulness poetry that captures your interest and report back what you learned.

The final project is entirely self-directed and has three components.

1. *The Inquiry.*

Choose an area of mindfulness poetry to explore more deeply. You may wish to read several books by a single author, such as Anne Lamott, Thich Nhat Hahn, or a poet such as Pablo Neruda or Basho. You might be particularly interested in haiku or poetry by nuns. Or, you may wish to explore a web-based resource, such as the Insight Meditation Society or Black Yoga Collective. You could listen to talks by a single teacher or various teachers. You may wish to listen to a sequence of podcasts or watch videos from On Being or Happiness or listen to interviews with poets.

A full list of suggested resources appears at the end of this syllabus; you are free to choose from this list or to propose your own ideas for a sustained deep dive into mindfulness and/or poetry.

Aim to spend 6-8 hours reading, listening, viewing. That's two or three books or 6-8 hours of listening/viewing.

Think about what you want to get from the inquiry, for yourself, in advance. What questions do you seek answers to?

Take notes on what you are learning and experiencing as you read/view/listen/listen.

You'll do some background research on your resources; individual projects will be designed in consultation with the instructor

2. *Two Poems.*

Choose two poems to present as part of your final project.

Choose one of your poems from the semester that you feel embodies a number of our course concepts from both columns, writing techniques and mindfulness techniques.

Choose a poem from our packet, or one you find on your own, through your personal inquiry, that you feel embodies a number of our course concepts, from both categories.

3. *The Letter.*

Write a letter to me, your instructor, tell me what you learned during your inquiry and present your two poems.

- What questions did you set out to answer at the beginning of your inquiry? What were you most curious about?
- What did you learn during your studies? What are your seven - ten key take aways?
- What course concepts did you come to better understand, specifically?
- Specifically: How do the two poems you are including exemplify course concepts? Explain at least three course concepts in each of the poems. (Six different concepts.)
- What are the most valuable things you have learned, personally, during this course?

Be specific and offer examples. Your letter will be at least 5 paragraphs (bullet point sections are fine—it's a letter, not an essay) and you should aim for roughly 250-500 words (plus the poems).

Discussions in Canvas

Objective: contribute to class community by sharing your observations and reactions to content.

There are two kinds of Discussions in this course. First, there are the Discussions of your peer's poems each week. Second, you'll respond to readings and media relevant to each module in Discussion.

I always want to know what you think about various aspects of our study; your peers will also be intrigued to learn from you and see the world through your eyes.

Discussion posts are graded in terms of depth, thoughtfulness, and engagement.

Responses to peers in these Discussions are welcomed but not required—reply as you wish when you wish.

Daily Diary

Objective: Hone your observation skills by practicing regularly with intention and attention

Most writers find their creative writing improves, sometimes dramatically, by keeping a daily observation diary. We record four things: what we saw, what we did, what we overheard people say and we do a quick sketch of something right in front of us, to train the eye. Note that this is not a journal of feelings, emotions, and reactions—it’s the opposite. And much more difficult!

You’ll practice for two weeks. The intention is to record each day, but if you are able to get six days, that is great success!

I use [Fabriano EcoQua A4](#) soft cover lined and unlined journals. They are same size as printer paper. You may use any journal you like or just plain printer paper.

Each entry is supposed to be carefully observed, highly accurate and tiny—a small and super specific observation.

<i>What I Saw</i> 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	<i>What I Did</i> 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
<i>What I Overheard</i> (three or more lines of dialogue you overheard from fellow humans)	<i>A simple drawing of something you are looking at right now—your mug, phone, water bottle...etc.</i>

1	
2	
3	

You'll upload images from your daily diary (so writing in a legible manner is important) and you will read and comment on what you enjoy from the entries posted by your classmates.

Drafts of Poems & Workshop Participation

Objective: practice mindfulness techniques by writing poems from prompts; self-assess in workshop and offer constructive feedback on course concepts to peers in workshop and in

Canvas Discussions

Each week, you will write a poem from a prompt. (If you don't like the prompt, you may ask for an alternate suggestion or propose your own.) You'll have certain course concepts—both mindfulness-based and poetry-based—that you are demonstrating in each poem assignment.

You'll submit your poem to a Discussion in Canvas before class. Respond to two peers each week, giving feedback on the poem and its execution of course concepts.

In Class Workshop

Upload your poem to your Teams Group. Before each workshop, you'll be given specific directions on how to conduct your review session with your peers. You will read your poem to the group and receive feedback.

This is a supportive workshop. We seek to help each other improve as poets and writers, of course. But it's also important each member of the workshop leave the session inspired to write, with increased awareness of what is working well on the page as well as what may need more attention/improvement.

Class Participation

Objectives: 1) contribute to and benefit from hearing diverse opinions and observations of all in the class as we discuss poetry and mindfulness concepts and techniques. 2) improve one's skill at making concise, thoughtful oral comments in a group setting.

This course is a little different from many online courses: together, we seek to create a supportive, meaningful creative community. To that end, your engaged, thoughtful verbal participation is a vital part of our collective experience.

Please make sure you consistently abide by the following best practices for synchronous online classes:

- Video is on
- Mute until called on
- Professional appearance and background
- Arrive early or on time
- No distractions (eating, pets, background activity, texting, multi-tasking)
- Make contributions in chat or conversation in each class period
- Be present and engaged throughout entire class period
- Respect viewpoints of others
- Be mindful of body language
- Keep contributions brief and to the point
- Regularly contribute comments and ask questions (prompted and unprompted)

If there is a legitimate reason you are not able to participate in the expected, required manner, consult with the professor to arrange alternate options.

It will be very challenging/impossible to participate in this course by phone. You need access to a desktop, an ethernet cable, a neutral background, and a private, quiet space for our synchronous sessions.

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Course Concepts

Core Poetry Writing Concepts

Clarity
Fifth Exit
Flashlight Title
Going Cold
Images
Line
Metaphor
Particle Free
Rhythm
Showing (versus explaining)
Simplicity
Sound Work
Subtext
Surprise
Tension
The Line
Turns
Vulnerability

Mindfulness Concepts

Acceptance
Alertness
Being
Belonging
Compassion
Detachment/Non-attachment
Friendliness
Gratitude
Habitual Responses
Honesty
Impermanence
Intimate Attention
Joy
Light-hearted/Open-hearted
Listening
Mirror Poems
Non-clinging (“letting go”)
Non-separation/Oneness
Noticing
Observing
Opening
Ordinary
Questions
Seeing Clearly
Self Forgetfulness
Silence
Smile
Stopping
Surprise
The Sacred Pause
Uncertainty
Walking meditation
Wisdom

DRAFT

Calendar and Schedule of Classes

Class and Module Format

1. Explore mindfulness training and post observations in Canvas Discussion.
2. Read poems together in class.
3. Receive new writing prompt.
4. Post new poem in Canvas Discussion and respond to two peers.
5. In class, workshop poems from previous prompt.

Spring 2021 Important Dates

January 2021

11 – Spring Semester, First Day of Classes

18 – Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday

March 2021

29 – Summer/Fall registration for degree-seeking students begins

April 2021

12-18 - Spring Break

26-30 – Spring Test Free Week

30 - Spring last day of classes

SCHEDULE OF CLASSES

Class sessions are held on Teams on Tuesday night, 6:30- 9:15. The room is open fifteen minutes before class for “hallway” chatting.

January

12 Introduction. Your experience as a writer, as a seeker.

Basic Core Course Concepts

19 Silence and Listening

26 Observation

February

2 Observation

9 Daily Diary

16 Daily Diary

23 Walking Meditation

March

2 Conversation and Mirror Poems

9 Self-Forgetfulness

16 Joy

23 Wisdom

30 Inquiry

April

6 Self-directed inquiry project continues.

13 NO CLASS SPRING BREAK

20 Self-directed inquiry project continues.

27 Last week. Test free. Inquiry project due.

Inquiry Project: Resources

Books—Single Author

1. Anne LaMott:

Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith. Pantheon Books.

Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith. Riverhead Books.

Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith. Riverhead Books.

Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers. Riverhead Books. .

Stitches: A Handbook on Meaning, Hope and Repair. Riverhead Books.

2. *Love Poems from God*
3. *Migration*, W. S. Merwin
4. *The Essential Rumi*, ed Coleman Barks
5. *Sacred Poetry* Stephen Mitchell
6. Jane Hirshfeld:

Nine Gates

Ten Windows

7. Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now*
8. Thich Nhat Hanh *The Miracle of Mindfulness* or *You Are Here*

Books—ANTHOLOGIES

1. *The Poetry of Impermanence, Mindfulness, and Joy*, edited by John Brehm
2. *The First Free Women: Poems of the Early Buddhist Nuns* by Matty Weingast and Bhikkhuni Anandabodhi
3. *Poetry of Presence: An Anthology of Mindfulness Poems*, edited by Phyllis Cole-Dai and Ruby R. Wilson
4. *The Essential Haiku: Versions of Basho, Buson, & Issa*, edited by Robert Hass
5. *Mountain Home: The Wilderness Poetry of Ancient China*, edited by David Hinton
6. *Women in Praise of the Sacred: 43 Centuries of Spiritual Poetry by Women*, edited by Jane Hirshfeld

7. A Book of Luminous Things: An International Anthology of Poetry, edited by Czeslaw Milosz
8. The Enlightened Heart: An Anthology of Sacred Poetry, edited by Stephen Mitchell
9. American Journal: Fifty Poems for Our Time, edited by Tracy K. Smith
10. Zen Poems of China and Japan: The Crane's Bill, edited by Lucien Stryk and Takaski Ikemoto
11. The Art of Losing: Poems of Grief and Healing, edited by Kevin Young

Apps

Head Space

Om

Dharma Seed

Reviews of Apps

A review of five apps:
attention/

<https://www.mindful.org/free-mindfulness-apps-worthy-of-your-attention/>

A review of nine apps:

<https://www.zerotoskill.com/best-free-meditation-apps/>

BASIC MEDITATION

[Gina Sharpe](#) (audio, video, and lots of links for basic practices)

Joana Hardy <https://www.joannahardy.org/>

[latinx and buddhist](#)

Websites

Centers

1. UC San Diego: <https://medschool.ucsd.edu/som/fmph/research/mindfulness/mindfulness-resources/Pages/default.aspx>
2. Insight Meditation Society
3. Dawn Scott [Inward Bound](#)

4. Black Yoga Collective <https://www.blackyogacollective.com/>
5. Black and Buddhist
6. Plum Village <https://plumvillage.org> (listen to <https://plumvillage.org/thich-nhat-hanh-dharma-talks/>)
7. San Francisco Zen Center <https://www.sfzc.org/offerings/dharma-talk-archive>
8. BIPOC Sangha <https://www.dharma.org/bipoc-sangha-online-weekly-sitting-group/>

Popular Teachers

Cara Lai

Llama Rod Owens

Ruth King

Sharon Salzberg

Joseph Goldstein

Jack Kornfeld

Tara Brach

Pema Chodron

Eckhart Tolle

[Gil Fronsdale](#)

angel Kyodo Williams

Jarvis Masters

<https://www.freejarvis.org/podcast>

Roshi Joan Halifax

Podcasts

On Being (Try this talk on [Islam](#))

DRAFT

Ten Percent Happier

Films and videos

A Girl Like Me

Kiri Davis

The Color of Fear

Lee Mun Wah

Race – The Power of An Illusion

BIPOC Resources

IMS's four-part series: Diversity and the Dharma:

Diversity and the Dharma: For the Liberation of All Beings

Diversity and the Dharma: Challenges and Opportunities

Diversity and the Dharma: Affinity Sits

Diversity and the Dharma: Facing Our Conditioning

Being Black: Zen and the Art of Living with Fearlessness and Grace

Reverend angel Kyodo Williams

Black Buddha: Changing the Face of American Buddhism

Lama Choyin Rangdrol

Dreaming Me: Black, Baptist & Buddhist

Jan Willis

Dharma, Color, and Culture

Hilda Gutierrez Baldoquin, ed.

Free Your Mind: An African American Guide to Meditation

by Cortez R. Rainey

Healing Rage: Women Making Inner Peace Possible

Ruth King

Making the Invisible Visible: Healing Racism in Our Buddhist Communities (PDF of booklet) Sheridan Adams, Mushim Ikeda-Nash, Jeff Kitzes, Margarita Loinaz, Choyin Rangdrol, Jessica Tan and Larry Yang

Mindful of Race: Transforming Racism from the Inside Out

Ruth King

Spanish Speaking Mindfulness Community Resources

(Recursos Comunitarios de Mindfulness)

For more information in Spanish, please visit the Bilingual Center for Mindfulness

at: www.bilingualmindfulness.com .

Japanese Speaking Mindfulness Community Resources

(日本語でのマインドフルネスとセルフ・コンパッションの情報は下記リンクをご覧ください。)

For more information in Japanese, please visit <https://mindfulheartcenter.com/>

Poetry and Mind

“Poetry is Like Music to the Mind.” article published by Neuroscience News (October 9, 2013). “New brain imaging technology is helping researchers to bridge the gap between art and science by mapping the different ways in which the brain responds to poetry and prose.”

Ellen Langer: “Science of Mindlessness and Mindfulness.” podcast and transcript interview by *On Being’s* Krista Tippett. Langer “is a social psychologist who some have dubbed ‘the mother of mindfulness.’ But she defines mindfulness with counterintuitive simplicity: the simple act of actively noticing things — with a result of increased health, competence, and happiness.”

Meditation Resources

Guided Audio Files to Practice Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, prepared by the UC San Diego Center for Mindfulness (MP3 format).

Mindfulness Toolkit. University of Southern California’s Masters in Social Work program created a Mindfulness Toolkit which contains a list of mindfulness tips and meditation tracks for beginners.

Short Mindfulness Videos Online

- [“What Is Mindfulness?”](#): Jon Kabat-Zinn (5 minutes).
- [“What Mindfulness Really Is”](#): Joseph Goldstein (4:25 minutes).
- [“Just Breathe”](#) by Julie Bayer Salzman & Josh Salzman, featuring the kids of Citizens of the World Charter School, in Mar Vista, CA (3:41).
- [“Exercise for Connecting”](#): Angel Kyodo Williams (5:33).
- [“A Simple Mindfulness Practice to Restore Vitality”](#): Tara Brach (5:13).
- [“Mindfulness Meditation”](#): Sharon Salzberg (7:12).
- [“Oprah Winfrey Talks with Thich Nhat Hanh Excerpt”](#) (21:47).
- [“Don’t Try to Be Mindful”](#): Daron Larson (11:59).
- [“What is Mindfulness ... And What Does It Mean to You?”](#): Melli O’Brien (4:46).

Interviews with Poets

[A. R. Ammons](#), [Margaret Atwood](#), [Jimmy Santiago Baca](#), [Ellen Bass](#), [Wendell Berry](#), [Robert Bly](#), [Chana Bloch](#), [John Brantingham](#), [Lucille Clifton](#), [Billy Collins](#), [Barbara Crooker](#), [Mahmoud Darwish](#), [Kirsten Dierking](#), [David Allan Evans](#), [Patricia Fargnoli](#), [Julia Fehrenbacher](#), [Laura Foley](#), [Nikki Giovanni](#), [Louise Glück](#), [Rafael Jesús González](#), [Charles Goodrich](#), [Thich Nhat Hanh](#), [Twyla Hansen](#), [Joy Harjo](#), [Penny Harter](#), [Linda Hasselstrom](#), [Seamus Heaney](#), [Donna Hilbert](#), [Edward Hirsch](#), [Jane Hirshfield](#), [Tony Hoagland](#), [Linda Hogan](#), [Miroslav Holub](#), [Marie Howe](#), [Fady Joudah](#), [Stuart Kestenbaum](#), [Galway Kinnell](#), [Ted Kooser](#), [Daniel Ladinsky](#)(translator of Hafiz), [Dorianne Laux](#), [Li-Young Lee](#), [Denise Levertov](#), [Joanna Macy](#) (translator of Rilke, with Anita Barrows), [W. S. Merwin](#), [Czeslaw Milosz](#), [Marilyn Nelson](#), [Howard Nemerov](#), [Pablo Neruda](#), [Sister Dang Nghiem](#), [Kathleen Norris](#), [Naomi Shihab Nye](#), [John O’Donohue](#), [Mary Oliver](#), [Gregory Orr](#), [Joe Paddock](#), [Linda Pastan](#), [Octavio Paz](#), [Alberto Ríos](#), [May Sarton](#), [William Stafford](#), [Hannah Stephenson](#), [Joyce Sutphen](#), [Wisława Szymborska](#), [Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer](#), [Derek Walcott](#), [Alice Walker](#), [David Whyte](#).