

The background of the top half of the page is a teal color with a pattern of overlapping, semi-transparent leaf shapes. The leaves have serrated edges and prominent veins, creating a textured, organic feel. The text is overlaid on the left side of this pattern.

DISSERTATION
SUMMARY:

Exploring
the Lived
Experience of
Organizational
Leaders with a
Contemplative
Practice

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“The leader who is centered and grounded can work with erratic people and critical group situations without harm. Being centered means having the ability to recover one’s balance, even in the midst of action. A centered person is not subject to passing whims of sudden excitements. Being grounded means being down-to-earth, having gravity or weight. I know where I stand, and I know what I stand for: that is ground. The centered and grounded leader has stability and a sense of self. One who is not stable can easily get carried away by the intensity of leadership and make mistakes of judgment or even become ill”¹

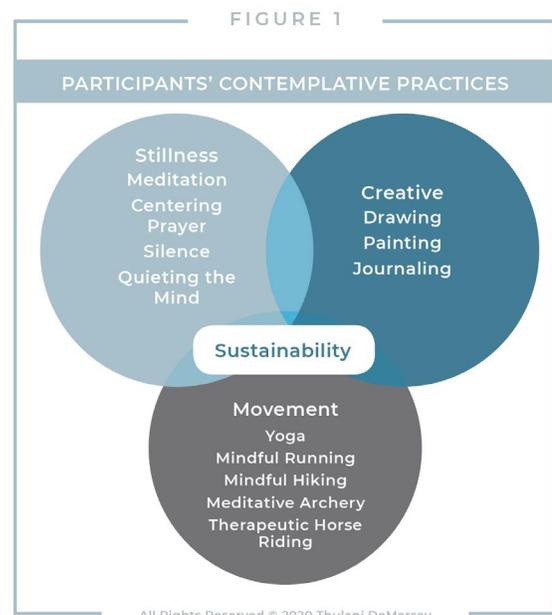
- LAO TZU

This Lao Tzu quote created the context for my phenomenological study, which explored the lived experience of organizational leaders who have a contemplative practice. My dissertation examined how each participant leader applies their contemplative practice in the workplace and the extent to which their practices help to foster stress resilience. My in-depth interviews with nine leaders from a cross section of industries, revealed that contemplative practices are varied and multidimensional. Moreover, findings indicated that these corporate leaders derive key attributes (e.g., resilience) from their respective practices. The research also revealed the practical ways that leaders operationalize these practices in their respective workplaces. The study also demonstrates that contemplatively oriented leadership can transform work culture, thus improving interpersonal relationships, and enhancing employee wellness.

When I embarked on this study, I expected that leaders would primarily use mindfulness and meditation. Although study participants had a stillness practice (including mindfulness, meditation, and/or centering prayer), I quickly discovered that they engaged in other contemplative practices as well. These exercises ranged from meditative archery to mindful activities like running, contemplative hiking, gratitude journaling, and painting. Research revealed that contemplation extends beyond the practice of stillness². Indeed, contemplative practice encompasses

activities and exercises that are movement-based, creative, generative, relational, and ritualistic³.

Figure 1 illustrates the practices of study participants.



The effects of contemplatively oriented leadership are demonstrated under the following attributes shared by respondents: (a) self awareness, (b) empathy, (c) better quality of presence, and (d) releasing ego, as seen in Figure 2. These constituent aspects of

1. Te Ching, T. (1984). John Heider. Contemporary issues in leadership. 289.

2. Duerr, M. (2015). The tree of contemplative practices. The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society. Retrieved from <http://www.contemplativemind.org/practices/tree>.

3. Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, 2015.

leadership were reported by the respondents and is a manifestation of their inner life. It is important to note that the following attributes are not intended to be exhaustive. Rather, this represents the more salient qualities derived from the participants' practice. Engaging the range of participant practices expanded my awareness of the many methods that cultivate stillness and a better quality of presence.

there are few in-depth studies that explore the lived experience of senior executives and leaders with a contemplative practice.

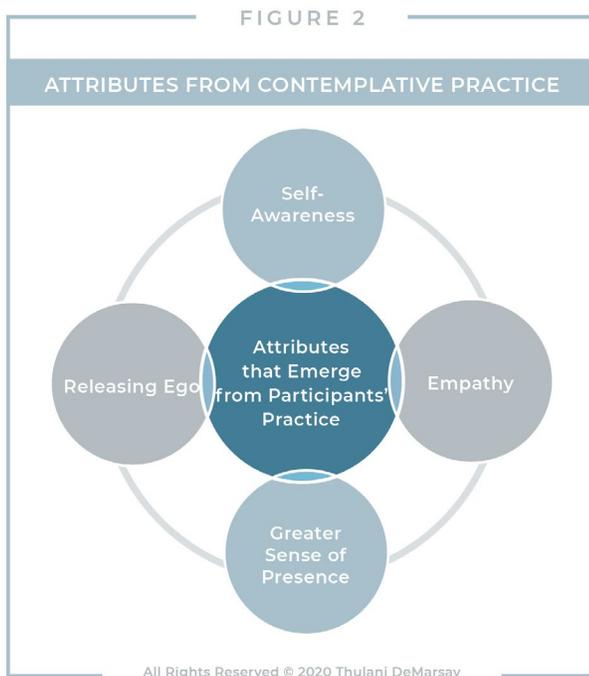
Leadership and Resilience

The concept of resilience is widely used in various fields. It is relevant to industries like engineering⁵ and ecological studies⁶, as well as an important concept in psychology⁷, and it helps our understanding of human responses to natural and manmade disasters⁸. Resilience has such breadth that each discipline examines it according to its own disciplinary questions about human change and adaptation. Yet, instead of signaling a common intellectual thread between these different disciplines, such disparate frameworks suggest that resilience is intrinsically tied to the human capacity for change.

Most relevant to this study is the psychological concept of resilience as the capacity to cope with adversity⁹. More specifically, leadership literature describes resilience as a kind of mental resource or psychological capital that organizational leaders can use to deal with workplace pressures¹⁰.

This emphasis on interiority has found a place in the discipline of leadership studies, which is shifting its focus to the inner life of the leader. Scholars assert that leadership study is moving from "leadership based on having and doing, to leadership that rests on and evolves out of being"¹¹.

Because the self of the leader is directly linked to his or her leadership quality, this study prioritized the interiority of the leader with respect to the emergent qualities derived from contemplative practices.



Although scholars have taken an interest in contemplative practice within the field of leadership studies, most of that research focuses on mindfulness⁴. This study elucidates the range of practices in the literature and shows the need for further inquiry to enhance understanding of their effects. To date,

4. Choi, E., & Tobias, J. (2015). Mind the gap: The link between mindfulness and performance at work needs more attention. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 8(4), 629-633.
5. Woods, D. D. (2015). Four concepts for resilience and the implications for the future of resilience engineering. *Reliability Engineering & System Safety*, 141, 5-9.
6. Ungar, M. (2011). The social ecology of resilience: Addressing contextual and cultural ambiguity of a nascent construct. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 81(1), 1.
7. Fletcher, D., & Sarkar, M. (2013). Psychological resilience: A review and critique of definitions, concepts, and theory. *European Psychologist*, 18(1), 12.
8. Cutter, S. L. (2016). The landscape of disaster resilience indicators in the USA. *Natural Hazards*, 80(2), 741-758.
9. Tugade, M. M., & Fredrickson, B. L. (2004). Resilient individuals use positive emotions to bounce back from negative emotional experiences. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 86(2), 320.; Werner, E. E., & Smith, R. S. (1992). *Overcoming the odds: High risk children from birth to adulthood*. Cornell University Press.
10. Luthans, F., Avey, J. B., Avolio, B. J., Norman, S. M., & Combs, G. M. (2006). Psychological capital development: toward a micro-intervention. *Journal of Organizational Behavior: The International Journal of Industrial, Occupational and Organizational Psychology and Behavior*, 27(3), 387-393.
11. Kriger, M., & Seng, Y. (2005). Leadership with inner meaning: A contingency theory of leadership based on the worldviews of five religions. *The Leadership quarterly*, 16(5), 788.

The pandemic crisis and contemplative leadership

The COVID-19 pandemic presents a significant opportunity for further research on contemplative practices, particularly as they relate to senior executives and organizational leaders. The pandemic also has implications for future research on leadership resilience. Undoubtedly, COVID-19 will continue to push workplaces to adapt and change in ways they may not have anticipated. The future presents a series of new dilemmas for leaders to navigate to ensure the economic viability of their organizations and the wellness of employees, clients, and customers. My research highlights the ways in which contemplatively oriented leaders can thrive amidst chaos and adversity.

My Learning and Contemplative Practice

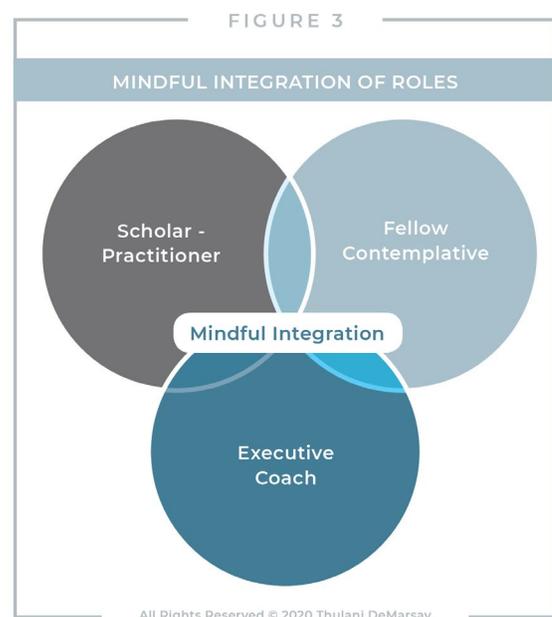
As a contemplative scholar-practitioner invested in re-imagining the future of leadership, I want these research findings to advance contemplative leadership discourse. The study holds promise for myself and other executive coaches who feel called to explore contemplative practice as a pathway to greater self-awareness and presence. The thoughtful and nuanced conversations I had with my study participants inspired me to continue my zealous advocacy for contemplatively oriented leadership.

Notably, this exploratory undertaking revealed that contemplative practices are not only transformative for individual practitioners – they have practical implications for the organization. Such benefits include: (a) enhanced interpersonal dynamics among employees and teams, (b) reduction in employee turnover, (c) reduction in sick leave and, (d) increase in gross revenues. Indeed, this study affirmed that contemplative leadership is far from a being soft skill; individuals in this study possessed internal strength and fortitude, which was supported by their daily practice.

Moreover, this research expands knowledge about contemplative practice by focusing on resilience as a key attribute of contemplative leadership. Thus, the research further challenges conventional definitions and conceptualizations of contemplative practice¹². In this way, the study does not reduce mindfulness to an individual tool¹³.

Although mindfulness was traditionally practiced to foster spiritual development and growth, and to build inner strength and resolve, the benefits are multifaceted. Leaders in the present study reportedly experienced improved critical thinking, productivity, energy, and performance. Still, they considered these to be byproducts of their practice and not its objective. Indeed, this study revealed that they made contemplative practices central to their lives more holistically, which informed their approach to leadership.

I intentionally brought my contemplative practice to the fore as I researched and wrote my dissertation. In addition to my daily meditation practice, I engaged in visualization exercises and incorporated moments of silence during study periods to give myself time and space to reflect on the material. Consequently, the research and writing became a type of contemplative practice for me. Research on mindful inquiry puts the “inquirer in the center”¹³ of the study; thus, instead of compartmentalizing my roles as a scholar practitioner, a fellow contemplative and an executive coach, my central task was to use mindfulness to facilitate their integration by becoming a more reflexive researcher. The integration of these three roles is illustrated in Figure 3 and each served a purpose in this inquiry.



12. Bush, M. (2015). *Awakening at work: introducing mindfulness into organizations*. In Reb, J., & Atkins, P. (Eds.). *Mindfulness in Organizations: Foundations, Research, and Applications* (Cambridge Companions to Management). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9781107587793

13. Roulston, K., McClendon, V. J., Thomas, A., Tuff, R., Williams, G., & Healy, M. F. (2008). Developing reflective interviewers and reflexive researchers. *Reflective Practice*, 9(3), 171.

Having worked closely with executive leaders for 20 years, I understand the unrelenting pressures they face. Accordingly, I could appreciate the key challenges and stressors they reported.

As a fellow contemplative, I had a sense of the participants' lived experiences in relation to various practices. However, mindful awareness helped me to limit my assumptions during the interview and data reporting processes. In turn, the interview process became a mindful practice.

Research with a 'Beginner's Mind.'

By continually observing myself within the context of the research, I became aware of my attachments to notions of what contemplative practices were and were not. This observation reminded me of the need to incorporate what Buddhism refers to as 'beginner's mind' into the inquiry and interview process. This concept refers to releasing preconceived ideas and approaching learning from an attitude of openness, enthusiasm, and humility.

Kabat-Zinn (1994) refers to this experience as an "open, attention, moment to moment awareness while

seeing things as novel and without judgment"¹⁴. In an interview, Zinn shared that in the "beginner's mind, there are infinite possibilities because we come to it fresh"¹⁵. In some ways, it was as though I was learning about contemplative practices for the first time in my conversations with the respondents.

I experienced several personal setbacks and the loss of a beloved friend while working on my dissertation. To help lessen my stress, I incorporated West African drumming and aikido into my practice, which anchored me and provided a sense of emotional stability during these difficult times. In listening to the participants' stories, I was encouraged by the myriad of ways in which they leaned into adversity and were sustained by their respective practices, particularly amidst COVID-19.

One research participant was grieving the loss of her father to the virus, yet she drew strength from her varied practices to continue serving others. Her story was heartening and a true testament to personal resilience. The study inspired me to expand my own capacity as a scholar-practitioner, coach, and a contemplative – it afforded me the opportunity to develop and grow in numerous ways, for which I am grateful.

14. Kabat-Zinn, J. (1994). *Wherever you go, there you are: Mindfulness meditation in everyday life*. New York: Hyperion.

15. Kabat-Zinn, J. (2015). *Mindfulness*. *Mindfulness*, 6(6), 1481-1483.



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