

About Inner Tracking

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The premise behind the practice of Inner Tracking is that your education is most likely to be transformational if it touches you deeply—not exclusively on an intellectual level.¹ This self-awareness practice, adapted from the spiral structure of the Work that Reconnects,² is designed to help you turn inward to reflect on the questions: How is your learning affecting you as a person? In the modern Western world, educators have often ignored or discouraged emotional responses to learning because of the questionable idea that acknowledging our emotional responses would threaten the objectivity of our knowledge. This approach is problematic for at least two reasons: First, an emotional response is still present and active, even if we ignore it. Awareness can thus increase the clarity of our knowing. Second, our emotional responses can help us know how to act on our learning. I am not suggesting that we be driven solely by emotional reactions but rather that our emotions provide us with valuable information about ourselves and the world.

Each of the four parts of Inner Tracking described below refers to the “content, community, or learning process” of the course in question. “Content” here means the knowledge of history, culture, nature, etc., that is explored in the course. “Community” refers to the learning community of the course—the students, peer mentor (if applicable), instructor, guests, etc. “Learning process” means your own learning process in the class. You may, for instance, be struggling with some aspects of the class or learning new things about how to learn.

Centering: Before you respond to the four questions below, please take a moment to center yourself as you begin to turn inward. First, check in with yourself: what’s your emotional tone, or how would you describe the quality of your awareness in this moment? (Some possibilities might be energetic, neutral, tense, tired, clear, foggy, calm, sad, excited, bored, anxious, curious, etc.) Second, if it would feel comfortable to you, close your eyes and take three deep breaths. (As an alternative, just breathe normally while placing a hand on your chest or belly, or simply sit silently for a moment, feeling how gravity pulls your body downward.) When you feel ready, continue on to the four questions below.

1. Giving Gratitude: What is something from this course (content, community, or learning process) that you are grateful for? (Write 125-200 words.)

- Gratitude is a fitting place to start your reflections because it may help you connect your learning to values you already hold or aspirations you have for yourself or others.
- Giving thanks is fundamentally connecting, because it reminds us that we depend on other people and the larger Earth community for our very lives. Practically speaking, gratitude can help us cooperate with others. It keeps us from taking things for granted. A powerful example of a gratitude practice is the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Thanksgiving Address, which is used to give gratitude for “the full circle of Creation” and to cultivate a spirit of “one-mindedness” in preparation for important ceremonial, political, or diplomatic work.³
- Giving gratitude also helps keep us intellectually and emotionally balanced, especially during difficult times when we are inclined to focus mostly on criticisms or losses.
- For this part of the practice, consider finding gratitude for the opportunities you have had to learn, for ways your understanding was expanded by classmates, for people you have studied who worked on behalf of a value you hold dear, or for something you appreciate that has been passed down or preserved over the generations. For example, you could give gratitude for something that you value that people in the past have made sacrifices for, or you could give gratitude for the

¹ Although this implementation is distinctive, the concept of “Inner Tracking” has especially been promoted by Jon Young of the 8 Shields Institute.

² Joanna Macy and Molly Brown, *Coming Back to Life: The Updated Guide to the Work the Reconnects* (New Society Publishers, 2014), 67–68.

³ Jacob Thomas, “Words that Come before All Else,” in José Barriero, ed., *Indian Roots of American Democracy* (AKWE:KON Press, 1992), 10–11.

persistence of First Nations people and wisdom traditions, despite centuries of colonization. Choose something that is meaningful to you.

2. Honoring Pain: What is something from this course (content, community, or learning process) for which you feel sadness, grief, anger, frustration, or disappointment? (Write 125-200 words.)

- Joanna Macy and Molly Brown have written that “pain is the price of consciousness in a threatened and suffering world” (21). To study history and the humanities is to come face to face with tremendous loss and suffering, as well as with astounding beauty and resilience. We must be able to see both of these aspects of human experience. Like gratitude, grief (if expressed and shared) can be very connecting. It is a “common bond,” in the words of Francis Weller—a reminder that “our lives are intricately comingled with one another.”⁴ Far from being self-indulgent, honoring pain or grief is a critical practice for learning from the past.
- Grief can mean simply *sadness*, but expressing grief (or grieving) is a way of processing sadness. Indigenous and traditional cultures have ways of dealing with grief in a communal way. I am not asking you to enter into a full-blown grieving process as part of this course—that would require more support than a class can offer. But I do invite you to acknowledge any sadness, frustration, disappointment, or anger that you may experience as part of the learning process. Macy and Brown refer to this as “honoring our pain” (67).
- Expressing grief does not mean “getting over” a loss, whether personal or collective. We often continue to hold sadness after expressing grief. This may be especially true for historical trauma. Mary Watkins and Helene Shulman have described “non-redemptive mourning” as a kind of grieving that is “not intended to finish with the past and return to ‘normal life,’ but rather to keep the past from slipping away in a present that continues to deny it.”⁵ In other words, expressing grief is a way to acknowledge the past—not to deny or forget it. Part of learning deeply about the past is accepting what happened within human communities (and the community of life) in the past—communities to which we are still connected today.
- For this part of the practice, consider acknowledging how some past injustice caused suffering and how that suffering may still have repercussions today. Or, you might recognize a frustration that some of the things you previously learned about history turned out to be incomplete, misleading, or untrue. (Note: This assignment is not meant to be a “complaint box” about the course; rather, it is meant to create space for you to feel and reflect on the pain or frustration that can accompany learning. If you do have constructive feedback about the course, I welcome you to share that through other means, such as the mid-semester evaluation or the course evaluation at the end of the semester. Better yet, I’d love for you to email or drop by my office.)

3. Seeing Anew: How has something from this course (content, community, or learning process) helped you see the world in a new way? (Write 125-200 words.)

- This facet of Inner Tracking can be more intellectual than the others, but it may take you beyond how you usually think about learning. The idea of “seeing with new eyes” reminds us that learning is not simply about accumulating knowledge. Learning can bring us new ways of seeing and thinking.
- For this part of the practice, give a specific example (or examples) of something that you see or think about differently than you did before taking the class. Consider whether and how some aspect of the course gave you new insight into the world or into yourself, or a new way of understanding some aspect of the human experience. For example, maybe you think a bit differently about what it means to study history or the humanities.

⁴ Francis Weller, *The Wild Edge of Sorrow: Rituals of Renewal and the Sacred Work of Grief* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2015), xvi.

⁵ Mary Watkins and Helene Shulman, *Toward Psychologies of Liberation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 123.

4. Going Forth: What's something from this course (content, community, or learning process) that you want to carry forward in your life? Is there something here that will help you be the kind of person you would like to be or make the impact you want to make? How might you act on the insights you have shared here? (Write 125-200 words.)

- This question gives you an opportunity to take ownership of and responsibility for some aspect of your learning. What do you take away from the class that will help you be the person you are becoming?

Closing: As you complete this practice, take a moment to notice, again, how you are feeling right now. Without judgment, notice any changes from when you started the practice.



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Note: This is not the current version of the practice. I am sharing this version, because I used these instructions to conduct research on Inner Tracking during the Fall 2019 semester. For an updated version, see: <http://davidjvoelker.com/inner-tracking/>.