

Good Work Project Report Series, Number 6

# Contemplation and Implications for Good Work in Teaching

Laurinda Morway, Jeff Solomon, Mimi  
Michaelson, and Howard Gardner

August, 1998

Updated February, 2001

Jeff Solomon, Series Editor  
Project Zero  
Harvard University

*COPYRIGHT 2001. All Rights Reserved.*

## **The Good Work Project**

### **February 2001**

Since 1995, three teams of investigators, under the direction of Howard Gardner, of Harvard University, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi of Claremont Graduate University, and William Damon of Stanford University, have been researching the ways in which leading professionals in a variety of domains carry out good work. "Good work" is used in a dual sense: 1) work that is deemed to be of high quality and 2) work that is socially responsible. Through intensive, face-to-face interviews, the researchers have investigated several domains, including journalism, genetics, business, jazz music, theater, philanthropy, and higher education. Pilot studies have been conducted of medicine and the rapidly emerging domain of "cyberlaw", with plans to explore these areas more fully in the future.

In addition to this central line of study, several other related lines of investigation have been launched:

1. The Origins of Good Work project is an examination of teenagers who excel in extracurricular activities.
2. The Dedicated Young Professionals Study focuses on those who have just begun (or will soon begin) promising professional careers.
3. Good Work in Interdisciplinary Contexts. Pilot studies of new arts/science media and of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Lab have been completed. Plans are underway to study interdisciplinary work at the pre-collegiate, college, and research institution level.
4. The Role of Contemplative Practices investigates the ways in which contemplation/meditation influence how professionals carry out work.
5. Encouraging Good Work in Journalism. This project, carried out in conjunction with the Committee of Concerned Journalists, is currently developing a "traveling curriculum" for use in newsrooms around the country.
6. Good Work as Transmitted through Lineages examines how the principle of doing good work is passed down through continuous generations of teachers to students or from mentors to less experienced professionals.
7. Good Work in Other Societies is a project spearheaded by colleagues at Denmark's Royal Danish School of Education that investigates good work in Denmark and Latvia. In the future, additional international components will be added.

The Project expects to issue a variety of books, reports, and related documentation. The present series, launched in early 2001, includes reports on several of the lines of research mentioned above. For further information on the Good Work Project, contact Professor Howard Gardner's office at 617-496-4929, via email at [hgasst@harvard.edu](mailto:hgasst@harvard.edu), or through regular mail at 201 Larsen Hall, Harvard Graduate School of Education, Cambridge, MA, 02138.

**Papers On Good Work**  
**February 2001**

1. The Project on Good Work: A Description (April, 2000), Howard Gardner, Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi, and William Damon.
2. The Ethical Responsibilities of Professionals (July, 1998), Howard Gardner
3. The Empirical Basis of Good Work: Methodological Considerations (June, 1997), Howard Gardner, Anne Gregory, Mihalyi Csikzentmihalyi, William Damon, and Mimi Michaelson.
4. Good Work in Business (August, 2000), Kim Barberich and Howard Gardner.
5. Good Work Among Dedicated Young Professionals (July, 2000), Becca Solomon, Greg Feldman, and Marcy LeLacheur.
6. Contemplation and Implications for Good Work in Teaching (August, 1998), Laurinda Morway, Jeff Solomon, Mimi Michaelson, and Howard Gardner.
7. Good Work in a Complex World: A Cross Cultural Comparison (November, 1998), Hans Henrik Knoop and Howard Gardner.
8. Opportunities and Obstacles for Good Work in Medicine (August, 2000), Jeff Solomon, Jennifer DiBara, Sara Simeone, and Dan Dillon.
9. New Media Art: A New Frontier or Continued Tradition? (January, 2001), Kaley Middlebrooks.
10. The Origins of Good Work (April, 2000), Wendy Fischman and Grace Lam.
11. Good Work among Albert Schweitzer Fellows (April, 1999), Wendy Fischman, Becca Solomon, and Deborah Shutte.
12. High Abilities and Excellence: A Cultural Perspective (2000), Jin Li
13. Interdisciplinary Research and Education: Preliminary Perspectives from the MIT Media Laboratory (January, 2001), Dan Dillon.
14. Good Work in Cyberlaw (August, 2000), Evan Zullo.
15. Getting Kids, Parents, and Coaches on the Same Page (2000), Becca Solomon and Howard Gardner.

## **Acknowledgement**

The Good Work Project is made possible by the generous support of:

The Bauman Foundation

The Carnegie Corporation

The Nathan Cummings Foundation

The J. Epstein Foundation

Fetzer Institute

The Ford Foundation

The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

The Christian A. Johnson Endeavor Foundation

Thomas E. Lee

The Jesse Phillips Foundation Fund

Louise and Claude Rosenberg Jr. Family Foundation

Ross Family Charitable Foundation

The Spencer Foundation

The John Templeton Foundation

## **I. Introduction**

Teaching, like many other professions, has its own rewards. The excitement of engaging with growing minds and the chance to have an impact on young lives are among the rewarding aspects of the profession. It also provides opportunities for creativity and inspiration.

But, like most professions in this fast-paced, rapidly changing world, the world of education has its own set of pressures and challenges. Educators have to deal with complicated, competing demands on their time and resources. Schools face criticism from parents, communities, the media, and politicians about academic performance; at the same time they must deal with expanding expectations as social problems increasingly become part of the schools' mission. Educators must also meet demands for accountability (for example, through standardized tests) while still trying to cover a variety of subject matter in some depth. Teachers are expected to advance their own education and update their skills at the same time they are asked to take on more complex work loads.

With all of these challenges, when do teachers and administrators have the chance to gain perspective, “recharge their batteries,” and generate new ideas and creative solutions? What is to prevent burn-out and flight of talented people to other professions with greater material or personal rewards?

Our study on Good Work and the Contemplative Mind is part of a larger set of “Good Work” studies that examine how successful professionals in several fields—including journalism, genetics, higher education, and others—carry out high quality, creative work, despite the pressures and challenges of their professions. The portion of the study we report on here examines the role that contemplative and reflective practices play in enabling professionals to achieve their goals.

We began with a study of the media, a realm characterized by extreme pressures and rapid change. Corporate buyouts of news organizations, increasing competition from the Internet as a news source, and other factors have led to greater pressure than ever on journalists to "get the story first" and get it out as quickly as possible. Some commentators believe that these pressures lead journalists and others who work in the media to compromise quality.

In spite of these constraints, some people in the media still manage to produce high-quality work and thrive in their careers. What can educators learn from them? And how might these journalists' strategies for coping with pressure apply to the situation in schools today?

There are similarities in the demands faced by practitioners in education and the media. In both cases people must cope with suddenly shifting ground. A news anchor whose station receives low ratings is shifted to a different time slot; a teacher in California learns there is no more bilingual education, and his daily responsibilities multiply overnight. Workers in both professions frequently have to comply with bureaucratic dictates that conflict with personal or professional standards. A reporter who strives for depth and social value in his articles is told to produce short, sensational breaking news stories; a school system has to "teach for the test" because of state-mandated evaluations which may not coincide with the carefully-wrought local curriculum. Understanding how successful journalists maintain their goals and sense of direction in the face of rapid change and organizational/corporate pressures might help educators do the same.

## **II. Research Methods, Definitions and Findings**

We conducted 25 in-depth interviews (lasting around two hours each) with outstanding media professionals. They span the range of specializations: 15 work in print journalism (newspapers and magazines), 4 in broadcasting (radio and television), 4 in documentary film, and 2 in the Internet. Some are in positions of authority and influence (editors and publishers), others are “in-the-trenches” reporters. Some are nationally-known, others may have more limited range of reputation but have received recognition for the quality of their work within their region. Our subjects were not selected because of any indication that they are contemplative people: we sought out professionals who produce high-quality, creative work, and who have gained recognition from their field or the larger community as accomplished practitioners or leaders.

We use the term contemplation to describe the regular engagement in activities that help people to think about, gain perspective on, and generate ideas about the meanings, goals, purposes, and quality of their work and personal lives. The key qualifier is that such practice occur regularly and intentionally. Some people engage in daily practice, but we were less concerned with frequency than with the role such contemplative activity plays in people's work and personal lives.

Our interviews consisted of open-ended questions about the nature of interviewees' work days (how they structure their days, where and when they get their best ideas), strategies they use to gain perspective on their work, involvement in religious/spiritual practices, and other related topics.

Two types of contemplation emerged from our interviews with media professionals: religious/spiritual and secular practices. Religious/spiritual practices are associated with a personal or institutionalized system grounded in belief and worship of a God or deity, or a sense of connection to things greater

than oneself (nature, God, humanity, the universe). Secular practices are those that are truly separate from any religious or spiritual belief system.

In their book Gifts of the Spirit, Zaleski and Kaufman (1997, p.2) note that contemplation can occur in "the most ordinary passages of life," as opposed to formal, ritualistic settings. While the people we interviewed do take advantage of "ordinary" situations to engage in contemplation, many of them also engage in a sort of abbreviated contemplation to suit the hectic paces of their lives. Even some people who engage in religious/spiritual practices mentioned adapting them to their lives in unique and abbreviated forms.

#### A. Religious/Spiritual Contemplation

Church attendance, prayer, and purposeful time in nature are among the practices described by 17 of our participants. Although these practices had benefits for their work, people do not impose their beliefs on others at work. Practices are either reserved for other times, or are privately expressed (two subjects said that, when under stress, they pray silently at their desks ). A reporter who cited the importance of his faith said he is well aware of the issue of separation of religion and the workplace, but that the principles of his faith guide him when making ethical decisions at work. Finding meaning in life and gaining perspective are among the benefits of religious/spiritual practices. A reporter reads the bible for five minutes in his car every morning before he goes into the building:

It gives me a first of all, a calming influence, knowing that as soon as I step into the office it won't be so calm. It gives me just a better perspective on the day, that if I have a bad day that I'll hopefully remember what I've read that morning and can remember that there's something more important.

For professionals whose work life is hectic and complicated, religious/spiritual beliefs can provide a stable foundation. An editorial writer said his faith is “the real anchor of my life.”

The managing editor of a newspaper said her most spiritual moments take place in the natural world. She finds her time in nature to be “of great comfort” and a source of energy to “tackle something new.” Others talked about exploring the meaning of life through asking existential questions. A television investigative reporter spends time by the ocean:

A lot of praying, a lot of meditating. My sense of meditating, kind of thinking about a universe, a God, or why are we here? What’s it all about? Why anything? How did we get here? Where’s this going? What happens after I die? Things like that. I do a lot of that type of thing.

He says this gives him a sense of his “place on the planet...some sense of meaning, of why I’m here, and what it all means.”

We found that people most often described their religious/spiritual practices in terms of personal benefits rather than direct work benefits, but the sense of meaning, relief of stress, renewal of energy and enhanced perspective undoubtedly play a positive role in work as well.

## B. Secular Contemplation

To our surprise, a great variety of activities framed by our subjects as contemplative are not traditionally considered to be so. These range from common practices like walking to everyday routines like commuting. It isn’t the activity itself that is contemplative, but the links people make to the reflective processes they engage in during these activities.

Subjects more often described benefits connected to work when discussing secular, as opposed to religious/spiritual, practices. These benefits include: generating new ideas, making decisions, solving problems, and gaining perspective on work. Following are the types of secular practices, paired with examples, mentioned by media professionals :

- *Physical activity, including running, walking, hiking, swimming, and other sports.*

A syndicated columnist described generating ideas while exercising:

at least half of my columns I have tried to work out in my brain while I am on my treadmill in the morning...that is one of the places that I walk and think. ... I walk and think anyway—two things you can do simultaneously.

- *Language-based activities, such as journal-writing, dialogue, and reading.* A public radio producer/host mentioned dialog as a means for identifying topics for her show:

it's from [talking with people] that I think the base of the philosophies that I'm trying to express on the show come...if I could just sit and talk out an idea for a show, really thoroughly in a really warm environment, it would be a better script than if I sat there and tried to write...

- *Commuting or travel time.* A newspaper editor noted that her daily drive to and from work helps her think about, "what's going to be facing me, what'll be on my desk, what kind of stories, I usually think about my column..." When returning home she usually thinks about "whatever tough decisions either I made [at work] and I have to reflect on, was that really the right thing, do I need to rethink it..."
- *Meditation.* A magazine editor said that when she is faced with a problem or stressful situation at work she goes somewhere quiet and meditates to "open" her "view" of the problem.

- *Reflection apart from specific activities.* A magazine publisher regularly reassesses his work:

when you write, as I do, there are things that you write most easily about. And if you write easily about it, you fall into the trap of writing about it frequently. I have to be able to "step back" and say, "Why are you doing this? Is it because you have nothing else to say? Is it because it is easy to do this?"

It is important to note that most interviewees described a variety of contemplative activities which, in combination, enrich their lives. For example, the public radio producer/host applies her Jewish tradition in an ongoing self-questioning about whether she is doing the right thing, in the right place in her profession; writes and reads fiction and engages in purposeful dialog with others; recognizes cooking as a useful daily ritual which relieves stress; uses frequent travel as a time for reflection and perspective-taking.

While our focus has been on the professional benefits of secular contemplation, subjects did mention a variety of personal benefits. These include increasing self-understanding, searching for happiness and fulfillment, making sense of the world, gaining perspective on life, searching for a community, connecting to family/friends, expressing oneself, and reducing stress. Acknowledging the personal dimensions of contemplation is important: it might be that the more fulfilled people are in their personal lives, the more likely they are to be able carry out high quality work.

For some people one activity brings together professional and personal benefits. A newspaper editorial writer commented at length on the powerful role that fly fishing plays in helping him reduce stress, gain perspective on his work, and feel a connection to nature:

[it's] a nice counterpoise to politics and issues and screaming and yelling and rending your hair and garments and tearing your hair....It's solitude and quiet and gracefulness.... I find that it's very restorative to me.... I've found that even at times of great stress in my life, I've been able to go out on the river and fish and just absolutely put it all aside, and not think about it for a long period, whatever it is that's bothering me. And it helps put everything back in perspective. There's something about standing in a river, realizing that the river was flowing before you were around and it'll be flowing after you leave. And life goes on, and there's a certain rhythm and cycle to nature.

### **III. Implications for Educators**

We believe that the means of coping described by journalists might be an aid for educators in dealing with stress and change at the workplace. But how can these be brought into general use? One of the strongest messages from our subjects is that these practices are not institutionalized. They are highly individualistic adaptations, suggesting that a prescribed program might be inappropriate. For a school principal to suggest that the staff meet every Thursday afternoon to reflect, or for a state board to mandate contemplation course work for credit, would distort the meaning of these practices. We make the following recommendations for implementing the findings of our study:

- Inform: One of the most effective applications of our findings would be simply the passage of information to both teachers and administrators of the value of contemplative practices. This dissemination could take place in a variety of ways, from formal presentations to the most informal of conversations among colleagues. Those who train teachers in schools of education, administrators, fellow teachers, and others interested in improving resources for educators can help them become aware of the potential benefits to their work and personal lives, and can encourage them to adapt even small units of available time that may make a difference in their ability to meet the challenges of their work.

- Make a personal commitment: Contemplative practices do not require a major investment of time, money or training, but they do require regular engagement. This is not an occasional walk, a single thoughtful commuting experiences, one spiritual moment. The media professionals who described these activities engage in them purposefully on a regular basis. People don't need to change their lives radically, but may just need to test out opportunities already available, and change the focus of the activity, to develop a practice that is effective for them. This could take place either during personal time or during the work day.

a) Personal time: Using existing resources such as exercise regimens, commuting time, religious practices and other daily activities, educators can try using these as times to reflect on their work and lives.

b) Work time: Busy teachers and administrators can't simply stop in the middle of a hectic day and go off to a quiet place to meditate, but they can look for small spaces during the day that permit reflection. They might take a short walk instead of having lunch in a bustling teachers' lounge, or add to their own notebook of poetry when they ask the children to write.

Administrators may be able to encourage these practices by offering small windows of calm during the competing demands and intensity of the work day.

- Self-monitor the results: Any attempts to activate contemplative practices should include self-assessment. The media professionals were consciously aware of the benefits they gain from their practices. So we suggest it would be beneficial for people to monitor both the positive results and shortcomings of the practices they choose, so that they may find the most effective adaptations for their own needs and available resources. Administrators can

help by encouraging discussion of the outcomes staff members have noticed from their practices.

- Build upon existing educational practices: The topic of Reflective Teaching/Reflective Learning is one example of an area where contemplative practices might contribute. Programs that aim to enhance perspective-taking and self-evaluation include such practices as journal writing and portfolio assessment, for both students and teachers. These provide a mechanism for reflection on the state and progress of one's work and thinking. The people in our study described a number of other methods for accomplishing this. Although some keep journals or do a retrospective kind of review of their work, they described the same kinds of gains in understanding and perspective from other language-based practices like dialog with others, and from seemingly unrelated activities that facilitate reflection, such as exercise and travel. Expanded notions of the kinds of activities that foster reflective teaching and learning might tap a wider range of individual abilities and inclinations.
- Extend to students: The burdens on schools to expand curricula, increase instructional time, and improve academic performance transfer directly to students. They must cope with densely-packed school days and pressure to achieve even from the earliest grades. Many have structured, supervised after-school activities as well, followed by evenings filled with homework. The intensity, pace, and competition of daily life can become overwhelming. We suggest that contemplative practices may help children and young adults meet the challenges in their lives. By helping students become aware of their own resources and the variety of options, and by modeling through their own behavior, educators can help students cope with stress and become more reflective and effective learners. The different forms this might take,

depending on the developmental level of the student, is an interesting subject for future research.

In Extraordinary Minds, Gardner (1997, pp. 146-155) describes reflection, leveraging, and framing as strategies used by exceptional achievers, and suggests that these habits of mind are assets of potential value to all of us. The individuals profiled in the book demonstrate conscious consideration of the events of daily life (reflection), the capacity to bypass personal weaknesses and use strengths to their own advantage (leveraging) and the capacity to construe events in positive ways that allow them to learn and proceed with renewed energy (framing). Reflecting is fundamental to all three. The contemplative practices we have discussed offer a range of resources that can help both educators and students develop these strategies which can help them reach their highest potential.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The lesson for educators from our research on the media is that contemplative practices are valuable aids to carrying out high-quality work, and that these practices can be individualized and can take place in small amounts of time integrated into daily life. We believe that engagement in contemplation by educators may facilitate the generation of new ideas, novel solutions to problems, and enhanced perspective reported by successful media professionals. This may encourage the vision needed to innovate and implement the positive changes needed in the world of education. The potential benefits go beyond individuals: the larger community stands to gain great rewards.